

Jesus Christ: Shepherd of Shepherds

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Introduction

“Good Shepherd” paintings abound. We have all seen them: the central figure stands in an idyllic scene gently caressing a lamb in his arms or carrying it across his shoulders; other sheep crowd around or blissfully lie nearby; the bearded face displays a kind, loving, and often other-worldly expression. These images lie firmly embedded in the imagination and tend to surface each time we hear of the Good Shepherd, Great Shepherd, or Chief Shepherd. They give us a sense that we intuitively understand the significance of the biblical shepherd metaphor.

When was the last time that you saw, touched, heard, or smelled sheep outside of a petting zoo? Have you ever fed, led, birthed, butchered, sheered, chased, or chastened a sheep? The extent of my involvement with sheep is probably akin to yours: Sometimes I wear the wool someone else has processed and I have been known to enjoy the occasional lamb chop—that is all. My experience with shepherding is exactly none. Our common lack of experiential knowledge should lead us to wonder whether our understanding of this important metaphor has been shaped by common assumptions that, under closer analysis, will not match the biblical data.

In this workshop we will take a fresh look at the Bible’s use of the shepherd metaphor. We will invest most of our energy in tracing thematic threads that lie outside of the famous Good Shepherd passage (John 10) and will see the metaphor woven tightly into the entire biblical metanarrative, from the Pentateuch to Revelation. Most important, we will see that the imagery of a **divine Shepherd-King** informs the New Testament use of the shepherd metaphor.

I. Metaphors and Context:

Figures of speech deepen our ability to communicate. They can instantly tap collective experiences to communicate layers of meaning shared intuitively. Because they “work” due to shared experiences, they are contextually based and, thus, sometimes fail to transcend cultures, generations, or languages.

A. “If I have to explain it, you are missing something.”

We are separated from the Bible’s use of the shepherd metaphor by 2,000—3,500 years, not to mention being half a world away. Consequently, we must rely on careful explanation to unpack its meaning. This presents a problem. One author has compared the use of metaphors to telling a joke—if you have to explain it,

something is missing.¹ Original recipients of either Testament required no explanation of the shepherd metaphor. The got it. We, however, have to work harder. Fortunately, exegesis along with careful study of historical context will help us understand, even if we cannot replicate the immediate impact of the form.

B. The “something” we tend to miss.

A survey of ancient cultures known by and associated with Abraham’s descendants reveals a key element that the some discussions of the Great Shepherd overlook. *The shepherd metaphor was used frequently in every ancient culture in that region.* It appears in writings as far back as recorded history in Sumeria, Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria.² It appears in the beginnings of ancient Greek literature, as well.³

Each of these cultures employed the shepherd metaphor to describe the *divine right* of their kings *to rule*, or as Jefferey Niehaus describes it:

. . . a god works through a monarch or a prophet to advance his kingdom. The god is a suzerain over the monarch and is viewed as the shepherd. But the monarch also can be styled a shepherd, and in this he is like his god.⁴

The association between a divine shepherd and a divinely appointed shepherd-king proved to be an unshakable motif. Egypt applied it to pharaohs from Sen-Usert I (1991—1961 B.C.) to Seti I (1302—1290).⁵ The shepherd’s staff was the ubiquitous symbol of pharaoh’s authority. All of this is ironic given the fact that Egyptians in that era deplored shepherds.

Genesis 46:33-34⁶

³³ “When Pharaoh calls you and says, ‘What is your occupation?’ ³⁴ you shall say, ‘Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until

¹ Timothy Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 39.

² For a survey of examples found in each of these nations, see Jeffrey Jay Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2008.), the second chapter.

³ F. F Bruce, *This Is That: The New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 110–114.

⁴ Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes*, 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶ All Scripture Reference are from the *English Standard Version*, 2011 unless otherwise noted.

now, both we and our fathers,' in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen, for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians.”

This symbol of divinely bestowed authority was so powerful, intuitively understood and used in every surrounding culture, that it remained the symbol for pharaoh without attaching to him any of the low-caste stigma that actual shepherds carried.

The imagery bore the weight of two ideas: rule over the sheep and care for the sheep. Sometimes nations enjoyed benevolent rulers. “Shepherd” provided a colorful picture to describe his care, guidance, and provision. But the *primary* point of the metaphor was the shepherd’s right to rule; the sheep belonged to his god (and thus to him) and existed for his purposes; they were his by divine right. Importantly, the good shepherd cared for the sheep that he owned, but this was *secondary*.

II. Foundations: The Shepherd metaphor in the Old Testament

Symbolism of the divine shepherd and divine shepherd-king entered biblical literature and stretched across the Old Testament, deeply woven into the story of God’s relationship with his people. In the following survey we will exclusively examine passages that use the noun or verb forms of *shepherd* (רעה). For the purpose of this presentation, a few samplings of the wealth of biblical data will have to suffice.

A. YHWH is Shepherd of Israel.

The first explicit reference to God as Shepherd appears in the blessing Israel pronounced on Joseph’s sons.

Genesis 48:15

¹⁵ And he blessed Joseph and said,

“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,
the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day . . .

Even in this simple, unadorned first reference, we see a reflection of the theme of rule by divine right; Jacob’s blessing flowed from his God and bestowed rights of prominence (leadership) on Ephraim who was preferred over Manasseh.

The best known Old Testament use of the shepherd metaphor occurs in Psalm 23.

¹ YHWH is my shepherd; I shall not want.

God’ people in 21st century America hear this with a preconception, something like this:

YHWH is my shepherd . . .

We focus on his role as shepherd, but it is likely that David placed emphasis in a different place when he sang this song:

YHWH is my shepherd . . .

The shepherd boy whom YHWH appointed shepherd of Israel identified the true ruler of God's people. God undeniably is the source of all good but note especially the themes of rulership subtly woven into the song: YHWH's comforting "rod" (v. 4, cf., Psalm 2:9), David's special and privileged role (v. 5a),⁷ and his exaltation above his enemies (v. 5b).

Perhaps nowhere does the Old Testament paint a more striking portrait of Israel's divine Shepherd than Isaiah 40. In a passage that reverberates with unmistakable messianic tones (vv. 1-5), the prophet sets the greatness of the God who rules in sharp contrast with human frailty (vv. 6-8).

Isaiah 40:9–11 (ESV)

“Behold your God!”

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.

Note the juxtaposition of mighty ruler and caring, gentle Shepherd. His arm is mighty, yet tender. This complex image of God introduces a scathing challenge God issues to the rulers of nations and their false Gods. “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One?” (Isaiah 40:25). Compared to him, the nations are nothing; their gods are nothing, but by the greatness of his might, Israel's Shepherd sustains the stars (v. 26).

B. YHWH appointed shepherd-kings to lead Israel.

YHWH always mediated his rule through human oversight. Moses clearly served as a prototypical shepherd figure, though God never called him by that label. Related themes of guiding, feeding, protecting run throughout the Pentateuch. At the end, Moses thinks of his successor as a shepherd, and so he prayed:

⁷ “You anoint my head with oil” is usually interpreted as an expression of hospitality lavished on an honored guest. However, the honor associated with the practice seems connected with the joy associated with divine commissioning. See Psalm 133 as an illustration.

Numbers 27:16–17

¹⁶ “Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation ¹⁷ who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.”

Leaders, both political and religious, served in shepherding roles, mediating divine oversight. However the image attached unmistakably and unshakably to David and his dynasty. From the beginning the tribes of Israel recognized YHWH’s divine appointment.

2 Samuel 5:2-3

² In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, ‘You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.’ ” ³ So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel.

David, like Moses before him, at best was an imperfect shepherd. But worse shepherds followed him. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah record God’s denunciation of Israel’s evil shepherds.

Ezekiel 34:1-3, 10

¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep . . . ¹⁰ Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds

Slaughtering sheep to eat; wearing clothing made from their wool—shepherds did these things routinely. In that culture, readers would have understood the connection between those details and God’s indictment in a specific way that we sometimes overlook: the shepherds’ neglect and abuse of the sheep grew out of the assumption that the sheep belonged to them. Only the true shepherd can use the sheep for his own purposes; all others who try to do so are usurpers.

God promised Israel a solution to the neglect and abuse they suffered at the hands of wicked shepherds.

Ezekiel 34:15-16;

¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice . . .

C. YHWH promised to give Israel the ultimate Shepherd-King.

YHWH promised to overturn the failures of those who filled mediatorial roles on behalf of the divine Shepherd throughout Israel's troubled history. God himself promised to be their Shepherd, and yet he said,

Ezekiel 34:23-24

²³ And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

Israel's hope rests on the word of YHWH. They could never imagine what he had designed in his great plan. At the time Ezekiel prophesied, David had been in his grave for nearly 400 years. "My servant David" referred to a son of David, yet to come. All the divinely appointed leadership functions (prophet, priest, and king) flowed into enthusiastic messianic expectation. The divine Shepherd-King will be David's Son and David's Lord! See Psalm 110:1, cf. Matthew 22:45.

III. Fulfillment: Jesus Christ, the divine Shepherd-King

All mediatorial roles (prophet, priest, and king) converge in Christ, the divine Shepherd-King. In the synoptic gospels the metaphor seems muted, appearing only occasionally,⁸ though related imagery surfaces frequently. But all of that changes in John 10.

A. The Good Shepherd

Jesus laid claim to the Old Testament messianic promises of a coming shepherd without qualification or equivocation. Significantly, he framed this claim as one of the seven famed "I am" sayings which seem to have "overtones of divinity."⁹

John 10:11-15

¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.
¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches

⁸ Matthew quotes or alludes to Old Testament shepherd passages 4 times. Mark 2 times. Luke does not use "shepherd" in a metaphorical sense at all. Both Matthew and Mark quote Zechariah 13:7, "strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered" (Matthew 26:31 and Mark 14:27) and both refer Jesus' compassion for Israel because they were like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36 and Mark 6:34).

⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 323.

them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Christ is not “a” good Shepherd—one among many; he is “the” good Shepherd. The definite article marks him out as unique, but also echoes the messianic expectation. He is good because he “lays down his life for the sheep,” a rare expression that may “reflect the Hebrew idiom ‘to hand over one’s life.’”¹⁰ In everyday life, a shepherd may be *prepared* to lay down his life for his sheep, but would never intend to do so. Jesus’ intentional death goes beyond the simple metaphor and connects him with Zechariah’s vision of the “shepherd who is put to death and whose death brings about a turning point (Zech. 12:10; 13:7–9).”¹¹

In contrast to Israel’s “hired hands,” Christ assumed the permanent role of YHWH’s mediator; he is the divinely appointed Shepherd-King, perfectly representing the divine Shepherd, as the next pericope reveals.

John 10:27-30

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.”

Don Carson draws out the clear link between Jesus’ teaching here and Ezekiel’s prophecies of the divine Shepherd-King who establishes the new covenant.

“The mingling of the foci—the promised shepherd is the LORD, or the promised shepherd is the LORD’s servant David—is peculiarly appropriate in a book where the Word is God, and the Word is God’s emissary, distinguishable from him.”¹²

Amazement over the benevolent act of the Good Shepherd, dying for his sheep, intensifies when we place this remarkable passage in the stream of biblical theology. The focus is not on the sheep, but the owner of the sheep. YHWH’s divinely appointed Shepherd-King—David’s son and David’s Lord—hands over his life. Amazing grace, indeed!

¹⁰ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 305.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 305.

¹² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 382.

Another striking feature of this passage lies in Jesus' declaration,

¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

All of the Old Testament messianic promises, the perfect Shepherd, and his new covenant all belonged to Israel. But Jesus, alluding to Ezekiel 34:23 and 37:24, expanded the import of the shepherd prophecies, applying them beyond Israel to embrace the Gentiles.

B. The Great and Chief Shepherd

The author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus as Shepherd only in his benediction (13:20). He uniquely qualifies him as "the *great* shepherd."

Hebrews 13:20

²⁰ Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant . . .

The "great shepherd" seems to reflect Hebrews' emphasis on the exaltation of Christ. The text lays stress on the term "great," probably linking it with the statement that God (literally) "led him up" from the dead. We are also told that God raised Jesus "by the blood of the eternal covenant." The resurrection proved God's acceptance of the death of Christ. One commentator is probably correct when he says that the author carefully "linked the sacrificial death of Jesus to his being 'led up,' so that the death and exaltation appear as a single movement toward God."¹³ Thus God approved of Jesus' death by which he secured the new covenant and demonstrated his approval through resurrection and exaltation of the Shepherd-King (cf. Hebrews 1:3-8).

Another version of the shepherd metaphor is found in 1 Peter 5:4. It refers to Christ as the Chief Shepherd, implying the existence of other shepherds. Verse 2 begins with a verbal imperative (ποιμάνετε), commanding elders to perform the duties of a shepherd. The larger passage (vv. 1-5) reminds elders that the flock entrusted to their care belongs to God, that they are to shepherd the flock following the example of the Chief Shepherd, and that they are accountable to him.

Certainly Peter harkened back to the commission that the Chief Shepherd delivered to him personally on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, "Shepherd my sheep" (John 21:16). Today, the Chief Shepherd's mediates care for his people through human agents prepared and appointed to the task.

¹³ Peter T. O'Brien, citing L. T. Johnson," in *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 535–536.

C. The Eternal Shepherd

Old Testament promises of a divine Shepherd-King push relentlessly forward to final fulfillment in the eschaton. Shepherd imagery appears prominently in Revelation which tells us that Christ will rule (ποιμανεῖ) with a (shepherd's) rod of iron (2:27, 12:5, 19:5). The title "shepherd" makes its final appearance in Scripture in Revelation 7:17. In the context, John's vision gives the reader a preview of the very end (a common device used throughout Revelation). At the brink of the kingdom, John beheld myriads of redeemed emerging from the Great Tribulation, joining the company of the rest of God's people and innumerable angels before the divine throne.

¹⁵ "Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Biblical writers never shied away from mixed metaphors. For them the point was not metaphoric consistency, but the significance that each word picture conveyed. In Revelation we find a startling mixture of metaphors that pull together the messianic promises, the sacrifice of Christ, and his eternal reign: Christ is Lion (5:5), who is the Lamb (5:6), who is the Shepherd (7:17). Forever he is the eternal divine Shepherd-King.

IV. Some important implications for the undershepherd

This brief survey has traced the shepherd metaphor through the Scriptures from beginning to end. Most hearers or readers will agree that I introduced no novel ideas. But perhaps this exercise will help some see new connections between old ideas. Ultimately, I hope that it will help us think more deeply about the identity of the Christ whenever we encounter the biblical shepherd metaphor. Deeper reflection on the identity of the divine Shepherd-King should affect every undershepherd. Here are some implications for the undershepherd that require deeper contemplation:

A. The identity of the divine Shepherd-King should humble every undershepherd.

David's shepherd is our shepherd: YHWH, fully revealed (John 1:18) in One who is both David's son and David's Lord. He—*he*—handed over his life for us and commissions us to follow his example. Nothing could be more humbling

than being called to serve the One who served us with immeasurable condescension. Perhaps this is why Peter began his instructions to fellow elders by calling himself, “a witness of the sufferings of Christ” (1 Peter 5:1). He *saw* the Shepherd stricken and never got over it—and neither should we. Nothing could be less appropriate among undershepherds than an air of pastoral swagger.

- B. The identity of the divine Shepherd-King should clarify each undershepherd’s priorities.

Narcissism saturates churches today.¹⁴ Undershepherds cater to the whims and passions of the sheep (and goats) in order to attract them to the “fold.” But YHWH, not the sheep is the subject of the biblical narrative; he acts in history for his own glory. To that end, he has revealed himself in Christ—our Chief Shepherd. Christ’s will should be our singular priority. Therefore, the faithful undershepherd must say, “I serve the Chief Shepherd” and then ask, “What does *he* want for the sheep.” Peter’s admonition to exercise oversight “as God would have you” (1 Peter 5:2) echoes this priority. Sheep are prone to stray; sheep never know what is in their best interest. The Good Shepherd has revealed what the sheep really need.

Lest the reader think that I am setting up an elitist ministry model, read on.

- C. The identity of the divine Shepherd-King should remind every undershepherd that he is *first* a sheep.

Peter used vivid language to describe the undershepherds’ responsibility: be “examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). His language in the passage places the undershepherd among the sheep. The Chief Shepherd calls men who are part the flock to serve as undershepherds. They are men who live as Christians ought to live (1 Timothy 3:1-7) and their only distinguishing characteristic is the ability to teach (cf. v. 2). Christ gives them a role of leadership among peers. Undershepherds have no intrinsic superiority and have no reason or right to look down on the sheep the Chief Shepherd entrusts to their care. Even the apostles called the humblest believer “brother.”

- D. The identity of the divine Shepherd-King should strengthen the undershepherd’s integrity.

Undershepherds serve, eager to please the Chief Shepherd. Nothing could be more unseemly than a greedy undershepherd. Remember that YHWH condemned the wicked shepherds of Israel because they treated the sheep as their own (Ezekiel 34). We must remind ourselves daily, “The sheep are his, not mine; they exist for his glory, not my gain.”

¹⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *City on a Hill: Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church in the 21st Century* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 255.

- E. The identity of the divine Shepherd-King should encourage the undershepherd to faithful endurance in the darkest day.

Let's be honest; shepherding isn't easy. Christ's enemies are our enemies. At times the valley of the shadow of death seems very real to us. But what will we face that the Chief Shepherd has not already endured? What can the enemy threaten that the Chief Shepherd has not promised to vanquish? His "rod and staff" are our comfort; we need fear no evil. *We know how this ends!* Because YHWH is our Shepherd, we will dwell in his house forever. Those who lay down life for him will stand again in Zion and bask in the glory of the Great Shepherd, risen and exalted (Revelation 14:1-3). Peter said, that we are partakers of the glory that will be revealed (1 Peter 5:1) and that we will receive a crown of glory (v. 4). Together with the saints of every age, we will behold David's son and David's Lord the standing in the midst of the divine throne. He will be our Shepherd—forever!

What Happy Men, or Angels, These?

Isaac Watts, 1707
Revelation 7:9-17

What happy men, or angels, these,
That all their robes are spotless white?
Whence did this glorious troop arrive
At the pure realms of heav'nly light?

From torturing racks and burning fires,
And seas of their own blood they came;
But nobler blood has washed their robes,
Flowing from Christ the dying Lamb.

Now they approach th'almighty throne,
With loud hosannas night and day;
Sweet anthems to the great Three-One,
Measure their blest eternity.

No more shall hunger pain their souls;
He bids their paring thirst begone,
And spreads the shadow of His wings
To screen them from the parching sun.

The Lamb that fills the middle throne
Shall shed around His milder beams;
There shall they feast on His rich love,
And drink full joys from living streams.

Thus shall their mighty bliss renew
Through the vast round of endless years;
And the soft hand of sovereign grace
Heals all their wounds and wipes their tears.