

# **A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF SHEPHERDS**

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## Introduction

In this paper, I will trace the biblical-theological theme of “Shepherds” across the protestant canon, using the major Biblical covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenants) the Prophets, and the Book of Psalms as sign-posts, or mile markers in the journey. This will serve to show the progress of this theme throughout the progress of redemptive history as the story of Scripture moves along. The powerful shepherd imagery in Scripture plays a key role in helping one understand the character and heart of God. It is also important for understanding the posture, duties, and obligations those in leadership have as they reflect the great shepherd’s heart and character to His people. It is a profound image that is worth exploring in more detail.

## Defining Terms

To understand the meaning of this biblical theme more robustly, some “word-study” work is necessary. The Hebrew root word for shepherd is the verb “רָעָה” (*ra’ah*) (רֹעֶה, *ro’eh*, noun form) which has several meanings depending upon the context. The most common definitions are: to shepherd, to pasture, tend, graze, feed, and rule (BDB). רָעָה occurs 167 times in 138 verses in the Old Testament, and most frequently carries the meaning of “shepherd”, and/or activities pertaining to shepherding.

The Greek counterpart to רָעָה is, ποιμήν (*poimē, noun*) or ποιμαίνω (*poimainō, verb*) which means: to shepherd, to rule, guide and help, to care, and pastor/minister (DBLG). Ποιμήν occurs 40 times in 32 verses in the New Testament and describes shepherding activities.

## Shepherds: Creation to the Abrahamic Covenant

From creation in Genesis one to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12, 15, 17) “shepherd” only occurs a couple of times. It appears for the first time in chapter four verse two. The context is the story of Cain and Abel. Genesis 4:1-2 reads, “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.’ And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a *keeper* of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.” Here the ESV translates רָעָה as “keeper”. This is different than the word Cain uses when God questions him after he has killed Abel and says, “...am I my brother’s keeper (שמר)?” In this context it describes an occupation, work activities or duties. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd, someone who watched over, fed, and

protected the flocks. I think it's fair to say that this also meant Abel had authority over the livestock as their keeper.

The next occurrence is in chapter thirteen verses seven and eight. This comes on the heels of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) and God's covenant with Abraham in which he will use Abraham's family to restore his divine "blessing" to all nations (Gen 12). Abraham has just been called by God to leave his country, people, and his father's household (12:1). Essentially, Abraham is being asked to remove himself from everything and everyone he knows. If he obeys, God promises him three things: make him into a great nation, make his name great, and bless him (Gen. 12:2-3). Verse three of chapter twelve then explains God's intentions in fulfilling this covenant with Abraham. This is to be a great nation, be personally blessed, and to be a blessing to others. Abraham leaves, camps out, hears the voice of God again, makes an altar to Yahweh in Canaanite land, and eventually ends up in Egypt because there is a famine (Gen. 12). Abraham's own household is large. He was, "...very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold" (13:2), and as we learn later in chapter fourteen (when he rescues his nephew, Lot), that he does so with 318 men under his command. Lot and Abraham separate in chapter thirteen because the land cannot support all of their livestock. The word shepherd appears again here in this context, "and there was strife between the *herdsmen* of Abram's livestock and the *herdsmen* of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land. Then Abram said to Lot, 'Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your *herdsmen* and my *herdsmen*, for we are kinsmen'" (Gen. 13:7-8). Here the ESV translates רֹעֵי as "herdsmen". It carries the same basic meaning as it did in chapter four. The sense is of someone who has oversight of the livestock and sees to it that they are guided, cared for, and protected.

### *Summary*

Up to this point in redemptive history "shepherd" carries the meaning of "herdsman" or "keeper." They both speak to the responsibilities of a particular person to care for and protect the livestock (sheep and other animals). It's a job description that directly reflects the desire of the creator God for his children in how they are to relate, and treat the other living creatures (Gn.1:26-27). Right after the Fall (Gen.3), it becomes necessary that the role of a shepherd exists (Gen.4:2). The herds need a shepherd to lead, protect, and guide them to food, water, and safe pastures.

## Shepherds: Abraham to the Mosaic Covenant

During this time in redemptive history רָעָה is used a little over a dozen times. In Genesis 29:7; 30:21; 36:24; 37:2,13; and 41:2,18 most Bible translations translate רָעָה “pasture”, “pasturing”, or “fed”. The context of all these verses has to do with the physical needs of the flock, namely food and water. The descriptions are of an activity in which the shepherd intentionally leads the livestock to places where they can be nourished.

In Genesis 46:32,34;47:3, the story of Joseph’s brothers coming to Egypt because of famine, we are reminded that Jacob’s family has always been “shepherds” and “keepers”, and they seek to do the same in Egypt. Shepherding was the main occupation of the Israelites in the early days of the patriarchs: Abraham (Gen. 12:16); Isaac (Gen. 26:20), Laban and Rachel (Gen. 29:9); Jacob (Gen. 30:31–40); and Moses (Exod. 3:1) for example. We learn an interesting and strange fact in these passages as well, that shepherds are an abomination to Egyptians (something to keep in mind throughout the Exodus story as God acts as a shepherd). Again, the imagery is of care and protection. However, something remarkable happens in Genesis 48:15-16. It reads,

“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, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.’” (see also 49:24)

This is the first time that God is referred to as a shepherd in the Bible. The prophets and the book of Psalms pick up this language and imagery, and develop it further, but “God as shepherd” has its origin here in the context of Jacob blessing Joseph’s sons before he passes away. This is a profound statement, that the creator and sustainer of the universe acts like a shepherd to his people. He watches over them, protects, leads, feeds, and carries them etc. Jacob is telling his grandsons who God has been to him, describing his nature and character as that of a shepherd. Shepherding was the family occupation. Joseph’s sons would have understood the imagery well, that is: as I am for the sheep, God is for me. The image used to describe the nature and character of God in this passage, is of a shepherd who redeems. Exodus 15:13 (the song of Moses) picks up on this as well (though not containing the word “shepherd”) the language implies Yahweh acting as a shepherd when he rescued his people out of Egypt, “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.” God as shepherd, redeems his people and leads them to safe pastures. After he has revealed himself to Israel in power and deed, he covenants with them, he

calls them to become a kingdom of priests to the nations by adhering to the laws of the covenant. Obedience will result in covenant blessing, and rebellion will bring covenant curses (Exod. 19, Lev 26. Deut. 28–30).

### *Summary*

The most notable and significant change or addition to our theme during this time period in redemptive history, is the shepherd imagery being applied to God. Previously it had only been used to describe a human being, their occupation, and activities associated with their work. This is a profound addition to the portrait of the nature and character of God. The way Jacob and Moses saw it, God had led, nourished, and cared for them (and His people both spiritually and physically), as they had their flocks. As Scripture attests, when attempting to describe the mighty acts of God, and his relationship to those who are his, the image of a shepherd comes to mind.

### **Shepherds: Moses to the Davidic Covenant**

Perhaps the most striking addition to the shepherd imagery during this time period in redemptive history, is that it is applied to Israel’s leaders. So far, we have seen “shepherd” used to describe an occupation, the activities of that occupation, and to describe the nature and character of God. A shepherd is one who cares for and protects his flock, and when applied to God, that flock is his people. So we have human’s exercising authority over animals, for their benefit and flourishing, and God exercising authority over humans in a similar way. Now we see this imagery applied to human leaders over other human beings, for their benefit and to promote human flourishing. Some people are uniquely called to be shepherds, serving other by guiding, leading, feeding, protecting, nourishing, and caring for them. I want to look at just two examples to show this development as we move further down the timeline of redemptive history: Joshua and David.

Israel’s leaders were often regarded as shepherds, even though Yahweh was always their chief shepherd. In fact, as we see in Numbers 27, human agents were necessary, so that Israel would not be as “sheep without a *shepherd*” (v.16-17; {the “shepherd-less sheep” motif is prominent throughout Scripture: 1 Kings 22:17; Ezek. 34:5; Zech. 10:2; Matt. 9:36; Mark 6:34}). In the second half of Numbers 27 we read of the succession of Moses by his personal assistant Joshua. Moses will not be able to go into the Promised Land because he has disqualified himself, but is concerned for the people of Israel, for they need a shepherd, and he doesn’t want them to be without one. God appoints Joshua as their Shepherd, as a man with the Spirit of Yahweh and the authority of Moses (v.18-22). The

shepherd metaphor gets mapped onto human governance and authority over other human beings here. The characteristics of a shepherd with his sheep, now applies as a powerful symbol for godly leadership.

Before David was a valiant warrior and mighty king, he was a shepherd, in the occupational sense (1 Sam. 16:11; 17:15). Initially, in the story of David and Goliath, David paints the “shepherd as protector” colors a brighter hue in our shepherd portrait. 1 Samuel 17:34-37 reads,

But David said to Saul, “Your servant used to *keep* sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.” And David said, “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.”

Just as Jacob spoke of God as a shepherd who redeemed (Gen. 48:15-16), David describes his protective duties as a shepherd in a similar way, “...*I went after* him (wild animals) and struck him and *delivered* it (the lamb) out of his mouth” (v. 35). Shepherds risk their own lives and safety for those of the sheep. They pursue the helpless and needy, deal with the threats, and bring the sheep back into the fold. They draw their passion, motivation and strength from God knowing he is the ultimate deliverer, and chief shepherd (2 Sam. 7).

Later in 2 Samuel 5:2, David is anointed as king (again, 1 Sam. 16) and called a shepherd of and prince over Israel. This harkens back to Joshua’s role as leader over Israel. 2 Samuel 7:8-16 and 1 Chronicles 17:7-14 delineate God’s Covenant with David. David is promised a great name, a great place, and rest from his enemies. Yahweh will raise up a king from the line of David who will bring blessing to all the nations. It shares much in common with the Abrahamic Covenant, 2 Samuel 7:11b-16 uses Abrahamic Covenant language of house, seed, and kingdom (Gen. 12). The serpent crusher (“seed”) promised in Genesis 3:15 and the “seed” promised to Abraham, now gets placed in the future Davidic kinship. Here God makes the line of David everlasting (v.16). The promises of God are now funneled through the line of David. The terms of the original Abrahamic Covenant have now been revealed further, and permanently attached to the house of David.

The Davidic decedents are to be shepherd-kings who care for their flocks taking notes from King David’s humble prayer of gratitude after receiving this blessing from God (v. 18-29). But that is not how the story goes. Soon after, Israel’s kings begin to chase after other gods and instead of her leaders being concerned that she should have a shepherd, they begin to neglect the flocks. As we will see in the prophets, they become oppressive, unjust, and abusive shepherds, leaving Israel as Moses

feared, “sheep that have no shepherd” (1 Kings 22:17; 2 Chronicles 18:16). The reader is left wondering how in the world the promised seed is going to come, if at all, because the circumstances are so dim at times. However, God intervenes and brings light into the darkness and hope into a world in turmoil.

### ***Summary***

In this portion of Scripture, the common elements of our theme from all prior time periods of redemptive history still apply here. However, the volume is turned up on two important aspects of this metaphor: leadership and protection. For the first time the imagery of a human leader as a shepherd is used, denoting such things as authority, care, provision, and protection as duties for one in leadership in service to others. We also saw a vivid description of what it means to look after and care for sheep, particularly in the areas of protection, passion, concern, and where our power and motivation comes from.

### **Shepherds: The Prophets**

The prophets speak into a bleak time in Israel’s history. Israel was unable to fulfill its side of the Mosaic Covenant, and was sent into exile (2 Kings 17:23; 25:11, 21). Up until this point the highlight of our theme has been mostly positive. However, in the prophets, the shepherds of Israel are far from being role models. The people are sheep gone astray (Isa. 53:6; Psa. 119:176; Isa. 13:14). Isaiah chapter one is unique in that it is really a summary of the whole message and book of Isaiah, and the other prophets’ central message. God rightfully accuses the people of Judah of covenant infidelity, of failing to live out the Abrahamic (Gen. 12,15,17) and Mosaic (Exod.19-24) covenants in doing justice and righteousness (1:2-31), and has instead lived a rebellious life, practiced hypocritical worship, and covenant unfaithfulness. Therefore, Yahweh is coming in judgement, depicted as a purifying fire (exile) that will both purge the evil, and restore His people into a New Jerusalem.

Pertaining specifically to leadership, Israel’s “shepherds”, they are said to be morally corrupt, unrighteous, idolatrous, and put their trust in foreign kingdoms rather than in Yahweh (Hos. 4:5-9; 6:8-10; 7:1-4; Mic. 2-3; Ezek. 36:7; Jer. 7, 23 ; Isa.5,39; Hab. 1; Zech. 10-12; Mal. 2:1-9). If they were to be judged by their fruit and the character in which they produced in those under their care, Jeremiah seven reminds us that it’s worse than it sounds. The people do not keep the Torah, they neglect the needy, and they practice abominations against the Lord, offering sacrifice to Baal and other gods, and then come into his house and say, “we are delivered” (v.10). They don’t believe God would destroy his own house. Yahweh declares that his house has become a “den of robbers” (v.11). His house is full of

predators, there is rampant social injustice, and covenant infidelity. Verse seventeen, shows us that it wasn't only the leaders who were practicing injustice. It was so bad, in fact that they were offering their children as sacrifices to foreign deities (30-32). Israel is in dire need of a new kind of shepherd.

In Ezekiel 34:23-24 God says he will set over his people one shepherd, His servant David. The title "David" is also used for the messianic king in Isaiah 11, Hosea 3:4, and Jeremiah 30:9 who will be empowered by the Spirit of God, like Moses and Joshua were (Num. 11; Deut. 34:9), bringing true justice, righteousness, and peace. The activity of this "New David" and God himself are nearly identical in this passage (see v.12, 14, 23-24) just like Micah 5:1-5 (messiah) and Isaiah 7, 11,40 (Branch of Jesse, Immanuel, Suffering Servant). Ezekiel, along with the other prophets, realizes that Israel needs a representative who can do what they cannot. Ezekiel picks up this key theme from the prophets and focuses on the shepherd imagery (34:23-24; 37:24-25). The new David is also the prince/leader described in chapters 40-48 that fulfills the Davidic commission that the kings of times past were incapable of doing. True worship of God requires doing justice and righteousness in all relationships (2:6; 5:7, 12, 15, 24; 6:12) harkening back to God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12, 15, 17; Matt.22:34-40). The hope of the prophets is in the new covenant in which Yahweh will transform the hearts of his people so they can truly love and obey him (Deut. 30; Jer. 31; Ezek. 36)

### *Summary*

Pervasive throughout the prophets (major and minor) is the concept of a divine-messianic shepherd-king (Dan. 7; Hos. 1, 3 Amos 9; Obadiah; Mic. 5; Hag. 2; Zech. 3-4,12-13; Isa. 11; Jer. 30:9; Ezek. 34:23). Each prophet picks up similar language, but also at times adds to the portrait new aspects of the messiah. A few examples: Isaiah gives us the "suffering servant" portrait, Jeremiah adds the emotional piece to that (obedience despite not wanting to endure the pain), Ezekiel really plays into the shepherd aspect, and Zechariah adds the priestly language to the messiah job description. They are all powerful images of what Israel's leaders should be at their best. The prophets know it is going to take a figure who will represent them, that embodies all of these things and does on behalf of Israel what she cannot do for herself (Isa. 7-9, 11; 49:8-13). The future hope is in this "New David" the hope of the world rests on his shoulders.

### **Shepherds: The Book of Psalms**

In the Book of Psalms, the volume is turned up on the previous imagery of God as shepherd to his people (Gen 48:15; 49:24; Deut. 26:5–8; Mic 7:14; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34). Psalm 23, 28, 78, and 80 perhaps being the most explicit, as “shepherd”, *רֹעֶה*, is used. However, numerous psalms depict the nature and character of God using shepherding language, absent the word *רֹעֶה*. For example, Psalm 31:3 and 78:52, “For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name’s sake you *lead* me and *guide* me...” and “Then he *led* out his people like sheep and *guided* them in the wilderness like a flock”. There are many more like these examples throughout the book of Psalms.

The Psalms mentioned above (23, 28, 78, 80, read similar to Jacob’s blessing of his grandsons in Genesis 48, and are beautiful poetic descriptions of the shepherding activities of Yahweh. They are deep reflections on the nature and character of God. He is a God who is righteous and good, who leads, guides, provides, redeems, restores, and saves. It is because he is who he is (Exod. 3:14) that these things are trustworthy, true, and lead to the human response and the realities of Psalm 23. Yahweh is a powerful and mighty shepherd, yet gentle enough to carry his people (Ps. 28:9).

### **Shepherds: Jesus and the New Covenant**

As we step into the world of the New Testament, we switch from the Hebrew language to Greek. The Greek counterpart to *רֹעֶה* is, *ποιμήν* (*poimē*, *noun*) or *ποιμαίνω* (*poimainō*, *verb*) which means: to shepherd, to rule, guide and help, to care for, and pastor/minister. The Old Testament concepts about shepherds as responsible leaders was employed by Jesus’ disciples, who used the motif in their writings to characterize his role and mission. Later, church leadership is described in using shepherding imagery as keepers of God’s flock.

Matthew opens his gospel, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” This short sentence is packed with information. “Son of David” should make us think back to the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7 (as well as “David” as a title for the Messiah in the Prophets {see above especially Ezek. 34 “my shepherd David”}). Matthew is claiming that here in front of our eyes is the messianic seed for Israel. “Son of Abraham” should make us think back to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12,15,17 and 22). Jesus is the promised seed of Abraham that will bring blessing to all of the nations (the seed first promised in Gen. 3:15; see also Gal. 3:6-29).

The description of Jesus as the new David and Israel’s shepherd begins at his birth, when the shepherds (*ποιμένες*), come to see him in Bethlehem. To a twenty-first century reader, the language may be more subtle, but in Luke 2:8-20 the narrative is evocative and recalls the testimony that the

coming of the new David would result in a “covenant of peace” (Ezek. 34:23–25; 1 Sam. 16:1, 12, 13; Jer. 23:1–8; Mic 5:2–4). Because of Israel’s wicked shepherds (Jer. 23:1-8; Mic. 2-3), Jesus goes to a people who are “sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34; Matt 9:35–10:6; 15:24; cf. Luke 19:10). The gospel writers pull this language from the account of Joshua becoming the new leader of Israel that we discussed earlier (Num. 27), presenting Jesus as a new Joshua, as well as from Ezekiel 34, showcasing Jesus as the promised shepherd to the scattered flock.

The most developed treatment of this theme and imagery comes in John chapter ten, a compare and contrast between Jesus as shepherd and Israel’s current leadership. Jesus is the “good shepherd” (v.11, 14, 21:15-17; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:12, 23; 37:24; Zech. 13:7; Ps. 23; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4; Rev. 7:17). His leadership, compassion, concern, and trustworthiness are tied up in the fact that, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” and “I know my own and my own know me” (see vv. 11-18; 1 Sam 17:34-25). Ezekiel 34 and Zechariah 9-13 were particularly important for the gospel writers as they thought upon what it truly meant for Jesus to be the “good shepherd” who would give up his life for his sheep, redeeming humanity, and ushering in the New Covenant and the inaugurating the Kingdom of God.

Additionally, Jesus as the ultimate shepherd, at the end time will separate the sheep from the goats, eradicating evil once for all, and bring about the consummation of all things (Psa. 2; Isa. 11:6-9; 65:17-25; Ezek. 40-48; Matt. 25; Rev. 2,19,21).

Based on the portrait of Jesus as the good and ultimate shepherd, the early church used this imagery to describe the activities and responsibilities of its leaders. They were to pattern their lives after Jesus (1 Pet. 5:1–4; Heb. 13:17, 20–21) as they watch over the souls of God’s flock. The titles applied to church leaders such as elder, guardian, bishop, pastor, or overseer are always directly linked to shepherding activities (Acts 15-16; 20:28-29; 1 Tim. 3:2; 4:14; 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet 5:2–3). The church is to be led, fed, and protected by the leadership of these shepherds who care for God’s flock.

### ***Summary***

The most profound development that we see taking place within the shepherding motif of Scripture, is that the promised son of David, the messianic good shepherd has come in the person of Jesus Christ. Additionally, church leadership is to reflect the character and adopt the attitude of their savior in the work that they are given. The call of a shepherd is one of service for the benefit of others, a laying down of one’s life (whatever form that takes) so that others may thrive and flourish.

## **Biblical Theological Summary**

In the Old Testament we learn what a shepherd is and does (shepherd, to pasture, tend, graze, feed, and rule etc.). As time progresses, it becomes a powerful metaphor for how God governs (both physically and spiritually), and how he expects his human leaders to exercise authority and care for his people. However, fallen humanity is so corrupt and sinful that they fail to live up to God's righteous standards. We get glimpses of what a good shepherd looks like, but no one quite fits the bill, and many are so far from it their evil eclipses even the faintest of hopes that they'll lead God's people into justice and righteousness. As the prophets show us, Israel needs a new kind of leader, one who will be the very embodiment of the Covenants, who can act as a representative for the people of Israel, acting on their behalf to fulfill the law, break the curse, and bring his people back to their father. As we see, only God himself can fill this bill. Israel must wait for the greater than Moses, the "suffering servant" of Isaiah, and the "New David" of Ezekiel and Micah to rescue them and usher in the New Covenant (Jer. 31; Ezek. 36).

In the New Testament, John 10:10, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." He is pulling this imagery from Ezekiel 34-37 36 (as well as Isa. 40 and Zech. 13:7). In Chapter 34:23-24 God says he will set over his people one shepherd, His servant David (the title used for the messianic king in Isaiah 11, Hosea 3:4-5, and Jer.30:9) who will be empowered by the Spirit of God, like Moses and Joshua were (Num. 11; Deut. 34:9), bringing true justice, righteousness, and peace. Jesus is claiming in John that he is the messianic-shepherd-king from Ezekiel. He is intentionally choosing this metaphor to express who he is and what he is from the Law and the Prophets. It is this understanding of the person and work of Jesus that inspires the shepherd imagery to be carried on into the future as a powerful metaphor for the offices and activities of church leadership in the early church, and for believers everywhere today as they care for the physical and spiritual needs of their flocks

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