

JESUS AS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

A Paper

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Dr. Paul Hoskins

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Bret Allen Rogers

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Introduction

In his Gospel, John provides a surplus of historical accounts of Christ's work, coupled together with OT allusions and theological overtones, to help his readers make the connection that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31). One of these accounts presents Jesus explaining to the Jewish authorities that he is the good shepherd who dies for the sheep, who gathers his flock from amongst Israel and the rest of the nations (John 10:11-18). Peculiar as this teaching might seem to the authorities, it is obvious that Jesus is consciously aware of who he is, the promised shepherd-king. This paper will show that, in obedience to his Father's command, Jesus comes as the good shepherd to fulfill the OT promise of the Davidic shepherd-king, in order that a unified body of people might be gathered through his atoning death and triumphant resurrection.

Historical and Literary Context

The pericope to be observed comes shortly after the Pharisees abuse their power and 'put out' the blind man who was previously healed by Jesus (John 9:34). They do this because of the man's testimony that Jesus must be sent from God—a truth they do not want to accept (9:30-33; cf. 9:22). Ironically, the blind man sees and worships Jesus, but the Pharisees, who think they see, are blind and remain in their sins (9:35-41). The opportunity is perfect for Jesus to reveal himself as the good Shepherd.

For the purposes of this paper, the situation in 9:35-10:18 lines up very well with what is found in Ezekiel 34.¹ In this OT passage, Yahweh reveals the wickedness of Israel's shepherds, because they do not care for God's people (Ezek 34:1-6). Instead, they use them for their own gain (34:7-10). To remain steadfast to his covenant with Israel, and so redeem his abused and scattered flock, Yahweh declares that he himself will shepherd his people (34:11-16; cf. Isa 40:11). Furthermore, he will send 'David' to be king over them (34:23; cf. 37:24-25). Jesus' statement, "I am the good Shepherd," and the following "symbol-laden discourse" reveals that this divine, Davidic shepherd-king has arrived.²

Interpreting Jesus as the Good Shepherd

After speaking of himself as 'the door' through whom one is saved and enabled to enter the pastures of salvation, Jesus asserts, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11). Throughout John, Jesus uses ἐγώ εἰμι ("I am") to identify himself as the Messiah and perfect revelation of his Father (4:26; 6:48; 8:12, 24, 28, 58; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 13:19; 14:6; 15:1; 18:5). As Yahweh revealed himself as the great shepherd of Israel (Ezek 34:11-16), so also does Jesus reveal himself as 'the good shepherd.' He is much more than *a* shepherd, as in one among many; he is *the* good shepherd, unique in his own

¹Andreas Köstenberger, "Jesus the Good Shepherd Who Will Also Bring Other Sheep (John 10:16): The Old Testament Background of a Familiar Metaphor," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12 (2002): 76-78.

²Köstenberger, "Jesus the Good Shepherd," 72. That Jesus is the divine Davidic shepherd-king is also confirmed in 10:22-39, where Jesus asserts that he is the Christ and God. See also, Richard Morgan, "Fulfillment in the Fourth Gospel," *Interpretation* 11 (Apr 1957): 155-165; and Andreas Köstenberger, "Jesus as Rabbi in the Fourth Gospel," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 8 (1998): 117.

right.³ He is God in the flesh (1:1-18), sent into the world on a mission to die on behalf of sinners. Thus he continues, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

That the shepherd is good is observed in how he treats the sheep. According to Jesus, the good shepherd lays down his life *for* them; that is, he dies for their benefit. Jesus sees the shepherd’s death as substitutionary and atoning. This is confirmed by John’s use of the preposition ὑπὲρ (“for”). For example, in 6:51, Jesus states, “The bread that I will give *for* the life of the world is my flesh.” In 11:50, Caiaphas prophesies, “Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die *for* the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” Doubtless, John’s interpretation of Caiaphas’ words is a substitutionary one (11:51-52).⁴ In essence, the analogy Jesus uses in John portrays what he said elsewhere, that the Son of Man came “to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28=Mark 10:45). Sacrifice and service are far from the attitudes of the leaders portrayed in Ezekiel 34 and John 9.

Already, Jesus has identified himself as the good shepherd, and the substitutionary death associated with being that shepherd. To further his point, he uses an analogy to compare the shepherd to a hired man (John 10:12-13). The hired man, “does not own the sheep.” Rather, the sheep belong particularly to the shepherd. He is the sole

³Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 510; Walter Grundmann, “καλός,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament [TDNT]*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:548; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 386. The repetition of the article gives emphasis to the substantive (ποιμήν) and the adjective (καλός).

⁴Cf. John 15:13; 17:19; 18:14. Other NT writers use ὑπὲρ the same way (e.g. Mark 14:24; Luke 22:19; Rom 5:6, 8; 8:32; 14:15; 1 Cor 1:13; 11:24; 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14; Gal 2:20; 3:13; Eph 5:25; 1 Thess 5:10; 1 Tim 2:6; Titus 2:14; Heb 2:9; 6:20; 1 Pet 2:21; 3:18; 1 John 3:16). Both Thielman and Tenney agree that Jesus’ words imply substitution and atonement: Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 201; Merrill C. Tenney, “The Imagery of John,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (Jan/Mar 1964): 17.

owner of the sheep—the evidence of which is observed in his laying down his own life for them (v. 11). This is unlike the hired man, who “sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and flees.” Who the wolf is in this context, the listeners are left to wonder.⁵ Fitting for Jesus’ analogy, however, the wolf is brought in to emphasize the unfaithfulness of the hired man and the faithfulness of the good shepherd. The hired man’s unfaithfulness is made explicit by the causal clause in v. 13. He flees *because* he is a hired man, and furthermore, he cares nothing for the sheep. The good shepherd on the other hand, does not flee, but lays down his life on their behalf. He does this because they are his own.

This ownership is further expressed in the mutual knowledge the sheep and the good shepherd share. “I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says, “I know my own, and my own know me” (10:14). By reiterating his own identity, Jesus draws attention once again to his sacrificial death in 10:11, and then connects the death with the peculiar relationship he has with his sheep.⁶ Certainly, this is the difference between the shepherd and the hired man. Since Jesus owns them, he knows them, and they know him. More than a mere intellectual assent, this personal knowledge has its roots in the love of God—the shepherds love for them, and their love for the shepherd.

Moreover, this intimate relationship is also shared between the Father and the Son. Although καθώς could be drawing out a comparison between the sheep/shepherd relationship and the Father/Son relationship, it is more likely that καθώς has a causal

⁵What is clear in Matthew 12:30 is that those who scatter (σκορπίζει), rather than gather are enemies of Jesus; indeed, their work is in line with the works of the devil. Jesus states, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (cf. Luke 11:23).

⁶Carson, *John*, 387.

force.⁷ That is, “I know my own and my own know me, *in so far as* the Father knows me and I know my Father.” The mutual love shared by the sheep and the shepherd is based on the love the Father has for the Son and the Son for the Father (cf. 5:19-20; 6:37-40; 8:28-29; 10:25-30; 17:1-5, 20-21). In other words, Jesus is explaining *why* the shepherd knows the sheep; namely, because the Father and the Son know each other. Since the Father knows the Son’s complete, unwavering devotion to his will, he entrusts him with the sheep (10:27-29). This relationship between the Father and the Son, and the sheep and the shepherd is what brings Jesus to the cross: “and so I lay down my life for the sheep.”⁸

Jesus’ discourse does not end with the good shepherd’s death resulting in wandering sheep. Rather, because of his death, the sheep are gathered from all nations. He says, “I have other sheep that are not from this fold; I must bring them also; and they will listen to my voice; and they will be one flock, one shepherd.” (10:16). If there was ever an allusion to Jesus fulfilling the OT’s promise of the Davidic shepherd-king, it is here. After pronouncing judgment on the leaders of Israel, Ezekiel prophesies of an eschatological day when Yahweh himself will shepherd his people (Ezek 34:11-16). This will happen when he sets his servant David over them (Ezek 34:23-24; cf. 37:15-28). That David will shepherd the people reminds Ezekiel’s audience of Yahweh’s covenant faithfulness to the Davidic throne (2 Sam 7:8-17), and assures them of the coming

⁷Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilber Gingrich, and Fredrick W. Danker [BDAG], 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “καθώς.”

⁸The καὶ could be connective (“and”), restating Jesus’ death in light of the sheep-shepherd/Father-Son relationship, or resultative (“and so”), seeing the cross as a result of the mutual love between the Father and Son (BDAG, s.v. “καὶ.”). The latter was chosen for this paper.

messianic age.⁹ Ezekiel's message to Israel is nothing less than gospel, now realized in the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of David (Matt 1:1; John 1:41-9; 11:27; 12:13).

The messianic age has dawned; Yahweh is gathering his people under his servant David. These sheep are not only from the fold of ethnic Israel, but from among Gentiles as well (John 11:49-53; 12:20-23, 32; 17:20-21; 19:20).¹⁰ Though salvation is from the Jews (4:22), and comes through a Jewish messiah (19:9), it is for the world (3:16). Streaming into the one, 'true Israel,' and being joined together under one good shepherd, are those the Son has determined to bring through his word.¹¹ As the divine, Davidic shepherd-king, Jesus is making a new flock, under a new covenant, thus fulfilling Yahweh's covenant promises.

To this point, Jesus has declared his messianic mission (vv. 11-16). Now, he is pressed to reveal exactly why the Father loves him—because of the Son's 'eternal obedience,' even to the point of death on a cross.¹² Directly linked to this crucifixion, however, is the Son's resurrection. Indeed, the very purpose of his death is so that he would be raised. Therefore, the Father loves the Son precisely because the Son lays down his life *in order to* take it up again (10:17). His death and resurrection are a joint venture in the design of the messianic mission to save the world. It is no wonder why Jesus states,

⁹Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, chs. 25-48, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 308.

¹⁰This 'new-age' gathering of Gentiles into the fold of Israel is also mentioned in Isaiah 56:3-8.

¹¹George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 106, 318. This historical-redemptive plan is developed further by other NT writers (e.g. Rom 9-11; Eph 2:11-22). The Greek δεῖ is expressing the determined will of the Father. The Son *must* bring these other sheep into the fold. In the Son's bringing of these sheep into the fold through his death, they become unified (Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 512; Thielman, *Theology*, 713; David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989], 104).

¹²C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 377.

“Nobody takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down from myself” (10:18a). The cross has been designed, even commanded, by the Father (John 10:18b; cf. Isa 53:10; Acts 4:27f). Jesus dies not as a victim, but as a Son accomplishing his Father’s will. He has authority to undergo Roman crucifixion, and to raise himself from the dead. In these events, his death brings atonement, and his resurrection brings triumph, so that all the sheep given him by the Father will be gathered as one flock, under one shepherd.

Conclusion

Though troubling for the Jewish authorities (John 10:19-21), Jesus’ words in 10:11-18, clearly reveal that he is the divine, Davidic shepherd-king, expected to redeem God’s people in the messianic age. Ezekiel prophesied that Yahweh would shepherd Israel through his servant David. As God in the flesh, and the Davidic king, Jesus fulfills what the OT promised. He demonstrates this fulfillment through a symbol-laden discourse, which portrays himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. In obedience to his Father’s will, Jesus dies in order to rise again, so that he might gather his own blood-bought sheep from all the nations as one flock, under one shepherd.

Having been made part of the ‘true Israel,’ members of Christ’s body ought to find great hope in this messianic age. The bloody cross and the empty tomb mean a triumphant Shepherd whose mission cannot fail. The eschatological day has arrived, and the Gentiles are now streaming into the fold as Jesus gathers his sheep. Since he *must* bring them, and since they *will* listen to his voice, there is genuine hope for missions and evangelism. All that the Father has given the Son will come to him. They must! He is the divine, Davidic shepherd-king.

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