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The Background to the Good Shepherd Discourse in John 10

Donald L. Fowler
Liberty University, dfowler@liberty.edu

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There are few more beloved images from the Bible than that of Christ as our "God Shepherd." God as or shepherd is a well-known biblical idea common to both testaments. After the NT period, this image of Christ remained popular with the church as it spread west through the gentile world. As it left its original Semitic setting, however, it is clear that the context of the image was quickly lost. While the shepherd image for Christ would be the most popular pictorial representation in the first four centuries, by the middle of the fifth century A.D., it had all but disappeared from the Church's art. A modest exception to this observation might be made for certain branches of the church whose language was Syriac. As this study is begun, it is important to search of possible explanations for this startling change in imagery. The best place to begin the search is to analyze the biblical "context" where the Shepherd imagery occurs.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Students of the Bible who have been introduced to the study of hermeneutics know that the first rule of interpretation is to determine the context. To be more specific, what is the contextual relationship of the term Shepherd to the Old Testament? As is so often the case in biblical studies, the answer is neither simple nor conclusive.

The first point that must be made with vigor is to demonstrate the span of time shepherd appears in various cultures related to the entire biblical period. Scores of ancient Sumerian kings called themselves "shepherd" as early as the third millennium. Often the title was graced with an adjective such as "righteous," "humble," "obedient," "loving," etc. This practice continued until Sumerian fell into disuse. Concurrent with Sumerian were the Akkadian and Babylonian languages where the same usage prevailed. There are slight changes in that the title is now somewhat more common and often

becomes descriptive. An example of this may be seen in the title of Adad-nirari I (ca. 1307-1275). "The Shepherd who himself is the door of his heart," or "The Shepherd who provides for the needs of this sanctuaries/temples of the great gods." This same kind of literary imagery was continued in Mesopotamia from its earliest literary period down through the fall of Babylon to Cyrus the Great. It is much more difficult to trace the origins of its usage in Syro-Palestine since so few inscriptions have survived. There are some occurrences in royal literature from Ugarit and, of course, the Old Testament. Also, the title did continue to be used in the intertestamental literature and was attested in the Qumran literature.

The use of the shepherd as a royal title was even more popular in Egypt than elsewhere. So ancient is the image that the Egyptian hieroglyph for the verb "to rule" is that of a shepherd's crook. The basic difference, of course, between kingship in Egypt compared with those around her was that all of Egypt's kings were regarded as a deity. Nonetheless the highly favored title has the same imagery as elsewhere-kingship.

In the Mediterranean world, the oldest references appear to be Homeric. In the Odyssey, "Shepherd of the people" is a standard title for Menelaus, Nestor, Agamemnon, Laertes and Odysseus. The use of shepherd continued as a little throughout the Greed world but perhaps the most famous of its writers was Philo, for whom it was a common literary device.

> …for the chase of wild animals is a drilling-ground for the general in fighting the enemy, and the care and supervision of tame animals is a schooling for the king in dealing with his subjects, and therefore kings are called "shepherds for their people," not as a term of reproach but the highest honor. And, my opinion, based not on the opinions of the multitude but on my own inquiry into the truth of the matter is that the only perfect king is one who is skilled in the knowledge of shepherding, one who has been trained by management of the inferior creatures to manage to superior.

The use of Philo for comparison requires caution due to his allegorical style, but the fact is that he understood the connection between the image of the shepherd and kingship. The same general connection continued into the Roman era when Tiberius, emperor at the time of Christ's birth chided: "To the governors who recommended burdensome taxes for his provinces, he wrote in answer that it was the part of a good shepherd to shear his flock, not skin it."

One other point needs to be made in concluding this discussion of historical context. The title shepherd was especially revered among the gods, especially those who ranked highest in the pantheon. Just as with the geographical and chronological distribution among earthly kings as described above, sot here is also attested the usage of the title among the deities. This leads to the conclusion about the title that it equated automatically with leadership in general and kingship, whether mortal or divine, in particular. Its particular nuance was that it identified that leadership which was benign or meek and reverent, particularly in light of religious faithfulness and the cultus.

While there is not sufficient space to exegete the various Old Testament passages, several can be seen which illustrate that this same literary idiom can be found in the Old Testament as it was in Mesopotamia. It is clearly a title for God as in Ps 80:1: "Oh, give ear, Shepherd of Israel, thou who dost lead Joseph like a flock: Thou who are enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth!" In Isa 40:10-11 the Lord God rules….(hlAw4mo). "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs, and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes." Scores of these kinds of passages could be cited but for the present study these will suffice. We should note that the title shepherd is never used of an ancient Israelite king. Rather, Israel's kings were said to have "shepherded." Moses said near his death, "May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation may not be like sheep which have no shepherd"(Num 27:16-17). The idea of the earthly king "shepherding" was a more common metaphor in the Old Testament than using shepherd as a divine title.

The shepherd metaphor was also used of the leaders of the country in such passages as Jer 2:8, 23; 25:34-36; 50:8, and most importantly Ezekiel 34 which is likely to be the chapter Christ had in mind for his discourse in John 10.

Last, the shepherd metaphor is applied to the coming Messiah in the Old Testament in such passages as Mic 5:1-4 where the ruler (lweOm) was to "go forth for Me to be a ruler in Israel" from "Bethlehem Ephratah…of Judah." Ezek 34:22-24 refers to this coming one: "I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd" (see also 37:24ff.). This

juxtaposition of the coming Shepherd King with Yahweh Himself occurred in Psalm 45 (although the word Shepherd is missing) where at 45:6 God is exalted. "Thy throne O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Thy kingdom." Ps 45:6-7 is quoted by the writer of Hebrews in 1:8-9 as proof that Jesus was the Messiah.

In conclusion a number of points can be made fro the discussion above. One, the Shepherd title and image is one of the common images of ancient Near Eastern royal designations. Tow, the image is also used in the same way in the Old Testament. Three, it is used for the Messiah who, at times, is clearly identical to God.

JOHANNINE CONTEXT

The explanation for John's usage of the Old Testament often hinges on the presuppositions of the interpreter. Generally, scholars trained in Semitics are more likely to see the source of John's appeal to be the Old Testament. Scholars trained in the classics are more likely to explain the book in light of Hellenistic motifs and ideas which penetrated the Semitic world. There can be no doubt that Hellenism had made inroads into the ancient Semitic world. It is quite another matter, however, to argue that the various books of the NT were written with that world view in mind in either its context or audience. In his New Testament Introduction Guthrie wrote, "So Gospel that the part played by Old Testament ideas has not always been fully realized." Happily, the tide has today moved overwhelmingly in the direction of the Old Testament. Du Plessis has said that "It is without a doubt the most Jewish Gospel among the four."

If it may be agreed that John's citations and ideas are drawn fro the Old testament, the point also needs to be made that John's gospel, for all its uniqueness, fits well with the other Synoptics. "The attitude of the Johannine Jesus toward the Old Testament is very close to that reported in the synoptic tradition." This is, in my opinion, specifically true in the shepherd imagery. Concerning Matthew it has been written, 'more than any other Gospel, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' messiahship," One of the images that all the gospels share in identifying Christ is that He is Israel's shepherd. In a seminal work, Francis Martin has shown that Matthew used shepherd as a primary means of identification of Christ as Messiah. He comments that "…Mt builds upon the following combinations to construct an inclusive figure: Shepherd-king; Shepherd-Son of David;

Shepherd-servant; Shepherd-Vicar of Yahweh." In every instance in his gospel the Shepherd is the long-predicted messiah who heals. The image of the Shepherd who heals is, nonetheless, discarded in Matthew's book beginning with His final entry into Jerusalem. Now the messiah would lay down His life and suffer for the sheep as does the messianic shepherd in Zechariah 9-14.

If the term shepherd was so common in the ancient Near East and that same idiom is repeated in the Old Testament and, with only slight modifications, taken up in the gospels, it is most surprising to see how many commentators do not see the good Shepherd as either royal or messianic. Bultmann admits the chapter in John 10 "corresponds to the Old Testament tradition." But then he says, "There is, however, a decisive difference in John 10, namely that the shepherd is not thought of as the Messianic ruler; there are no traces whatsoever of the kingly figure." While few would agree with that stark evaluation, very few commentators are willing to interpret the series of discourses in 9-10 as messianic, and especially as royal.

Perhaps the chief reason for the is that they treat John 10 as if it was an allegory. John does not introduce the story with the word allegory but *paroimia* which is certainly an equivalent of the Hebrew *masal*. In the rest of the New Testament it only appears in 2 Peter 2:22 and John 16:25 (twice) and 16:29. In John's usage it appears to mean "hidden, obscure speech." Concerning a definition of allegory Stein has written:

> In an allegory the subject is described by circumstances and details that indicate that the subject as well as the circumstances and details refer to something else. An allegory is therefore a guise under which the intention of the story is different from what it first appears. In an allegory the details of the story are not simply local coloring to fill out the story, as in the story and example parables, but are of great importance and must be "interpreted."

Since it is quite impossible to identify key elements in this *paroimia*, it does not fit well with Stein's definition of an allegory. Perhaps it would be best to avoid nomenclature like parable and allegory since there is little consensus o definition. Even if John's *paroimia* was classified as an extended metaphor or parable, too often there is the failure to "perceive the distinction between the metaphor and its significance." It is now clear that the parables of Jesus were not meant to be clear. When it was imperative that his disciples understand the parable, Jesus would then explain it to them. More often

than not, then, the parable was an important mans of the self-presentation of Christ to the public but usually understood only by His inner circle. The message of this parable is the same in all three discourses: it is Christological which results in salvation for those who "know" His voice.

Another objection to John using the Good Shepherd as a messianic symbol is that he doesn't quote specifically fro the Old Testament. C.K. Barrett wrote that it's not

> …that John had no use for the Old Testament; what they suggest is that he used it in a way of his own. It is his method to deal not so much with Old Testament texts as with Old Testament themes. One of the clearest examples is provided by this description of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (10:1-16). In this passage no part of the Old Testament is quoted, but no one familiar with the Old Testament can read it would recalling a number of places where similar imagery is used-for example, Psalms 23; 80; Ezekiel 34; and not the least the fact that David, the ancestor and prototype of the Messiah was a shepherd. Without pinning himself to a particular prophecy, John takes up a central Old Testament theme and familiar Old Testament language and concentrates them upon the figure of Jesus.

Furthermore, "symbolism in John is not an element in the Gospel but a dimension of the Gospel as a whole, namely, its characteristic revelatory mode." The symbol in John 10 is the Shepherd (and that may be taken to mean he is proclaiming Himself as a political leader, king, Messiah or God) and the response to the symbol is found in v24, "If your are the Christ, tell us plainly."

The structure of this chapter has often led commentators to deny a direct connection with the Old Testament. The literary integrity of the chapter has, however, been proven to be of the highest quality in a massively important work by Menken. He has shown that chapters 9-10 are a literary triumph of the first order. "Careful attention to the literary character of the Fourth Gospel will quickly reveal how pervasive has been the influence of the OT in its composition." This is also evidenced in his use of numbers.

> The writer o the fourth gospel makes much use of number patter, in a manner similar to that which pervades Revelation. There is repeated use of sets of three. The narrator, for example, records three Passovers and three other feasts that Jesus attended. Early in the book John the Baptist three times states his witness to Christ's messiahship. Late in the narrative Jesus is three times condemned. He also speaks three times fro the cross and makes three appearances after His resurrection. There are three denials by Peter and three stages in Christ's restoration of Peter. There is a similar use of the number seven. The writer structures the central part of his narrative around seven great miracles or "signs" that Jesus performed. Equally important is the pattern of seven statements by Jesus beginning with the important formula "I am" and followed by a metaphoric description of Jesus' person and work…"

The effect of these observations is to take special note that one must not approach John's text as if its meaning was obvious.

The last point of introduction is tot understand the εγω ειμι (*ego eimi*) phrases. "The Christological εγω in John's Gospel is the catch word for a christocentric view of the world." The emphasis is truly striking as McArthur has shown: "Passages where the world order is reversed or words intervene between the *ego* and the *eimi* are not included in the following figures":

Total NT	47	Mark	3
John	24	Luke	4
Apocalypse	4	Acts	7
Joh. Ep.	0	Rest of NT	0
Matthew	5		

There are two current explanations for the meaning of the phrase. Schnackenburg wrote that "…the formal structure of the revealer's utterance was probably influenced by the soteriological type of discourse current in Eastern Hellenism." The overwhelming majority of scholars, however, seek its origins I the Old Testament where two primary locations have been proposed. Stevens has pointed out that

> The phrase *ego eimi* appears I the LXX, however, as the translation for many direct proclamatory statements by YHWH. The most important in the light of Bultmann's objection is the rendering of *ani* YHWH ("I am Yahweh") by the simple ego eimi in Isa 45:18. Frequently the statement by God, *ani hu* (literally "I he," meaning "I am he") receives the translation *ego eimi* (cf. Isa 41:4, 43:10, 46:4). *Ani hu* is an alternate for *ani* YHWH and it is an appropriate way of expression that he is the only God.

There can be little doubt that John's *ego eimi* is his way of telling us that the Christ was the *ani hu* which was Isaiah's way of saying YHWH.

An alternative view has been put forth by Odeberg who sought to relate *ego eimi* to the revelation of the tetragrammaton in Exod 3:14 Εγω ειμι = *ehyeh*, again, as implying the appropriation of the Divine Name, would equal 'I and the Father are one', the central, reiterated thesis of Jesus in John." Hamer has objected to this because the full

etymological phrase *ehyeh ser ehyeh* "I am who I am" in the LXX because "In the clause *ego eimi ho on*, the *ego eimi* is used not absolutely but merely to introduce the predicate ho on. Only this predicate can be regarded as a proper name." Since approximately half of John's *ego eimi* sayings are absolute rather than predicate, he feels that the *ani hu* formula from Isaiah is the source. Stauffer, however, is correct in writing, "This emphatic formula (*ego eimi*) [addition mine] rests ultimately on the 'I am that I am' of Exodus 3:14" the great revelation of the etymology of the divine name in Exodus 3 is the vehicle John was actually uniting he title *ani hu* in Isaiah with the idea of "I will be with you," an idea which is at the core to the revelation of the divine name in Exodus 3.

The opening "parable" in John 10 is divided into either a five or six verse unit. It should, however, be understood as a continuation of the events in chapter 9. Beasley-Murray has suggested that 10:1-21 is set in close association with the narrative of the healing of the blind man in the period following the Festival of Tabernacles, while 10:22-39 fails within the Festival of Dedication, shortly after the preceding events. This would mean that there were several months between the festivals, but John has not made clear in his text where the chronological disposition should be made. There are, however, a number of things which connect 10:1-21 with chapter 9. There is the common element of unbelief that the two chapters share. Furthermore, as Brown suggested, "…the example of the blind man Jesus is not unlike the example of the sheep in x4-5 who will not follow a stranger but recognize the voice of their true master." Last, both chapters open with the predicate *ego eimi* (I am the light of the world in 9:5 and I am the door of the sheep in 10:7).

Concerning the structure of 10:1-6 Menken has some pertinent suggestions:

> In 10, 1b-2, Jesus speaks first about the "thief and robber," who enters the sheepfold in an illegal way, and secondly about the "shepherd of the sheep," who enters in a legal way; in 10, 4b-5 he speaks first about the shepherd whom the sheep follow, and secondly about the "stranger" who they will not follow. So, the two parallelisms together constitute in 10,1-5 an inclusion in chiastic order: thief and robber-shepherd (10, 1b.2)-shepherd-stranger (10,4b-c.5).

The purpose of v 3 is to be a hinge in which the door is opened only to the shepherd and the leads them out and thus anticipates w 4-5.

It is difficult to know how to interpret the various persons in the *paroimia*. They are a shepherd, a doorkeeper, thieves, hirelings, and the question whether the door is to be personalized. It is perhaps no surprise that his audience is confused! I doubt that there is any character identification that is possible beyond the idea that there is one legitimate leader of the flock, Christ, and, perhaps, he illegitimate leaders might be the Pharisees. For John to have mixed his metaphors here is not at all unusual in his book:

> But such statements are not uncommon in this Gospel. Jesus is the Bread of Life (6:35), and He gives it (6:51). He speaks the truth (8:45f.) and He is the truth (14:6). Throughout the Gospel He is depicted as showing men the way, and he is the way (14:6).

Since "shepherd" in v 2 is anarthrous, it might be argued that such a Christological interpretation of the term is premature but Colwell has argued that "The absence of the article does not make the predicate indefinite or qualitative when it precedes the verb; it is indefinite in this position only when the context demands it. The context makes no such demand in the Gospel of John." Or as Schnackenburg put it,

> The contrasting of "thief and robber" with "shepherd of the sheep" is a general and typical procedure when, as here, normal conditions are described. And herein lies the explanation of why there is no article and of the fact that "thief and robber" is singular. In verse 2, "shepherd of the sheep" can thus stand for one shepherd among others and equally for the one shepherd looking after all the sheep. Not till verse 3f do we gather that a particular shepherd is meant…

At any rate, this *paroimia* sets the stage for the clearer christological revelation that follows. The ambiguity of the *paroimia* is clarified for those who know his voice by his skillful employment of the word "voice" which in John's gospel is only used in a supernatural sense. The message of the *paroimia* is subtle and able to be heard with varying capacities.

It is impossible to know for certain if the new discourse begun in v 7 was made at the same occasion as the *paroimia*. There are, however, a number of observations that would lead the interpreter to think it was. John's use of "therefore" (ουν) would seem to suggest this new discourse is a commentary on the first and seeks to answer their confusion- "they did not understand what those things were which he had been saying to

them." The repeated use of "truly, truly" suggests a continuity with the same words starting the *paroimia*. He interprets the meaning of the *paroimia* with the revelation "I am the door of the sheep." Because of the way John uses the formula, we no longer have a *paroimia*; He is now making His claim clear.

It is not possible to identify the Old Testament source for this little although Ps 118:20 is perhaps the best guess: "This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous will enter through it." Indeed, vv22-27 are clearly messianic. At any rate, it is most natural to interpret the Door here in relation to the sheep that enter by the Redeemer into the salvation of the kingdom of God. Schnackenburg captured the importance of vv 7-10 with his comment.

> Jesus' double self-predication unfolds less from the image (door) than from the subject matter. Through the firs I-word, false claims and seizures are parried (verse 8), and, through the second, Jesus' salvational importance for those who are his own is illustrated (verse 9).

The "double self-predication" is the fact that the *ego eimi* formula starts the discourse (v 7b) and repeats it (v 9a). Menken sees the structure:

10:7b	a	Amen formula
7b		'I am the door…'
8	b	thieves and robbers
9	a	'I am the door…'
10a	b	the thief
10b	a	'I came…'

Moreover, the passage displays a bipartition: 10,7-8.9-10. Both parts begin with and saying and contain a sentence about the "thieves and robbers" or the "thief." In the first part, the sentences end in and respectively; the second begins and ends with a sentence starting with . 10:10 contains a clear antithetic parallelism.

This pericope, then, has made clearer to the audience that Christ is making divine claims but they are still confused.

This third discourse (vv 11-18) is not only longer but more complex with characters and activity. A t first blush, it looks like genuine allegory. Even a quick glance at Ezekiel 34 shows that this is the source for Christ's self-revelation in John 10:11-18. In John 10:3, Jesus said εξαγει αυτα while in Ezek 34:13 (LXX) God said εξαξω αυτου. Again, in the Good Shepherd story, great emphasis is laid on the fact that there is a knowing relationship between the sheep and the Shepherd. In 10:4 it is said

that “the sheep follow him because they know this voice,” and the idea is preceded in Ezek 34:27, 31 where in that day “they will know that I am the Lord.”

Still another example of this interdependence may be seen in the reference to pasture in John 10:9 and εν νομη αγαθη in Ezek 34:14. The predations of the beasts in Ezek 34:5, 8 compare favorable with the attacks mentioned in John 10:12 as well as the Synoptics. There is conceptual similarity in that there is severe judgment on the bad shepherds whose flocks are scattered. The general theme of scattered sheep and regathering by YHWH compare favorably. Finally, the reference to one flock in 10:16 (μια ποιμην) may well have been prompted by the messianic prediction in Erzek 34:27-31. So similar are the two accounts that Gerhardsson has suggested that “…we should think of John 10:1-16 as a *messianic midrash* [his emphasis] on Ezekiel 34.”

The similarities are so numerous and striking that they actually highlight the few differences. In John 10, the Good Shepherd gives ζωην αιωνιον, a gift unique to he New testament picture of the Shepherd. In addition, the basis for this “eternal life” is taken from Zech 13:7ff. rather than Ezekiel. In a striking reversal, it is the Shepherd who searches out the wolf so that he may die, thereby granting life for His flock. Ezekiel 34 is much more allegorical than the Good Shepherd story which has scarcely any pastoral imagery beyond the Shepherd, a wolf and a hireling. Concerning the various characters in this discourse it has been observed:

> But in the Johannine perspective, wolf (singular) is simply the symbol of threatening danger and brings the hirelings conduct to light. As for “hireling,” it is not an image of those sub-shepherds appointed by the chief shepherd; rather, it stands in contrast to the owner who loves his sheep and devotes himself entirely to them.

Indeed, it is senseless in a genuinely pastoral setting for a hireling to run from a single wolf which would then kill a larger umber of sheep. Then too, any sturdy and properly armed shepherd was more than a match for the wolf. The most glaring inconsistency which pastoral imagery is the repeated declaration “I lay down my life for my sheep.” The good shepherd would do better to take the life of the wolf because with the shepherd’s death the sheep now have no shepherd! It would seem, in retrospect, that al three discourses use pastoral imagery only as a foil as each sought to make its main point.

It will always be impossible to know exactly how His audience understood His statements, but this last discourse has led some of them to say he has a demon (v 20). Still, His message was just ambiguous enough to be understood in several ways. He may have been simply picturing Himself as the messiah, or he may have been claiming something new and scandalous. "How long will You keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." This led to the point of the parable itself. "I and the Father are one." It is especially important to note that in vv 25-29 Christ returned to the sheep/shepherd imagery to answer their question. No better image fro the Old Testament could be found to communicate that YHWH and His Messiah were identical.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a number of statements need to be brought together. It was noted initially that the title/epithet of shepherd was used throughout the ancient world by both kings and deities. Invariably, it evoked the idea of a beneficent leader who piously exercised his rule. The Old Testament continued that practice except that the title is reserved for God. It was not uncommon, however, for the image or its nomenclature to be used for leaders. There are evidences that it was used in the intertestamental literature, occasionally in messianic texts. Most importantly, both the Synoptic gospels and John use it in a messianic way.

John alone combined most dramatically the person of the Messiah with YHWH Himself. His unique use of the formula εγο ειμι with the predicate was the means by which he made that self-revelation clearer. This finds its climax at the end of the discourses in John 9-10 with the unprecedented statement, "I and the Father are One." Up to this point, in John's gospel, Jesus had not yet made it public that He was the messiah. "By his subtle and careful use of he phrase he taught the truth concerning his won divinity and at the same time his submission to the Father." The result is such that the theme of the story, indeed of his book, is Christological. Because of the new understanding that Messiah and God are one, the Messiah is uniquely able to offer those who believe eternal life. "But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you have life in His name" (John 20:31).