

TITLE:

**The Metaphor of Israel as God's Flock in the Book of Psalms.**

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A *Introduction*

The metaphorical use of the concept of Israel as a flock of sheep with God as its shepherd is an extremely common one in the Bible. It is introduced by Moses in the desert (Num. 27.17), or perhaps even by Jacob himself (Gen. 48.15), and is frequently employed in the prophets from Amos in the eighth century BC to Zechariah in the fifth. And of course the theme is taken up by the Lord Jesus himself, and carried forward to the new creation in Rev. 7.17<sup>1</sup>. It is particularly well-represented in the Psalms, with nineteen references in twelve psalms.

Why should this picture recur so often in Hebrew Scripture? There are at least three factors which might help to explain its use.

From the time of Abraham the Hebrews were a pastoral people, and remained so at the time of their constitution as a nation under Moses. Furthermore sheep-farming remained a principal occupation, particularly in the hill country, throughout Israel's history. The flock, with its shepherd, was a graphic and readily understood image to every Israelite.

The royal line of Judah had its origin in David, who had been a keeper of sheep, and became a shepherd to Israel (2 Sam. 5.2; cf Ps. 78.70ff). Once Israel had a king, the idea of God as their supernatural King became more focused, so that it was perhaps natural to see him also as the Shepherd of Israel.

Most important of all was the unique relationship which Israel had with Yahweh. The shepherd-flock analogy fitted perfectly into the covenant relationship God had established with Abraham, and then with Israel at Sinai. Comparing the picture with the covenant-promise of Gen. 12.2-3, we see it encompasses the idea of the *land* where the flock dwells, the *community* of the flock itself, and the *rule* and *blessing* of the shepherd, Yahweh. In contrast, the surrounding nations could never have employed such imagery. For example,

The Mesopotamians approach deity with the assumption that there is an angry God (what could it be this time?) who needs somehow to be appeased ... In contrast, it is clear above all else that the Israelite believes he prays to a sovereign and just God. The Israelite seeks to remind God of his obligations. God is obliged only through his promises (the covenant) and through his attributes.<sup>2</sup> Just so is a shepherd in relationship to his flock, and obliged to care for them as they depend on him. Nevertheless, the metaphor has many more dimensions in its use in the the Psalms, as we shall see.

B *Words employed for the metaphor*

Several Hebrew words are used to represent the theme in the Psalms. Three are used of the sheep. These are *eder*, meaning "flock" or "herd", and so emphasising the community; *tsen*, meaning "flock" or "sheep", by far the commonest, with a greater stress on plurality; and *seh*, a young lamb or sheep, which is used once only in the context of a lost individual.

The word for shepherd is *raah*, derived from a word meaning "to feed" (cf Ps. 37.3), which says much about the fundamental relationship involved. This helps to explain the association of various words for "pasture" with the flock metaphor in many of the texts.

C *Types of psalm employing the metaphor*

It is noteworthy that the shepherd-flock metaphor is represented in nearly every one of the form-critical genres, which perhaps shows that the concept was often expressed in Israel and so applicable in many different contexts. There are individual<sup>3</sup> and communal<sup>4</sup> laments, psalms of descriptive praise<sup>5</sup>, psalms of declarative praise<sup>6</sup>, psalms of remembrance (and royal psalms)<sup>7</sup>, psalms of confidence<sup>8</sup>, wisdom psalms<sup>9</sup> and the law psalm<sup>10</sup>. Of these the laments predominate, but this appears to be proportional to the frequency of laments generally. To some extent the use to which the metaphor is put reflects the genre, as we shall see later.

There is an interesting observation regarding ascribed authorship. Despite David's origin as a shepherd, only Ps. 23 is attributed to him. On the other hand, no less than five of the psalms are ascribed to Asaph, out of only twelve so entitled altogether in the Psalter. This suggests a favourite theme of a single author, lending weight to the possibility of the psalm headings being reliable sources of information.

D *The different uses of the metaphor*

The richness of the shepherd-flock image is shown by the various shades of meaning given to it in the Psalms. I have identified six readily-distinguished aspects, which tend to reflect the genre of the source. However, in truth there are different nuances in virtually every separate example.

*Di Motive for worship*

This is the most basic statement of the analogy, best exemplified in the hymn Ps. 95 vv6-7:

Come, let us bow down in worship,  
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;  
for he is our God  
and we are the people of his pasture,  
the flock under his care.

It seems to be a direct application of Jacob's recognition of his relationship in Gen. 48.15, already mentioned. The concept of the LORD as *Maker* includes both his *creation*, as in vv3-5, and his *redemption*, by the separation of Israel as his own people through Moses. By this they have become his "treasured possession" (Exod. 19.5), and he has become "their God" (Gen. 17.8).

The phrase "people of his pasture" hints at the land, which is an integral part of the promise, but in a society where land was the heart of patrimony, it also gives the LORD a special concern for the welfare of the people as his *inheritance*<sup>11</sup>.

"The flock under his care" shows the core of the relationship, which is totally dependant on the care and feeding (*raah*) of the sheep by their Shepherd. The sheep owe their existence, and all their blessings, to God. The only proper response to this is to bow before him in praise and worship. Ps. 100 has the same concept in almost the same words, with the subtle difference of a hint at universal application ("Shout for joy to the LORD, *all the earth*"), echoing Gen. 12.3b.

Ps 78 is a psalm of remembrance, but the the use of the metaphor in v52 is identical:

But he brought his people out like a flock;  
he led them like sheep through the desert.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, reflecting the genre of the psalm, the figure is employed less to excite worship than to bring repentance for the ingratitude of rebellion throughout the psalm.

*Dii Pleading for mercy*

In all five of the communal laments under review the shepherd-flock metaphor is used as a gentle reminder to God, as it were, of the covenant relationship. It points out to him the incongruity of a shepherd's abandoning his flock. The simplest example of this is Ps. 74.1:

Why have you rejected us for ever, O God?  
Why does your anger smoulder against the sheep of your pasture?  
V2 goes on to remind him of his *purchase*, his *inheritance*, and his *place*. His abandonment is inexplicable partly because not only the sheep, but God, suffer mockery (v10), and it does not benefit the shepherd to lose his sheep (v1). But above this, how can a shepherd be angry with his flock? Though perhaps prone to stray, they are helpless, harmless and useful<sup>13</sup>. The psalmist recalls God to his covenant (v20) and his own cause (v22).

Much the same usage occurs in Pss. 80, 79<sup>14</sup>, and 44. In the last the picture of innocent suffering is developed more graphically:

You gave us to be devoured like sheep  
and have scattered us among the nations. (v11)  
Yet for your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. (v22)  
The shepherd having abandoned the flock, it is at the mercy of ravening wolves. Indeed, it is "for his sake" (or "because of him") that they are so vulnerable, because it is he who in the first place

brought them into one flock and one fold from being wild and free<sup>15</sup>. Bewildered, they look to the only One who can protect them for rescue.

*Diii Motive for trust*

Ps. 77 is an individual lament, where the metaphor is placed almost as an appendix as v20:

You led your people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.  
Yet its use is different from before. The psalmist, having made his complaint, begins to deal with it by remembering the LORD's deeds, remembering his miracles, meditating on his works and considering his mighty deeds. His final consideration, then, is God's special relationship with his flock, which is the guarantee of his restoration. Here it is the writer, rather than God, who is reminded of the covenant.

*Div Reminder of the LORD's provision*

The second reference in Ps 70 (vv70-72) extends the metaphor of the Shepherd-King to his earthly representative, David. The remembrance psalm merges into a royal psalm. In *Di above* the ingratitude of Israel to their Shepherd was indicated. Here God's merciful provision to a habitually rebellious flock is shown. He has provided them with a man used to the sheep pens, who shepherds them "with integrity of heart", and leads them "with skilful hands", so that they will suffer through rebellion no more<sup>16</sup>.

*Dv False shepherds and false flocks*

At first sight, the analogy in the wisdom Ps. 49 seems unrelated to our theme. Like much wisdom-literature it seems less comfortable, more hard-edged and cynical:

Like sheep they are destined for the grave,  
and death will feed on them. (v14)

More light is cast by the *NEB* translation:

like sheep they run headlong into Sheol, the land of Death;  
he is their shepherd [*raah*] and urges them on ...

The psalmist's theme is the contrast between those who trust in God, and "those who trust in themselves" (v13). In other words, there is an implied contrast between God's flock, as we have seen it before, and those who exclude themselves from it. Despite their independence, they in fact have a shepherd, Death, whose pasture is not Israel but Sheol, and who does not care for them but, like the Gadarene swine, drives them to destruction. Here, then, is a most subtle variation on the theme.

*Dvi The personal shepherd*

The picture of the shepherd in Ps. 23 takes all that is essential in the metaphor of Israel as the LORD's flock, and applies it to the individual believer in this personal meditation of confidence in God. God is not only a Shepherd to the nation, but to each member of it, dealing with them as benevolently as he does with the community. His care is complete (v1): it is physical (v2), spiritual and moral (v3), and extends his protection even to the edge of death itself (v4). It is this kind of psalm which demonstrates that the religion of Israel was not just a national *cultus*, but a personal faith.

*The same, personal, emphasis occurs in our last example, Ps. 119.176:*

I have strayed like a lost sheep.

Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.  
Here the individual is not just a part of the flock, but a lost lamb who has strayed from God's law. Yet he bleats for the Shepherd, knowing that his voice will be recognised; being lost does not mean being excluded from the fold. This is a fitting end point to our examination of the shepherd-flock metaphor. The God who led out a nation from slavery to covenant-relationship is also seen

as the One who seeks for individuals who have wandered, a theme which was taken up and amplified yet further under the New Covenant by the Lord Jesus.

*E Conclusion*

The shepherd-flock analogy, as used throughout the psalms, is shown to be capable of extremely rich and complex interpretation, almost to the point of allegory. It has its origin deep in the covenant narratives of Genesis and Exodus, and accurately reflects many aspects of the covenant relationship. Its development in the psalms is tailored to the needs of the various genres, and even to the individual message of each psalm. The freedom with which psalmists adapted the basic analogy suggest that it was a common and living illustration of the way that Israel viewed its relationship with the LORD. §§§  
(2057 words)

*Notes*

- 1 It is remarkable how here, as elsewhere in the NT, Jesus as Son of God and Davidic King is shepherd; whilst at the same time as Son of Man he is identified with the flock as a lamb, and specifically as the lamb of sacrifice.
- 2 Walton, 1989, p.15.
- 3 Ps. 77.
- 4 Pss. 44, 74, 79, 80.
- 5 Pss. 95, 100.
- 6 Ps. 107.
- 7 Ps. 78.
- 8 Ps. 23.
- 9 Ps. 49.
- 10 Ps. 119.
- 11 "Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance ..." Mic. 7.14.
- 12 The well-known eastern custom of leading, rather than driving, sheep says a lot about the relationship of care and mutual devotion here.
- 13 Owen, 1965, p.281.
- 14 Here it is attached to the renewed vow in the last verse.
- 15 This is the strength of Paul's application in Rom. 8.36.
- 16 The failure of David himself to fulfil this, even in his life, led to the Messianic hope only fulfilled in Jesus himself.

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