



PART 1

## BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

While this book is designed to provide a very practical model for shepherding ministry, no church should embrace a ministry model that cannot demonstrate its biblical rationale. Though the Bible is not a detailed “book of church order,” the Lord has provided clear principles designed to guide his church for its ongoing health and growth, particularly with regard to the nature and functions of church leaders. The concept of the leader as a shepherd is a theme with deep roots in God’s written revelation with its foundations in the Old Testament and fulfillment in the New. Chapters one and two will provide the biblical background, and chapter three will give a brief overview of the theme through the subsequent history of the church. Before we embark on the “how to’s” of the next section, chapter four will address the important biblical foundations of a shepherd’s “right” to exercise the biblical leadership functions.



I

# NOT A NEW IDEA: OLD TESTAMENT THEMES



The Lord as the Shepherd of His People

*“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”* (Ps. 23:1 KJV)

THE BIBLICAL IMAGERY of the Lord as the shepherd of his people is plentiful and rich throughout the Bible.<sup>1</sup> It begins in Genesis where, as Jacob blessed his sons, he described the Lord as “the God who has been my shepherd all my life” (Gen. 48:15).

1. A more detailed exposition of the biblical theology of the shepherding metaphor can be seen in Timothy S. Laniak’s book *Shepherds After My Own Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

Jacob declared in faith that behind his tumultuous and often rebellious life was a faithful, patient Shepherd who provided for him and guided him. It was his intent to see his children blessed by yielding to the covenant lovingkindness of the Lord. The sense of personal care and blessing in covenant with the Lord is captured by the most familiar of psalms, which begins with the affirmation, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1 KJV). The Lord is the ultimate provider, protector, and guide for his sheep.

However, the relationship that God established was not merely with individuals, but corporately with his people. It is natural, therefore, that God’s covenant people are described in terms of his “sheep” and “flock.” The psalmist cries out, “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock” (Ps. 80:1 NIV). The psalmist rejoices in the faithfulness of God to his covenant people, “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” (Ps. 95:6–7 NIV).

The description of the Lord as shepherd of his flock is often found in a redemptive context. There are numerous references, for example, that relate the redemption of the people from bondage in Egypt to the Lord as shepherd. “You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (Ps. 77:20 NIV) reflects on the goodness of God in delivering his people through the Red Sea. The very next psalm recounts the destructive plagues poured out upon the Egyptians but then remembers that “he brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep through the desert” (Ps. 78:52 NIV). These accounts not only celebrate his protective care from the Egyptians but lay the foundation for the climactic redemptive deliverance yet to come.

The Lord's self-revelation as "shepherd" of his people is not merely a metaphor with which his people could clearly relate, but it is one that describes the comprehensive care that he provides for his people. Again, this is clearly seen in Psalm 23, where the Lord's care for his people leads to the superlative expression of gratitude and praise from his people, "I shall not want." Nothing is lacking in the care provided for the flock. Not only does he feed them, but he also leads them and protects them.

The reassurance of his faithfulness is given to them even when they are straying. Isaiah writes, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (Isa. 40:11 NIV). When the work of shepherding is difficult, the commitment of the shepherd is truly revealed. Yet shepherding is a labor of love to the one who truly is a shepherd.

The shepherding metaphor is not only comprehensive with respect to the nature of the care received but also with respect to the extent. This is one important distinction between the metaphor of father and that of shepherd. Children grow up and become less dependent on their earthly fathers, though the relationship continues. Sheep, on the other hand, are *always* completely dependent on their shepherd. They never outgrow their need for the shepherd to care for them, feed them, lead them, and protect them. The shepherd cares for the newborn lambs and is still there when the sheep grow old and weak. Therefore, the imagery of shepherd-sheep captures the comprehensive sovereignty of the shepherd over the sheep and the need of the sheep to yield completely to his care. The good news is that the Lord uses his sovereign power for the well-being of his flock.

## Shepherd-Leaders of Israel: Moses and David

If the Lord is the shepherd and the people are his flock, we should not be surprised that he uses shepherding imagery to refer to those he calls to lead and care for his flock. The care of the Lord for his people is to be reflected in those whom he calls to lead.

Two of the preeminent leaders of God's people in the Old Covenant, Moses and David, are described in this way. In addition to the reference from Psalm 77 in the previous section, Isaiah identifies Moses as a shepherd of Israel. "Then his people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people—where is he who brought them through the sea, with the shepherd of his flock" (Isa. 63:11 NIV)? While the grammatical construction of the Hebrew text is difficult, E. J. Young definitively concludes that the "shepherd" is Moses: "On the one view it is God who delivered the people and with them the shepherd of His flock; on the other it is Moses who as the shepherd brought the people up from the Red Sea."<sup>2</sup> Moses was used by the Lord to lead God's covenant people, his flock, from bondage in Egypt.

David's leadership is also described in terms of shepherding. When the people of Israel rallied around him as their king, they reminded him that "the LORD said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler'" (2 Sam. 5:2 NIV). In recounting the glory of David's rule, the psalmist writes that "David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them" (Ps. 78:72 NIV).

2. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 484.

In addition to these specific references to Moses and David as shepherd-leaders, there is a general reference to all of Israel's leaders as shepherds. In 2 Samuel 7, the Lord instructs Nathan to respond to David's desire to build a house for the Lord. In that context the Lord tells Nathan, "Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar'" (2 Sam. 7:7 NIV)? The previous rulers are described as those "commanded to shepherd" the people.

Did you ever think about that fact that Moses and David were called from shepherding *real* flocks to shepherd the people of God? It was while tending his father-in-law's sheep that the Lord spoke to Moses from the burning bush, calling him to deliver the covenant people (Ex. 3:1ff). The Lord took Moses' humble shepherd's staff and transformed it into the symbol of God's call and through which his mighty deeds were accomplished that brought the people out of bondage. "You shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs" (Ex. 4:17). It was this staff that became a serpent in the presence of Pharaoh. It was through the staff that, in the Lord's power, the Nile was turned to blood, the dust was turned to gnats, the hail fell on Egypt, and the locusts came upon the land. It was when this staff was lifted up that the waters of the Red Sea parted and God's people passed through safely. When Moses raised it again the waters crashed down on Pharaoh's soldiers and chariots. It was with the staff that Moses struck the rock in Horeb and the water flowed in quantities sufficient to satisfy the thirst of his people in the desert.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff

BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

with which you struck the Nile, and go. “Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. (Ex. 17:5–6)

It was this staff that Moses held high on the mountain while Joshua and the Israelites fought in the valley and won their first post-exodus victory over the Amalekites. As long as the staff was held high, Israel prevailed, but as Moses’ arms grew weary and the staff came down, the Amalekites prevailed.

So Moses said to Joshua, “Choose men for us and go out, fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.” Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought against Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed. (Ex. 17:9–11)

Aaron and Hur helped him hold the staff high, and the Amalekites were defeated. No wonder it was referred to as the “staff of God” (Ex. 4:20). Moses was the human “undershepherd,” but there was no doubt that the “staff of God” revealed that it was the Lord who was protecting the people, providing for the people, and guiding the people.

David was another leader whom God called right from the sheepfolds. The psalmist writes, “He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance” (Ps. 78:70–71 NIV). In each case, David and Moses were prepared for service in the Lord’s flock by working with real sheep. When David was persuading Saul to allow him to take



on the Philistine champion, Goliath, he used his experience in protecting the sheep as the foundation of his argument.

Then Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth while he has been a warrior from his youth.” But David said to Saul, “Your servant was tending his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went out after him and attacked him, and rescued it from his mouth; and when he rose up against me, I seized him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, since he has taunted the armies of the living God.” (1 Sam. 17:33–36)

David found courage to face Goliath in the strength the Lord had given him to protect his father’s flocks from the lions and bears. Lessons learned in the sheepfold about feeding, leading, and protecting flocks would be essential in ministering to God’s people. The Lord’s purpose would be fulfilled in preserving a remnant of his people in his land from whom would issue the promised Messiah, the ultimate Shepherd of God’s people. Moses, the prototypical prophet, and David, the prototypical king, are both described as shepherds. In providing shepherding care for the people of God, they were reflecting the shepherding care of the covenant Lord.

## **The Problem with Human Shepherds**

### *Moses*

The ultimate inadequacy of human shepherds is also clearly revealed in the Old Testament. The power of God was shown

mightily through Moses' humble staff, which became the "staff of God." However, misuse of that same staff became his stumbling block when Israel faced the need for water again in the desert: "Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink" (Num. 20:8).

However, instead of speaking to the rock as the Lord commanded, Moses struck the rock with the staff. This act of insubordination and disrespect led to Moses' disqualification from entering the land. "But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them'" (Num. 20:12). There was to be no confusion over who was the shepherd of Israel. In the end there was no doubt that it was the Lord who brought the people into the land of promise.

### *David*

King David also fell short when he abused his power as shepherd-king of Israel; first in his adultery with Bathsheba and then in the subsequent conspiracy in the murder of her husband, Uriah. The king should have been deployed with his army for the sake of the protection of God's people. Instead, he remained behind and abused the sheep. Nathan the prophet was sent by the Lord to confront David with his sin. Remember the parable that he told?

Then the LORD sent Nathan to David. And he came to him and said, "There were two men in one city, the one rich and the

other poor. The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb which he bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him; rather he took the poor man's ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."  
(2 Sam. 12:1–4)

The story Nathan told would have resonated with David as he understood the malice of this selfish shepherd. His own shepherd's instinct based on his experience evoked a response of righteous indignation.

Then David's anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion."  
(2 Sam. 12:5–6)

When Nathan told him, "You are the man!" David immediately understood the evil he had committed and repented.

David would never think of abusing sheep in that way, but he had committed an even greater transgression by abusing God's sheep. As Moses' failure as Israel's shepherd resulted in consequences for himself and the people, so with King David. Moses, the one who bore the staff of God, had failed and would not enter the Promised Land. David, who wore the crown of the "shepherd-king," would see the death of the infant son born from the illicit union with Bathsheba. His sin had an even

greater impact, as Nathan prophesied: “Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife” (2 Sam. 12:10). Though the Lord called men to shepherd his flock, it became more and more apparent with every succeeding generation that the people needed to look to the Lord as their shepherd and king and that the undershepherds themselves needed to be vigilant in following the Lord. Unfortunately, the frailty of human shepherds continued to be a major theme in Israel’s history.

### *Ezekiel 34*

Moses and David demonstrated their fallibility as shepherds, but Israel’s shepherds as a whole incurred the chastisement of the Lord in an episode that should be sobering to all who are called to positions of leadership among God’s people.

Ezekiel prophesied among God’s people during a very difficult time in Israel’s history. He had been carried away into exile in Babylon along with the unfaithful Israelites. His ministry among them was manifold, including “to impress upon the exiles the fact that the calamity had come because of their own sinfulness.”<sup>3</sup>

The thirty-fourth chapter of Ezekiel’s prophecy represents detailed charges against the undershepherds of Israel, who should have been caring for God’s flock. These would have been the elders of the nation whose unfaithfulness was largely responsible for the circumstances in which the people found themselves. The Lord held them accountable for their failure to

3. Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 244.

shepherd the flock. The chapter contains three major sections. The first section (34:1–10) includes the detailed indictment against the shepherds. The appropriate use of the shepherding metaphor is front and center throughout the chapter. What are the charges?

They fed *themselves* rather than the flock (verse 2); they failed to strengthen the sickly, heal the diseased, bind up the broken, and seek the lost (verse 4). The result for the people was that they were scattered, literally to a foreign land, and became food for every beast of the field (verse 5). As you can see, they failed to fulfill the most basic functions of shepherds: to feed, lead, and protect the sheep. Instead, the sheep were starved, lost, and the prey of wild animals. Even worse, those who were supposed to feed and protect God's flock were actually feeding upon the sheep themselves: "You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock" (Ezek. 34:3).

Verse 4 also speaks of the manner of their approach, "with force and severity you have dominated them." Laniak comments that this terminology of brutality is only used elsewhere in the Old Testament where it describes slavery in Egypt.<sup>4</sup> The concluding verses (7–10) of the first section declare the Lord's opposition to the shepherds and their removal so that they can do no more damage to God's flock.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: "As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but rather the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed

4. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, 153.

BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

My flock; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.”’” (Ezek. 34:7–10)

In the second section of the chapter (verses 11–22) God promises shepherding care for his people. Though they have been mistreated, God has not forgotten them.

For thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day.” (Ezek. 34:11–12)

Every failure of the undershepherds will be met by the Lord. He himself will seek the lost sheep, care for them, feed them, and protect them. He will lead them to rest, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick. He also reiterates that he will hold those to account who have abused his flock.

One of the consequences of the failure to shepherd is that others will step in to fill the void. The strong will assert themselves and bully the weaker sheep.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them, “Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and with shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns until you have scattered them abroad.” (Ezek. 34:20–21)

Faithful shepherds protect their flocks not only from harmful outside influences but from the self-serving among the sheep. Many congregations have experienced the intimidation of bullies within their midst when leaders fail to take responsibility to shepherd the flock. It is often the strong-willed, outspoken, highly opinionated folk who fill the void. There will *always* be leaders—the issue is whether they are the leaders called and gifted by God to shepherd his flock or those who push themselves forward so that they can push others around.

The third section of the chapter (verses 23–31) looks forward to the coming of the perfect shepherd. Would there ever be one upon whom the Father could depend to give faithful care to his flock? Ezekiel looks forward with prophetic vision to the shepherd who is to come. “Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd” (Ezek. 34:23).

The times in which Ezekiel wrote were long after the days of the shepherd-king, David. However, there was another shepherd-king to come, and his faithfulness would eclipse not only that of the unfaithful shepherds during Ezekiel’s time, but that of David, Israel’s revered shepherd-king. In fact, the one of whom Ezekiel speaks is the promised one to come who will have an everlasting reign on David’s throne (see 2 Sam. 7:12). The one who is to come will not merely be a king but a shepherd-king. This concluding section once again sounds the notes of the shepherding metaphor but now in an eschatological key. There is yet to come a new covenant, a “covenant of peace,” the blessings of which will be brought to his people by the Messianic shepherd-king. He will be the ultimate provider, deliverer, and guide.

The chapter concludes with two important statements. Verse 30 reminds the people of the personal covenantal relationship that God has established with them. “Then they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are My people,” declares the Lord God.” The covenant with Israel was established that they might be his people and that he would be their God, so they can be assured of his lovingkindness and comprehensive shepherding care.

As verse 30 reminds the people about the uniqueness of the relationship between the Lord and his people, the final verse of this remarkable chapter reminds the people that they must not forget that *he* is God. “As for you, My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, you are men, and I am your God,” declares the Lord God” (Ezek. 34:31).

It is always incumbent upon the people of God to remember that he is not only their shepherd, but that he is the Lord God. Yet the sheep were not the only ones who needed to hear this message. The undershepherds of Israel failed to remember that they themselves were the Lord’s sheep, resulting in the scattering of the flock and their own condemnation. These words continue to serve as a vivid reminder to those who would lead his flock of their accountability to the Lord for the manner in which they care for his sheep.

## The Shepherd to Come

As we have just seen, the closing words of Ezekiel 34 point forward to *the* Good Shepherd who will have none of the shortcomings of sinful human shepherds. However, Ezekiel wasn’t the only prophet who used the shepherding metaphor to describe the



coming Messiah. In a passage that closely reflects the structure of Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23 gives a more condensed version of the condemnation of the false shepherds.

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: “You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,” declares the LORD. (Jer. 23:1–2)

As with Ezekiel, the hopelessness of the situation was not to prevail. Jeremiah also provides a promise of the coming Davidic shepherd-king:

“Behold the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘The Lord our righteousness.’” (Jer. 23:5–6)

The imagery of a well-protected flock is pictured as the prophet reflects on the current insecurity of Israel in Babylonian captivity. It is the “righteous Branch” from the lineage of David who will bring about deliverance for his people.

Later in redemptive history, Micah picks up this theme. Most are familiar with Micah’s prophecy about the place of the coming Messiah’s birth. However, many don’t recall Micah’s actual description of the One who is to come. After identifying Bethlehem Ephrathah as the birthplace of the “ruler over Israel,” Micah

describes him as the one who “will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth” (Mic. 5:2, 4 NIV). The gospel of Matthew quotes these words in the context of the search of the Magi for the one “who has been born king of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2). This promise was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the Shepherd-King. He would succeed in faithfully shepherding God’s flock where all others had failed.

### **For Further Reflection**

1. Why is the metaphor of shepherd appropriate for the relationship between God and his people?
2. Compare and contrast the imagery of shepherd and father as descriptions of the Lord’s relationship with his people.
3. Why is the metaphor of shepherd appropriate for those who would lead the people of God?
4. Using the chart on the next page follow and identify the parallels between the Lord’s indictment of Israel’s faithless elders, his commitment to shepherd them, and the shepherd to come. Discuss implications for your ministry as shepherds of his flock today.