

## **Lessons in Shepherding 1: God, Moses and David**

*By Paul Alexander*

[Editor's note: In the interest of providing pastors with good resources, or at least of pointing them toward good ideas, we are grateful to present Pastor Paul Alexander's elder training seminars for new elders. Alexander himself says that this study is dependent on and adapted from Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart* (IVP, 2006), and A.D. Clarke, "Leadership," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (IVP, 2000). This issue of the *9Marks eJournal* presents the first half of Alexander's curriculum (classes 1 to 4), which exclusively focuses on the metaphor of shepherding in Scripture. In a future issue, we hope to present the latter half of his curriculum, which moves to the more practical aspects of eldering.]

Jeremiah 3:15 "Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding" (NAS used throughout).

### **GOD – THE ULTIMATE SHEPHERD**

The whole history of God's people can be traced using the metaphor of God as the shepherd of his people. From Jacob in Genesis, to the exodus from Egypt into the Promised Land, and all the way to the second exodus from the wilderness of this world to the Promised Land of heaven, God reveals himself as the shepherd of his people.

#### ***For Jacob***

To begin with, he reveals himself as the shepherd of particular individuals, and individuals who are representative of the whole nation of Israel, such as Jacob.

And [Jacob/Israel] blessed Joseph, and said, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads; And may my name live on in them, And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; And may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth" (Gen 48:15).

Back in Genesis 28, after Isaac sends Jacob away to get a wife, God appears to Jacob in a dream and shows him Jacob's Ladder. God first promises to give Jacob the Promised Land and many descendants. Then he promises to be with Jacob: "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen 28:15).

In other words, God's *presence* and God's *protection* were the ways in which God shepherded Jacob all his life, and Jacob understood these things as God's shepherding care over him. So even before Israel is a nation—when Israel is just Jacob the individual—God is the shepherd of his people, providing his sovereign presence and omnipotent protection to ensure the fulfillment of his promises to Abraham of a people and a place.

#### ***For David***

God also shepherds David, another representative Israelite, in Psalm 23.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of

righteousness For his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever (Ps. 23).

What are some of the functions of a shepherd that David ascribes to God in this chapter?

- In verses 1-2, God provides *nourishment* (green grass, quiet waters), *rest* (lie down), *restoration* of the soul, and *satisfaction* (I shall not want).
- In verse 3, he provides *guidance* (in paths of righteousness).
- In verse 4, he provides *protection* and *comfort* by virtue of his presence and his rod and staff (the instruments a shepherd used to gather the sheep and fend off wild animals).

### ***Through The Exodus***

Just as Jacob and David are representative individuals in Israel, so God shepherds the entire nation of Israel through the exodus. For instance, the Psalmist describes God's care for corporate, national Israel in the wilderness of Sinai as shepherding care.

You led Your people like a flock By the hand of Moses and Aaron (Ps 77:20).

He leveled a path for his anger; He did not spare their soul from death, But gave over their life to the plague, And smote all the firstborn in Egypt, The first issue of their virility in the tents of Ham. But He led forth his own people like sheep And guided them in the wilderness like a flock; He led them safely, so that they did not fear; But the sea engulfed their enemies. So He brought them to his holy land, To this hill country which his right hand had gained" (Ps 78:50-54; see also Ps. 80:1).

What aspects of shepherding do we see in these verses?

- *Leadership* through the wilderness,
- *protection* and *safety* in the desert,
- *settling the fears* of the sheep,
- *fending off enemies* of the sheep with power and courage.

What's important to see here is that Israel's whole history is described as one seamless pastoral journey. From the days of Jacob, through the exodus from Egypt, through the wilderness of Sinai, to the people's possession of the Promised Land, God's relates to his people as a shepherd to his sheep.

### ***Through The Exile***

Upon the nation's exile, Isaiah sees another exodus coming, an exodus out of slavery to sin and into the holiness of the new creation.

Behold, the Lord God will come with might, with his arm ruling for Him. Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before Him. 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” (Is. 40:10-11).

Chapter 40 of Isaiah, from which these verses come, marks the beginning of a new section in Isaiah in which God promises that he will lead his people through a new exodus. Several chapters later, Isaiah says, “Behold, I will do something new, now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it? I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, rivers in the desert” (Is. 43:18-19). In one sense, this is exactly what God did in the wilderness of Sinai—he led the people through a wasteland with no road, and provided water in the desert. At the same time, he promises to do it in a new way. This exodus won’t be like the old one—merely physical and geographical. It will be a spiritual exodus out of slavery to sin, through the wilderness of this world, and into the new creation (see Is. 40:1-2). Yet in the verses from chapter 40 quoted above, God uses the same language to describe how he will lead his people in this second—like a shepherd in the wilderness.

Jeremiah sees the same thing: “Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare in the coastlands afar off, and say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him and keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock” (Jer 31:10). In exile, the shepherd’s *gathering* role comes to the foreground. God will gather his scattered sheep back together in one place.

Micah sees God gathering his sheep from exile as well: “I will surely assemble all of you, Jacob, I will surely gather the remnant of Israel. I will put them together like sheep in the fold; like a flock in the midst of its pasture they will be noisy with men” (Micah 2:12).

Micah later prays, “Shepherd your people with Your scepter, the flock of Your possession which dwells by itself in the woodland, in the midst of a fruitful field. Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old. As in the days when you came out from the land of Egypt, I will show you miracles” (Micah 7:14). Scepters were used to *protect* the sheep. The idea of *feeding* is also present here. And Micah connects this shepherding idea with the new exodus out of exile for sins. It’s going to be like the days when Israel came out of Egypt.

### ***Summary***

So God is the shepherd of his people. First, he leads them through the wilderness of Sinai to the Promised Land, and then he leads us through the dry wilderness of a sinful world on our way to heaven.

What aspects of God’s shepherding care for Israel have we seen so far?

- *Protecting* the sheep,
- *providing for* the sheep,
- *being present with* his sheep,
- *gathering* the sheep together,
- and *guiding* the sheep.

These are the activities that God thinks about and performs when he uses the metaphor of shepherding for leading his people.

And we elders, as under-shepherds, are called to shepherd God's people in the same way,

- under his authority,
- through a wilderness world that is not our home,
- toward the Promised Land of heaven, where our true citizenship lies.

We lead them there

- by knowing the way ourselves,
- by keeping them together along the way,
- by feeding them on God's Word,
- and by being present with them.

## **MOSES – THE FIRST EXEMPLARY SHEPHERD**

Let's turn then to those whom God appoints as shepherds over his people, and begin with Moses.

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush (Ex. 3:1-2a).

Moses was actually a shepherd when God called him to lead Israel out of Egypt.

We get a summary statement of Moses' ministry in Psalm 77:20: "You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron." God is the one doing the leading, but he's leading *by* the hand of Moses and Aaron. Moses' leadership was simply an extension of God's leadership. As Tim Laniak puts it, "Moses is the extension of God's rule in their lives, the means of their provision, and the agent of their deliverance....[his hand] became an extension of the 'hand of God' leading his people."<sup>1</sup>

Hosea 12:13 makes the same point: "By a prophet the Lord brought Israel from Egypt, and by a prophet he was kept [or 'cared for']." Moses throws the branch in the bitter waters of Marah, but it's God who makes the desert waters drinkable for his flock (Ex. 15). Moses strikes the rock at Massah with his staff, but it's God who causes the water to gush forth for his sheep to drink (Ex. 17).

### ***Moses as Prophet***

As the shepherd of God's people, Moses was also a prophet: "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex 33:11). He was the one who went up to Mount Sinai on behalf of the people to receive the law. And when God spoke in their hearing at Sinai, the people said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die" (Ex. 20:19).

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 87.

As the paradigm shepherd and prophet of Israel, Moses was the voice of God to the people. They were to follow his voice.

### ***Moses as Priest***

But Moses was also the voice of the people to God. He interceded with God on their behalf. Notice the change in Moses' willingness to identify himself with the people of Israel that occurs in his prayers between chapters 17 and 34 of Exodus.

So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, 'What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me' (Ex 17:4).

Then Moses returned to the Lord, and said, 'Alas, this people has committed a great sin and they have made a god of gold for themselves. But now, if You will, forgive their sin – and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written! (Ex 32:31).

If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession (Ex. 34:9).

Moses moves from "this people" and "their sin" to "us" and "our sin."<sup>2</sup> Such identification was primarily a function of Moses' priestly role, but it was not unrelated to his shepherding role. God wants his under-shepherds to identify with the plight of his sheep, which is exactly what we see the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, doing at his incarnation and all through his earthly ministry.

When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34).

Where is Jesus getting that reference to sheep without a shepherd?

### ***Moses as Leader***

Jesus' allusion in Mark 6 to "sheep without a shepherd" comes from the book of Numbers.

Then Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, "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, so that the congregation of the LORD will not be like sheep which have no shepherd." So the LORD said to Moses, "Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; and have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation, and commission him in their sight. You shall put some of your authority on him, in order that all the congregation of the sons of Israel may obey him (Num 27:15-20).

What's the one character trait that God tells Moses to look for in Joshua? The Spirit is in him.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 89-90.

What particular aspect of shepherding is noted here? Leadership – leading them out and bringing them in.

Why would Joshua need the Spirit to do that kind of work? Because leading God's people in and out was really an exercise in helping them to follow God as the ultimate Shepherd of Israel. As Laniak sums it up, "Human leader[ship] of God's people is nothing other than God leading his own people through an anointed servant." That doesn't make the human leader infallible or unable to be corrected. But it does make him the human instrument by which God shepherds his flock.

## **DAVID – THE SECOND EXEMPLARY SHEPHERD**

David is introduced to readers as an actual shepherd twice in 1 Samuel's narrative.

"Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are these all the children?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is tending the sheep'" (1 Sam. 16:11).

David was the youngest. Now the three oldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to tend his father's flock at Bethlehem" (1 Sam. 17:14-15).

### ***David, Saul, and Goliath***

It's also worth observing, David's own introduction to King Saul:

When the words which David spoke were heard, they told them to Saul, and he sent for him. David said to Saul, "Let no man's heart fail on account of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." 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." And David said, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." And Saul said to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you" (1 Sam. 17:31-37).

What aspects of shepherding are prominent here?

- *Protection,*
- *the courage of faith,*
- *seeking out the lost* (v.34-35).

But perhaps more significantly for our purposes here, to whom does David give credit? God. The Lord was the one who delivered him from the lion and the bear. His confidence to defeat Goliath is not rooted in himself. It's rooted in the greatness of God.

Why is David so confident that God will enable him to defeat Goliath? Because he knows that God is committed to his own glory among his people, and Goliath is working against God's glory by making fun of his people. One who is a shepherd of God's people must know that he is a guardian of God's fame, a fact in which he should find tremendous confidence. If God is wholly committed to the honor of his own name, then to stand up for God's fame, even if it means committing professional suicide (or worse), is to stand in the safest place in the universe.

### ***David as Ruler***

The kings of Israel were nothing like the pagan pharaohs of Egypt, kings of Babylon, or caesars of Rome, absolute in their power and beholden to no one. Rather, David and his sons were to be from among the people, and their rule was a stewardship.

Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Behold, we are your bone and your flesh. Previously, when Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel out and in. And the Lord said to you, 'You will shepherd My people Israel, and you will be a ruler over Israel (2 Sam. 5:1-2; cf. Deut. 17:15).

The word for ruler here is *nagid*, referring not to an autonomous king but a crowned prince whose authority was derived, not inherent. The idea of being a *nagid* is placed in parallel position here with shepherding God's people. So Israel gets a king, but, as Laniak writes, "only on the condition that it understands his role as derivative from and dependent on the rule of Jehovah, the flock's true owner. Kings, beginning with Saul, were to be measured in terms of their responsiveness to the words of that Owner, mediated through the prophets."<sup>3</sup>

When David made Jerusalem the new capital and tried to take the ark there in 2 Samuel 6, he met God's resistance because he didn't have it carried on poles, as God had commanded. Instead, he had put it on an ox cart, which nearly tipped over. When David's helper Uzzah reached out to steady the ark, God kills him on the spot. It seems to be God's way of saying "We'll do this my way, David. I'm the *melek* (king); you're the *nagid* (prince)."

In 2 Samuel 7, David expresses his desire to build God a house. Yet God turns it around on him and tells him he's going to build David a house. The reason God objects to David's idea is instructive:

Wherever I have gone with all the sons of Israel, did I speak a word with one of the tribes of Israel, which I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?" (2 Samuel 7:7).

God objects to the house of cedar because he had never commanded or asked for his people to make him a house of cedar. God will be the one who initiates. He will be the one who controls and determines the rules of engagement. "God will bless David, but on God's terms."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> T.S. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 102.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The issue is who has ultimate authority, and God always makes sure that his under-shepherds know how to answer that question. God has the ultimate authority, and whenever that authority is challenged, God squashes the challenger. He will not share his glory with another. God takes the initiative in calling his shepherds, and God holds his shepherds accountable by blessing and disciplining them according to his word.

God's shepherds are called to exercise God's work of gathering, guarding, nourishing, uniting, and guiding God's flock through the God-opposing wilderness of this world *on behalf of God*. They do this by keeping the flock centered upon God and his word. God is the king, the owner of the sheep. We who are elders are adopted princes, under-shepherds with no authority of our own. If we ever begin to shepherd God's flock contrary to his word or in a way that ignores our accountability to him and his ultimate authority over us, we will be the losers.

The whole story of Israel's history in Psalm 78 ends with a reference to David's shepherd leadership.

He also chose David his servant  
And took him from the sheepfolds;  
From the care of the ewes  
with suckling lambs  
He brought him  
To shepherd Jacob his people,  
And Israel his inheritance.  
So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart,  
And guided them with his skillful hands (Ps 78:70-72).

May the Lord grant us skillful hands.

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