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Profitable and Unprofitable Shepherds: Economic and Theological Perspectives on Ezekiel 34

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Abstract

This article examines Ezekiel 34's 'good shepherd' metaphor in the light of the economics of animal husbandry in ancient Israel and Mesopotamia. In 34.1-16, YHWH is presented as the owner of sheep, whose hired hands, the 'shepherds of Israel', have failed to perform their duties of care and protection. In economic terms, the problems are those of misappropriation of property and the failure to produce an adequate profit, and the disadvantage to the owner is of more significance than the suffering of the sheep. The theological consequence of this reading is that commentators may be mistaken in seeing YHWH's actions in ch. 34 as motivated by selflessness and compassion for Israel. Rather, YHWH's recovery and protection of his flock is of a piece with the emphasis on divine power and self-interest found throughout Ezekiel's restoration oracles.

Keywords: Ezekiel 34, restoration oracles, good shepherd, economics, animal husbandry, metaphor.

1. Ezekiel 34 Among the Oracles of Restoration

Ezekiel's oracles of restoration are hardly known for the love, care, and tenderness that YHWH shows his people. Far more prominent are themes of divine power and self-justification matched by human shame and

self-loathing. Some time ago Paul Joyce convincingly demonstrated the 'radical theocentricity' of the book (Joyce 1989). The characteristic recognition formula 'You/they shall know that I am YHWH' echoes around both oracles of judgment and of deliverance. Equally important is the explicit concern for his name and reputation that dominates all YHWH's actions, and especially those where he acts to rescue and restore his people Israel (pp. 97-103). Nowhere else in the Bible is it made so clear that YHWH restores Israel not out of love, duty or forgiveness, but solely for the sake of his own name.

Baruch Schwartz has taken such an argument further still in his essay 'Ezekiel's Dim View of Israel's Restoration' (Schwartz 2000). Here he points out that Ezekiel lacks any of the reflection on penitence, covenant faithfulness or love that motivates restoration in the Torah and the other exilic prophets, and that 'the entire vocabulary of divine favour is either absent or skewed in Ezekiel' (p. 53). Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that the oracles of restoration are more or less of a piece with the oracles of judgment:

> According to Ezekiel, YHWH's ultimate decision to restore his people's fortunes is not the result of any change in their feelings or behaviour towards him or in his disposition toward them. And since Israel's unregenerate evil and YHWH's wrathful resolve to requite them for it remain unaltered, Ezekiel never really alters his message. (Schwartz 2000: 55)

If this view is anything approaching correct (and it is certainly attractive), then Ezekiel 34 presents something of a conundrum. Surely here, if anywhere, in the first of the major restoration oracles, YHWH appears to show a degree of genuine concern for his people. The prophet casts 'Israel's shepherds' as greedy hirelings who have taken advantage of the flock they were supposed to nurture and protect (34.2-8). The oracle contrasts the failed human shepherds with YHWH the divine shepherd, who cares for his sheep, rescuing them from the rulers who have brought about their exile and returning them to a land of peace, blessing and security (34.10-16). The shepherds themselves most likely stand for Judah's Davidic monarchs (Duguid 1994: 39-40; Block 1997: 282), although it is also possible that they include the leadership stratum more broadly (Eichrodt 1970: 471; Greenberg 1997: 694-95).

The chapter's images of pastoral care and flourishing nature have suggested to a number of commentators that YHWH is acting out of genuine compassion for his people. The wellbeing of the sheep is of prime importance and the royal shepherds' failing is to have acted selfishly when they

should have looked after the interests of the sheep. Thus Joseph Blenkinsopp describes the 'pastoral responsibility' of public office as 'an opportunity for service, not for personal gain and glory', and one which calls for 'selfless dedication and unremitting solicitude' (Blenkinsopp 1990: 155, 157). Daniel Block acknowledges that in real life shepherds are 'justifiably motivated by self-interest' but argues that when the image is used metaphorically of humans tending humans, 'the shepherd holds office for the sake of the ruled' (Block 1997: 283). Among Christian commentators especially there is a tendency to draw connections with the Johannine Good Shepherd. Walther Zimmerli writes that 'the nobility and dignity of the shepherd reside in the fact that the shepherd works wholeheartedly for the flock'. He continues, 'Jn 10.11 expresses it: the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (Zimmerli 1983: 214). If the sin of the rulers is selfishness, YHWH is selfless in his devotion to his people. Thus Block writes of YHWH the true shepherd, 'who has the interests of his people at heart' (Block 1997: 308). The most effusive statement along these lines in a critical commentary is probably that of Eichrodt:

> The new intimate fellowship between God and people cannot be more vividly expressed than by the love with which the shepherd approaches the stunted, smitten remnant of the people. Jesus himself recognised this passage as furnishing him with a model of his own task. (Eichrodt 1970: 472)

Furthermore, lest we suppose that the attribution of selfless tenderness to God is limited to Christian interpreters, Moshe Greenberg also writes of the 'compassionate, forgiving note' in the oracle (Greenberg 1997: 709). He does recognize that it is out of kilter with the normal state of affairs in the book when he suggests, commenting on the oracle's probable origin in Jeremiah 23, that 'perhaps the tender note audible in this oracle owes something to the influence of Jeremiah, too' (p. 709). Nevertheless, if these commentators are correct, the portrayal of YHWH in ch. 34 would tend to undermine the radical theocentricity of the restoration oracles, at least in the strong terms proposed above.

2. Metaphor and Reality: Ezekiel 34.1-16 and the Economics of Sheep Farming

Of course the best known use of the sheep/shepherd metaphor in the Hebrew Bible must be Psalm 23, and approaching Ezekiel 34 it is worth remembering one of David Clines' typically incisive comments on the psalm:

> [W]hat happens to the sheep who has the Lord as its Shepherd is that once it has been led from green pastures through dark valleys, it is guided, eventually, up to the house of the Lord. And we all know why sheep go to the house of the Lord. Now it might be a sheep's highest ambition to end up as a holocaust on the sacrificial altar rather than lamb chops in the butcher's shop. But nothing like that is in the sheep's mind when it pronounces 'the Lord is my Shepherd'. (Clines 1995: 19)

Despite Hugh Pyper's criticism that 'being reared to be slaughtered at least means that one is reared in the first place' (Pyper 2001: 388), these comments serve as a powerful reminder that sheep are rarely if ever farmed for their own good, but only to meet some human (or perhaps divine) need. This in turn raises questions about the material and economic realities of shepherding on which the metaphors 'God is a shepherd' and 'the king is a shepherd' in Ezekiel 34 rest. Given the shepherd's familiar place in the biblical landscape, it is surprising how rarely commentators take an interest in the practices of animal husbandry that lie behind biblical stories and metaphors. I would suggest that the charitable interpretations of the chapter which I have described pay too little attention to the way economic realities may inform any specific use of a metaphor, with the result that all of the biblical images of shepherding collapse into a rather monochrome picture of caring generosity.

Marc Brettler's work is helpful in this context. In his article 'The Metaphorical Mapping of God in the Hebrew Bible' (Brettler 1999), he draws on the work of Max Black in making the broad point that metaphors offer a wide range of 'associated commonplaces' not all of which are in play in any one example of the metaphor. This in turn means that basic metaphors such as 'God is a shepherd' can be used to emphasize different things depending on which of these associated commonplaces are to the fore. He suggests that Ezekiel 34 shares notions of care and generosity with Psalm 23 and Isa. 40.11, but that it also introduces the image of the 'discriminating shepherd' in vv. 17-21 where YHWH judges between sheep and sheep. This rather tougher aspect of flock management is emphasized with the result that 'the metaphor "YHWH is a shepherd" means something different in Psalm 23 and in Ezekiel 34.17-22' (Brettler 1999: 224). I would like to build on this suggestion by looking again at 34.1-16 in the light of what we know about the economics of shepherding in Israel and the ancient Near East.

Sheep (and goat) farming was clearly a fundamental part of the economy of ancient Israel, as it was throughout the ancient Near East. Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb (2 Sam. 12.1-6) suggests that ancient

Israelites might feel genuine affection towards their livestock and treat them as pets, but on the whole we can be confident that they were kept for their economic benefits rather than for more selfless motives. Archaeological evidence is fairly sparse, but it is likely that most farming families split their resources between crop rearing and animal husbandry, as John Holladay puts it, 'both as a matter of diversification and risk spreading, and as a means of accumulating crop surpluses in easily sold (and readily movable) resources' (Holladay 1995: 386). A sheep or goat could provide some basic necessities for food and clothing, while also acting as a kind of four-legged bank. However, sheep and goats require to be looked after, sometimes on pasture land some distance from home, and it would often be more appropriate to entrust this task to specialist shepherds rather than to members of the immediate family. This would have been even more necessary in the case of wealthy men, whose animals were counted in the thousands: a good biblical example is 1 Sam. 25.1-7, where David encounters the shepherds looking after Nabal's flock of 3000 sheep and 1000 goats.

It is this relationship between absentee owner/breeder and hired shepherds to which Ezekiel 34 alludes. Ferdinand Deist makes the point plainly:

> The contracting owner, Yahweh, confronts the hired hands (royal court, bureaucrats) for not having fulfilled their contract... [L]ike Yahweh, any farmer would have fired and punished such hired hands and personally taken over the care of the flock from them. (Deist 2000: 164; cf. Matthews and Benjamin 1995: 66)

While the Bible does not provide much in the way of realistic evidence for the terms and conditions under which such shepherds worked, there is a good deal of material from Mesopotamia, which shows a continuity of practice from the Old Babylonian period to the Persian period (Postgate 1975; Morrison 1981, 1983; Van De Mieroop 1993; Van Driel 1993; cf. Matthews and Benjamin 1995). The administrative documents which provide the evidence come mainly from temple flocks, but there is also some evidence of private individuals hiring shepherds along the same lines, which may have been the more common situation in Israel and Judah.

The basic principle contained within these documents is that a hired shepherd took over management of a flock of mixed sheep and goats for a period of a year at a time. Contracts stipulated a minimum return to the owner in terms of both young animals and products such as wool and

cheese. The shepherd was entitled to any surplus over and above the minimum, but had to make good any shortfall out of his own resources. It was an entrepreneurial system, at which successful shepherds could do well, but the fact that so many of the recovered contracts deal with shepherds defaulting on their promised figures suggests that the owners may have had a keen eye for a feasible return. The contracts made provision for the loss of a proportion of the herd each year, on condition that the shepherd provided the skin of any animal that died, a clause reminiscent of Amos's 'two legs, or a piece of an ear' (Amos 3.12). Lost sheep (whose skins could not be recovered), would not count against this total, and would therefore be a considerable cause for concern.

To give one relevant example from the end of the period, there is an appendix to the Murashu archive dealing with the affairs of the Achaemenid prince Arsham, which contains nine herding contracts. These contracts all have a number of standard clauses, as G. van Driel points out: every year the herder would need to provide as follows (Van Driel 1993: 222-23):

1. 66 2/3 lambs per 100 ewes.
2. 1 1/2 mina of wool per sheep.
3. 1 cheese [size or weight not specified] per ewe with lambs; 1 litre of ghee [clarified butter] per 100 sheep.
4. 1 kid per full-grown female goat.
5. 5/6 mina of goat hair per goat.
6. 10 deaths per 100 animals [of all kinds] are accepted by the owner, provided that for each the skin and 2 1/2 shekels of tendon are handed over.

It seems plausible that herding contracts like these can help us to fill in the biblical gaps around the precise nature of the relationship between herdsmen and their employers. Martha Morrison has argued that similar sets of contracts from Uruk, Larsa and Nuzi illuminate the stories in Genesis of Laban the sheep farmer and his hired hand Jacob (Morrison 1983). And if the Arsham contracts are evidence that broadly similar practices operated around Nippur in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian period, we might speculate that Ezekiel or members of his exilic community had some experience of them. How might such material help us understand Ezekiel's use of the metaphor? In the first place it may help us determine more precisely what the bad shepherds have done wrong. We can then be clearer what the problem is to which YHWH's act of restoration is the solution.

To turn to the text: What is the principal failing of Israel's shepherds? Commentators have been unclear whether v. 3 in its entirety represents

bad behaviour on the part of the shepherds. Most emend חלב ('fat') to חָלָב ('milk') so that we have three distinct items: milk or cheese, wool and fatlings (e.g. Zimmerli 1983: 204; Allen 1990: 156; Block 1997: 287). For Fohrer, it is appropriate for shepherds to milk, shear and slaughter the animals in a way that maintains both the wellbeing of the herd and the shepherd's livelihood (Fohrer and Galling 1955: 192). For Zimmerli and Allen, to take the milk and the wool seems more or less unobjectionable, but to slaughter the fatlings is a step too far (Zimmerli 1983: 214-15; Allen 1990: 161). For Block, even the first two items are part of the accusation. The metaphor pushes what might be acceptable under normal circumstances to seem criminal: 'in real life, consuming the milk of the sheep is not an exploitative act, but here it is made to look like robbery' (Block 1997: 283). In similar terms, 'Ezekiel's figure assumes the forceful removal of wool, making it look like the sheep were left naked before the elements' (Block 1997: 283). Greenberg, drawing on some rabbinic discussions of shepherding, sees an intensification: milk is 'a recognized perquisite', wool a 'doubtful appropriation' and slaughter 'a gross violation of a shepherd's duty to care for his charges' (Greenberg 1997: 697; cf. also Dalman 1939: 236-37). In all of these cases, however, the problem appears to be primarily a two-way one between the sheep and their shepherds.

There is a striking parallel between these sins of commission and the Arsham herding contracts, which specify milk products, wool and young animals as belonging to the owner of the flock. On the pattern of these contracts, Ezekiel's shepherds would in fact be entitled to the surplus of all three (as Fohrer suggested), but here they appear to have treated all the sheep as if they were their own—tending themselves rather than the flock. The shepherds' sins of omission also show at least a loose connection with the documents. There is a strong emphasis on the need to prevent loss: they have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bound the broken, recovered the stray or sought the lost. This spills over into hyperbole when they are accused of scattering the sheep as prey for any wild beast. Such an anxiety about the loss and scattering of sheep not only reflects Judah's experience of deportation and exile, but also reminds us of the particularly serious consequences of lost sheep for shepherds unable to make up the numbers that were required or to provide evidence of death.

Ezekiel 34 probably has its model in Jer. 23.1-4 (Block 1997: 275-77; Greenberg 1997: 709), which also accuses Israel's shepherds of destroying

and scattering the flock entrusted to their charge. However, Ezekiel's elaboration of the shepherd metaphor is rather more detailed and realistic, and shows much stronger resonances with what we know of the economics of shepherding. These resonances help to emphasize that we are dealing with a three-way relationship between sheep, owner and hired help. In this context, the issues go beyond 'pastoral responsibility' for the sheep's wellbeing and become those of failing to produce the required return on an investment and misappropriation of the owner's property.

That the failings involve some breach of contract with the owner may also be implied by vv. 7-16, where YHWH first removes the shepherds and rescues the sheep (vv. 7-10) and then takes on the shepherding himself (vv. 11-16). Many commentators have noted the play on words with the verb דרש which runs through these verses (Zimmerli 1983: 216; Allen 1990: 184; Block 1997: 286). In the past, the shepherds have not looked for the sheep (ואין דורש ואין מבקש). Now (v. 9), YHWH will 'look for the sheep from their hand' (ודרשתי את־צאני מידם). The verb דרש has become the technical legal term for holding someone to account. A legal sense seems to continue in v. 11 where דרש is used alongside בקר to demonstrate how YHWH undertakes a thorough investigation of the condition of the sheep (Zimmerli 1983: 216). In this context it is noteworthy that many of the Neo-Babylonian administrative texts from Uruk and Sippar appear to be the records of precisely such owners' inspections of their stock as 'an essential element of accounting' (Van Driel 1993: 220). All of these activities serve to highlight not only YHWH's concern for the sheep, but also the failure of the shepherds to fulfil their contractual obligations. And again it is worth noting that Martha Morrison describes numerous documents from Nuzi which reflect herdsmen's failure to meet the targets set by owners (Morrison 1983: 157), and Van Driel indicates that the situation was little different in the Neo-Babylonian period, where again many of the documents describe 'debts and backlogs incurred by herdsmen' (Van Driel 1993: 223).

There would be no advantage in pushing this argument to a ludicrous extreme, and it would be foolish to suggest that *all* Ezekiel is proposing here is some kind of glorified stock check, but even within Ezekiel's extravagant language of restoration we find a realism which hints that the prophet's real concern is with the interests of the owner more than with the sheep. And that the flock belongs to YHWH is made very clear by the repeated term צאני ('my flock'), which appears eleven times in vv. 6-12. Some commentators have suggested that this is a term of endearment,

implying divine affection for the sheep (Block 1997: 284; Greenberg 1997: 698). It seems more likely to me that it is a reminder of ownership, which highlights the distinction between employer and employee, and serves to distance Israel's human shepherds from the true owner of the flock. Indeed, in its theocentricity it is matched by the relentless sequence of first person verbs which dominates 34.11-15, introduced by the resounding הנני אני ('Behold I myself...') and ended with the emphatic repetition of אני ('I myself...') (cf. Mein 2001: 244).

Bad shepherds done away with, YHWH himself will take charge of the management of his flock, with significantly improved results. He will retrieve them from 'all the places to which they were scattered on the day of cloud and gloom' (v. 12). And as they are brought back, the whole of the land will be transformed to pasture. The sheep will graze in some quite unlikely places: not just on the hills and valleys, but also in the settlements and even on the high mountains (vv. 13-14). Block suggests that we see restoration 'from the sheep's perspective' (Block 1997: 290), but I am not so sure. I am reminded here of Julie Galambush's suggestion that Ezekiel's oracles of restoration present the land primarily as YHWH's property, from which wild nature is systematically excluded: 'The land as the object of restoration in Ezekiel is pre-eminently an object of possession. Together with its plants and animals, the land must either reflect divine control and possession or defy them' (Galambush 2001: 89). In 34.14, the whole land of Israel has become a sheep farm: surely from the point of view of YHWH, the sheep farmer, a highly desirable outcome.

The list of YHWH's actions on behalf of the sheep has a rather odd element towards its end in the MT, with the expression ואת־השמנה ואת־החזקה אשמיד ('and the fat and healthy ones I will destroy', 34.16). A substantial majority of commentators prefer the reading אשמור, 'I will guard' or 'keep', on the basis of the LXX and other ancient versions (e.g. Fohrer and Galling 1955; Zimmerli 1983; Block 1997; Cooke 1936 is the significant dissenting voice, followed by the NRSV and a number of other modern versions). Even Greenberg goes as far as to say 'the plain sense is so unexpectedly excessive as to cast doubt on the authenticity of the reading' (Greenberg 1997: 701). But it is just possible that the MT, which is unquestionably the *lectio difficilior*, might reflect the owner's right to kill or otherwise dispose of his animals, the right which Israel's bad shepherds had usurped. Certainly what follows in 34.17-24 presupposes such a right, as YHWH sets about judging the healthy and strong animals in favour of the weaker, which they had treated badly.

3. Concluding Remarks

So, where does all this leave us? We noted above Block's point that real shepherds may be self-interested but metaphorical shepherds must put the flock first (Block 1997: 283). If we take the metaphor of rulers as hired shepherds working for YHWH, however, the situation is a little more complex. Even in 'real life' their self-interest would not be justified at the expense of the owner. Therefore, taking seriously the recognition that the shepherds are hirelings changes our understanding of the metaphor slightly but significantly, since their care for the flock is not for its own sake but for the sake of its owner YHWH.

If the basic problem is that the shepherds have misappropriated YHWH's property, the solution to this problem is for YHWH to take back his flock and care for it himself. This he promises to do with spectacular success, turning the whole land of Israel into a secure and prosperous pasture. This is unquestionably a good deal for the sheep, and it is true that in many respects the interests of sheep and owner coincide—health and security are vital for both. However, it should not blind us to the fact that both in the real world and in Ezekiel's notoriously hierarchical world, the owner's interests remain paramount.

With all of this in mind, the contradiction between Ezekiel 34 and the tone of Ezekiel's other restoration oracles begins to resolve itself. It may be better to understand YHWH's recovery and protection of his flock less as an expression of YHWH's love and compassion for his people (expressions which still remain absent from the text) and more as part of the demonstration of divine might that characterizes the restoration oracles more generally. The logic of the oracle is therefore of a piece with the refrain of ch. 36: 'it is not for your sake, O Israel, that I am about to do this, but for the sake of my holy name'.

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