

## Jesus is the Shepherd

Reflections on Psalm 23: Part 4.

By Barry Wilkins

The shepherd in the Bible is a common metaphor for leaders and kings. King David was well aware of this. He was a shepherd himself as a youth ([1 Samuel 17](#), the Goliath incident) and knew his obligations as king. When David questions why he should not build a house for God's Name to dwell, God replies, [2 Samuel 7:7](#), *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?'*

Throughout the OT, God (Yahweh by the OT Hebrew name) is described as the shepherd of Israel. For example, in Jacob's dying speech he attributes the epithet to God in his discourse about Joseph; [Genesis 49:24](#), *Joseph ... by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (from there is the **Shepherd** the Stone of Israel).* Likewise, in [Psalm 28:7-9](#), another psalm of David, he writes *The LORD is my strength and shield ... Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their **shepherd** and carry them for ever.* And in Psalm 80:1, *Give ear, O **Shepherd** of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who are enthroned upon the cherubim,<sup>1</sup> shine forth.*

The prophets are ruthless in their writing of the failure of Israel's human shepherds; for example, [Ezekiel 34:5-15](#), *So they were scattered, because there was no **shepherd** ... as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD ... because my **shepherds**<sup>2</sup> did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock ... As a **shepherd** looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered ... I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD.* We notice here an allusion to our Psalm 23, v.2, *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

The prophet Micah predicts the coming of the Messiah (Christ) with these words, [Micah 5:2-4](#), *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah ... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel ... And he shall stand and **shepherd** his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.* This is quoted in [Matthew 2:6](#) when Herod inquires where the Messiah is to be born after the visit of the magi.

Jesus's claim to be the Good Shepherd (and the door to the sheepfold) is one of the great "I am" statements in John's gospel, [John 10:1-16](#), *Truly, truly, ... The one who enters by the gate is the **shepherd** of the sheep ... I am the good **shepherd**. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep ... I am the good **shepherd**; I know my sheep and my sheep know me ... I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one **shepherd**.* It is noteworthy that the gentile nations are included here ('They too ...'). There is a contrast between the bad shepherding of the Pharisees (as with the leaders in Ezekiel 34 above); the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep is all-important. The shepherd knows the sheep by name, and they know his voice. He leads them out to pasture; he makes us lie down in safety.

Here we see how Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of Psalm 23. Who are His sheep? Surely His sheep are all those who know Him as saviour, who are 'in Christ' and whom He knows by name and who share in the kingdom. He is the 'chief shepherd' ([1 Peter 5:1-4](#), *... when the Chief **Shepherd** appears, you will receive the crown of glory ...*).

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the mercy seat upon the ark of the covenant.

<sup>2</sup> Shepherds in Ezekiel refers to all the leaders of the people of Israel, including the priesthood.

## Jesus is the Lamb

Jesus fulfils Psalm 23 in another way; He is at the same time the lamb of God, sacrificed for our sake, fulfilling the Passover. See [Exodus 12:5](#), *Your [Passover] **lamb** shall be without blemish ...*, and [Isaiah 53:7](#), *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a **lamb** to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth* (quoted in Acts 8:32 in the encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian court official). John the Baptist recognised this truth, [John 1:29](#), *The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, 'Look, the **Lamb** of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'*

Truly it was Jesus who walked through the valley of death's shadow, and indeed we can fittingly hear the words of Psalm 23 as coming appropriately from the lips of Jesus as he faced the cross. Every line of the psalm could be Jesus' words.<sup>3</sup> In the end He is exalted as not just the shepherd, not just God's lamb, but as king; [Revelation 5:12](#), *'Worthy is the **Lamb**, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!'* [Revelation 7:17](#), *For the **Lamb** at the centre of the throne will be their **shepherd**; "he will lead them to springs of living water."* This final statement is yet another allusion to our Psalm 23:2, *He leads me beside waters of rest*, remembering that *waters* in the Hebrew way of thinking is a figure for chaos and death, but now is transformed into a metaphor for life.

Thus, in our Psalm 23, we have a magnificent statement of God's care for us, his sheep. It embraces comfort, provision, safety, repentance, guidance, protection, steadfast love, eternity, rest in God's kingdom; it even prefigures the cruelty of the passion of the Lamb of God, that we might have life forever.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, 'he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake' fits with Paul's doctrine of the cross in Romans, namely that it is there that God displays his righteousness in the ultimate way, and the Father thus 'leads' Christ to the cross.