



# The leader as a shepherd

## *Part 1: Biblical research*

**A12** Articles series: Leadership

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**Much has been written about the leader as servant, but there are other biblical pictures of leadership of which shepherd is one. Two articles, A12 and A13, categorise the biblical references to this word and related terms in an attempt to understand what this image contributes to current thinking about church leadership.**

This article (A12) explains the background to shepherding in biblical times and lists many of the biblical references under various headings. Special attention is given to Ezekiel chapter 34 and John chapter 10. Article A13, accessed by a direct link, draws a number of conclusions from this research and applies these to church leadership today.

It will be clear that these two articles are written not by a scholar but by an analyst with a keen, practical interest in Christian leadership. The author welcomes critical comment from both biblical scholars and from Christian leaders. As with all items on this website, he is committed to developing and improving this paper in an effort to equip and encourage all Christian workers.

## 1: Sheep in their biblical context

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Throughout the Bible there are almost 700 occurrences of the terms 'shepherd', 'flock' and various words for 'sheep' (including 'ram', 'goat', 'lamb', 'ewe'). About 600 come in the Old Testament (OT) and just under 100 in the New (NT). These can be classified as follows.

1      **Literal**  
For example, a description of a scene where there is a flock of sheep. A little under half of all the references fall into this category.

2      **Sacrificial**  
In the Old Testament this is a second 'literal' category. But as so many relate to the death of a sheep as an offering to God, and in the New Testament this

then becomes a 'metaphorical' use ('lamb of God'), they are noted as a separate category. A little over a third of all references come under this heading.

### 3 **Metaphorical**

This term relates to non-sacrificial references where a leader is described as a shepherd or people as sheep. This category will include the use of simile (eg. where people are described as being 'like sheep') as well as strict metaphor. About one fifth of all references fall into this category.

The words investigated, based on the New International Version of the Bible (NIV), are:

Shepherd	Well over 50 OT references, about half being metaphorical; ten in NT in six passages including one reference to 'pastor'.
Flock	Well over 150 OT references, most being literal and 25 used as 'flocks and herds'; eight NT uses in six passages.
Sheep	Over 100 OT references, just under a quarter of them metaphorical, plus just under 25 in NT mostly metaphorical, with a further ten in John chapter 10.
Lamb	Over 100 OT references, almost all literal or sacrificial; over 30 refs in NT mostly in Revelation where they are all sacrificial.
Goat	About 90 OT references, mostly sacrificial and none metaphorical; six NT references in two passages.
Ram	Over 50 OT references, almost all sacrificial and none metaphorical; no NT references.
Ewe	Eight OT references all literal; no NT use.

Other related words include 'pasture', 'shearer', 'sheep-pen', 'fleece', 'wool', 'rod' and 'staff' but, as these often appear in passages already identified through the above analysis, they are not treated separately.

In the Old Testament half the references are literal and many of the rest are sacrificial. Sheep were simply a normal part of everyday life. But this still leaves well over 50 metaphorical

references plus one major passage on this theme in Ezekiel 34.

In the New Testament the majority of the much fewer references are metaphorical. The literal references are restricted to just three descriptive passages, including the famous Nativity scene, with five other passages coming as simple illustrations in Jesus' teaching (which at least demonstrates that sheep were still a very important commodity). This gives about 20 metaphorical references to investigate, plus one major passage in John 10. But first we need to understand the place that sheep and shepherds played in everyday life.

### **The importance of sheep**

Sheep played a key part in Middle Eastern life in the period of both Testaments from Abel onwards (Genesis 4:2). The Patriarchs were wandering shepherds. The lives of many well-known biblical characters were centred on sheep. Consider Jacob (Genesis 30:25-43) and his sons (Genesis 47:1-4), Moses in his early career (Exodus 2:15 - 3:3), David (1 Samuel 16:11-13, 19; 17:14-20), and Amos (Amos 1:1). Other famous stories include Saul's disobedience (1 Samuel 15), Nathan's parable (2 Samuel 12:1-14) and Daniel's vision (Daniel 8).

The Song of Songs uses sheep and goats in a metaphorical way to describe loveliness (eg. 4:1,2). One of the possible explanations for the 'speakers' in the book is to cast one as the shepherd (eg. 1:7,8).

Sheep were clearly not only a normal part of everyday life but a key material possession. To have large flocks of healthy animals was seen as God's blessing on the family. Spiritual blessing is often described in these terms (eg. Deuteronomy 7:12, 13; 28:1-6; Job 42:12; Psalm 65:13; 144:13).

Flocks were often a mixture of sheep and goats (hence Jesus' story in Matthew 25:31-46). Goats were more hardy than sheep but still pretty pathetic animals when left to their own devices. Sheep were useful for food, for wool and for clothing (the annual sheep shearing was a big occasion). Goats also provided milk and hair for cloth from which the nomads made their rough tents. Sheep had to be led to pasture, although goats on their own would usually be driven from behind.

### **The essential shepherd**

Sheep were not credited with much intelligence and clearly open to danger from wild animals,

especially as they were liable to wander off from the flock (1 Samuel 17:34-37; Amos 3:12). It is this idea that became the key thought in the Old Testament of people as 'sheep without a shepherd' (occurring for the first time in 1 Kings 22:17), and in the New Testament picture of 'sheep among wolves'.

Sheep wandered because they were not kept in fields such as we know today. Middle Eastern pasture was boundless so shepherds were indispensable. One day's pasture would have been thinly scattered over a large and unfenced tract of territory. The land was hardly hospitable: semi-desert frequented by lions, bears and wolves and covered with tracks which led nowhere in particular. So David felt that Goliath was little trouble compared with the lions or bears he had to deal with when looking after his flock. The picture of sheep without a shepherd would indeed have been a pitiful one.

Shepherds were therefore highly necessary if sheep were to be kept. To appreciate their work, forget the romantic notions of Christmas card scenes. For a start sheep were not normally clean and cuddly. The work would have been dirty, tiring, dangerous and open to the elements at all times, both blinding heat and cold nights. The shepherd slept on the ground with the flock, armed with staff (the shepherd's crook) and stout wooden club about three feet long (the rod) as in Psalm 23.

The shepherd's work involved finding pasture for his flock each day and leading them there. No pasture would have fed the flock for more than a short time so they were always on the move to new areas. If a sheep was lost, the shepherd had to make restitution unless it could be shown that wild animals had killed it.

From key passages, the role of the good shepherd was to:

- look after or tend the sheep;
- strengthen the weak ones and the young lambs;
- heal the sick and bind up the injured;
- search for the lost and bring back the strays;
- rescue them when the flock became scattered;
- lead them to good pasture for feeding;
- stay with the flock;
- protect them from wild animals.

(See Ezekiel 34:1-16 and Zechariah 11:15-17 plus Jeremiah 31:10; 50:6, Psalm 23, etc.).

These tasks were no more than any hearer of these words would have expected of a good shepherd. They form an accurate job description. Shepherding was an honourable profession although, as in all jobs, ruffians existed (so John 10:12).

## The sheep-pen

At night the sheep would be led to a sheep-pen or fold for safety. These were placed around the countryside and consisted of four walls of loose stones enclosing an area about six to nine metres square. The walls (known as Jedars) were about a metre wide at the base tapering to one third of this at the top which would have been one to two metres above. No robber or wild beast could scale these walls without dislodging stones and hence waking the shepherd. Sometimes the folds would be built into the side of cliffs to provide extra protection, with the caves for safety and shade.

The pens had no door, just a narrow opening. Each evening the shepherd would count his sheep into the pen and out again in the morning. At night he would often sleep across the opening so protecting the flock and preventing them from getting out. At other times he would sleep in a simple tent.

Sometimes several shepherds would put their flocks together for the night. It seems remarkable but in the morning each shepherd would call his own sheep and the combined flock would separate perfectly, following the voice of the shepherd they knew. In fact the shepherd would know each sheep by a special name and recognise each one. So Jesus' sayings about knowing each sheep in John 10 would have been clearly understood by those who were listening, even if they failed to grasp the underlying meaning.

## Leaders likened to shepherds

It was common in Old Testament days for kings and rulers to be likened to shepherds. When the Bible uses the term in this metaphorical sense, the writer is simply taking a common usage of the word. Even the 'rod' of Psalm 23 is the same word as for a royal sceptre. So when the biblical writers talk about leaders as shepherds, they mean rulers, not priests. As the term 'shepherd' implies both leading and caring, it is an appropriate title for hereditary monarchs who would otherwise think of lording it over others.

## Sheep for sacrifice

Over a third of the Old Testament references come in a sacrificial context (including most of the uses of the words 'ram', 'lamb' and 'goat'). These animals played a key part in the sacrifices that the people were commanded to make. Key passages include Exodus 12:1-11 (the Passover lamb); Leviticus 4:22-26 (a goat as sin offering); 1 Kings 8:3-5 (the ark of the Lord); Ezekiel 43:22-27.

But although all but one of the Old Testament references to sheep etc. for sacrifice are literal, the famous verse, 'He was led like a lamb to the slaughter...' in Isaiah 53:7, pointing to Christ (and cited by Philip in Acts 8:32), seems to be the only time this idea is spoken of in quite this way before John the Baptist used it (see below).

In the New Testament, apart from the John 10 passage where Jesus likens himself to the good

shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (note the picture is of the shepherd here, not the lamb), the only references outside Revelation are John 1:29,36 when John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God, and 1 Peter 1:19 when Christ is described as a lamb without blemish. But in Revelation this picture is taken up in no fewer than 27 references such as 5:12 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain ....'.

## 2: The OT metaphorical references

The complete set of OT metaphorical references is analysed under the following headings:

- 1 People as God's sheep
- 2 Sheep scattered or lost
- 3 God's rescue of his flock
- 4 God as Shepherd of Israel
- 5 God as the shepherd of his people
- 6 Christ to be Shepherd
- 7 Human shepherds
- 8 Human shepherds who failed

Verses listed more than once are asterisked. Quotations are from the NIV but are not complete and only designed to remind of the context. As might be expected, almost all the metaphorical uses of the terms come from the Psalms (especially 74-100) and the Prophets (Jeremiah, Ezekiel 34 and Zechariah 10 & 11 in particular). Apart from the references in Song of Songs (already noted), Job and Ecclesiastes, there are four passages (or six with repeats) in the historical books:

- Gen 49:24\* *The Shepherd, the Rock of Israel*  
 Num 27:17\* *So the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd*
- 2 Sam 24:17 &  
 1 Chr 21:17 *These are but sheep*  
 (humans who should not be blamed – the only time this precise meaning comes)
- 1 Ki 22:17\* &  
 2 Chr 18:16\* *Israel scattered like sheep without a shepherd*

### 1: People as God's sheep

(see also Groups 2 & 5)

The word used is normally 'sheep' or 'flock'. Six of the ten references come from Psalms 74-100.

- Ps 74:1 *Why does your anger smoulder against the sheep of your pasture?*
- Ps 77:20\* *You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron*
- Ps 78:52\* *He brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep*
- Ps 79:13 *We your people, the sheep of your pasture*
- Ps 95:7\* *We are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care*
- Ps 100:3 *We are his people, the sheep of his pasture*
- Is 40:11\* *He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms*
- Jer 31:10\* *He will watch over his flock like a shepherd*
- Ezek 34:15,16 *I myself will tend my sheep .... I will shepherd the flock*
- Ezek 34:31 *You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people*

In these verses we see a picture of God's people as his flock. The people are under God's care (with him explicitly or implicitly as shepherd – see Group 5). He is a good shepherd in that he tends or cares for the sheep. A key thought, appearing in more than half the verses, is that of pasture. The land was semi-desert and the shepherd's job was to find pasture for his flock each day. So the main way in which God as shepherd cares for his flock is in leading them to food, which should be taken literally but can no doubt be seen spiritually too.

The standard of care is also shown by the thought of 'my sheep' ('my pasture' too) and the concept of gentleness always shines through. Just as the shepherd knew all his flock by name, so God knows and cares for those who belong to him. In both Testaments the flock is always seen as belonging to God, even if care of the sheep is entrusted to others.

## 2: Sheep scattered or lost

(see also Group 8)

Again the word used is normally 'sheep' and these verses are really a further group within the previous category. The thought is still of God's people as sheep, but the sheep are not being shepherded and so have scattered and become lost.

Num 27:17*	<i>So the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd</i>
1 Ki 22:17*	<i>Israel scattered like sheep without a shepherd</i>
2 Chr 18:16*	the same
Ps 44:11	<i>You gave us up to be devoured like sheep</i>
Ps 44:22	<i>We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered (cf Rom 8:36)</i>
Ps 119:176	<i>I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant</i>
Is 13:14	<i>Like sheep without a shepherd</i>
Is 53:6	<i>We all, like sheep, have gone astray</i>
Jer 13:17	<i>The Lord's flock will be taken captive</i>
Jer 23:1*	<i>Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep</i>
Jer 50:6*	<i>My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray</i>
Jer 50:17	<i>Israel is a scattered flock that lions have chased away</i>
Ezek 34:6	<i>My sheep wandered .... they were scattered</i>
Zech 10:2*	<i>The people wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd</i>

The concept of shepherding has moved here from God as the Shepherd to human rulers who have failed as shepherds. There is firm condemnation of leading the sheep astray, of scattering and losing them. Sheep are, naturally, wanderers so one of the main expectations of the good shepherd or leader is to keep them together.

But there are other thoughts in these verses too. Psalm 119:176 lays the blame on the writer for straying, with the prayer to God to find him (echoes of Jesus' story of the lost sheep which is perhaps based on this verse if not Ezekiel 34). There is a similar thought in Isaiah 53:6.

## 3: God's rescue of his flock

If human leaders fail, God promises his own solution. He himself will become their shepherd and rescue his flock.

Ezek 34:11,12	<i>I myself will search for my sheep .... I will rescue them</i>
Mic 2:12	<i>I will bring them together like sheep in a pen, like a flock in its pasture</i>
Zech 9:16	<i>The Lord their God will save them .... as the flock of his people</i>
Jer 23:3,4	<i>I myself will gather the remnant of my flock .... and will bring them back</i>
Zech 10:3*	<i>(God) will care for his flock, the house of Judah</i>

The Micah reference mentions the sheep-pen or fold, the symbol of safety at night when danger from wild animals was most acute. In the pen the sheep were crowded together, the opposite picture of the flock scattered over a vast area of wild countryside.

These three categories have all had the focus on the sheep although the work of the shepherd has been clearly evident in most of the verses mentioned. We now turn to verses that focus more specifically on the shepherd.

## 4: God as Shepherd of Israel

These references give God the name Shepherd (coming with a capital S).

Gen 49:24*	<i>The Shepherd, the Rock of Israel</i>
Ps 80:1	<i>Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel</i>
Eccl 12:11	<i>The words of the wise .... given by one Shepherd</i>

These would appear to be three independent and scattered references over a wide area of the Old Testament. But bearing in mind that the picture of shepherd is used for rulers not priests, it is a natural link to the idea of God as supreme ruler or Shepherd. It is vital to hold the picture of God as King (with due majesty, authority and power), rather than just the idea of a country shepherd (with the idea of love and care for the flock). The wonderful picture is that the two go together.

## 5: God as shepherd of his people

(see also Group 1)

This is only a slight variation from the previous section. For completeness, a few references where the word 'shepherd' is not used are also shown.

Ps 23:1-4	<i>The LORD is my shepherd .... he makes me lie down</i>
Ps 77:20*	<i>You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron</i>

Ps 78:52*	<i>He brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep</i>
Ps 95:7*	<i>We are the people of his pasture, the sheep under his care</i>
Is 40:11*	<i>He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms</i>
Jer 31:10*	<i>He .... will watch over his flock like a shepherd</i>
Ezek 34:12	<i>As a shepherd .... so will I look after my sheep</i>
Ezek 34:11-24	<i>I will judge between one sheep and another .... (etc.)</i>
Mic 7:14	<i>Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance</i>
Zech 10:3*	<i>God .... will care for his flock, the house of Judah</i>

This is the complementary grouping of category 1: God's people as sheep, with five references common to both. Note the references to leadership, care, tending, looking after. The well-known Shepherd Psalm is unique in Scripture as being able to state that Yahweh is David's personal shepherd.

The thought coming through almost every verse is that of *his* flock or *my* sheep or *your* people (depending on the speaker). The people belong to God, even when a human agency is acting as under-shepherd.

## 6: Christ to be Shepherd

Ezek 34:23	<i>I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them</i>
Mic 5:4	<i>He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD (cf. Matt 2:6)</i>
Zech 13:7	<i>Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered (cf. Matt 26:31, Mark 14:27)</i>

The first two of these verses are assumed to refer to the coming Messiah and find their fulfilment in John 10. The third one is cited by Matthew and Mark. So the concept of kingship as shepherd is carried forward to the idea of the Good Shepherd.

## 7: Human shepherds

There are only two references to human shepherds in general (both in Jeremiah) until we come to failed shepherds in the next section. But a number of specific people are noted as being shepherds.

Ps 77:20*	<i>You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron</i>
Ps 78:70-72	<i>He chose David .... from tending the sheep .... to be the shepherd of his people</i>
Is 44:28	<i>who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd</i>
Is 63:11	<i>Moses .... who brought them through the sea, with the shepherd of his flock</i>
Jer 3:15	<i>I will give you shepherds after my own heart who will lead you with knowledge</i>
Jer 17:16	<i>I have not run away from being your shepherd</i>

This section includes some interesting references. First, one refers to a very secular ruler, Cyrus, as God's shepherd. The Psalm 78 reference is a nice play on the idea of David being an actual shepherd before becoming God's shepherd and stands in complete contrast to Group 8 below. Other references have the idea of God being the shepherd of his people with under-shepherds looking after them with delegated authority (as Psalm 77). The idea of these human shepherds *leading* the people comes in several references.

## 8: Human shepherds who failed

These references (to rulers not priests) show the awesome responsibility of being under-shepherds. Judgment is sometimes on the sheep as well.

Jer 2:8	<i>The leaders rebelled against me</i>
Jer 10:21	<i>The shepherds are senseless and do not enquire of the LORD</i>
Jer 12:10	<i>Many shepherds will ruin my vineyard</i>
Jer 13:20	<i>Where is the flock that was entrusted to you, the sheep of which you boasted?</i>
Jer 22:22	<i>The wind will drive all your shepherds away</i>
Jer 23:1,2*	<i>Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture</i>
Jer 25:34-36	<i>Weep and wail you shepherds; roll in the dust you leaders of the flock</i>
Jer 49:19	<i>What shepherd can stand against me? (also Jer 50:44)</i>
Jer 50:6*	<i>Their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam</i>
Ezek 34:2-16	<i>Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves</i>
Ezek 34:8	<i>Because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered</i>

Zech 10:2,3\* *The people wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd. My anger burns*

Zech 11:3 *Listen to the wail of the shepherds: their rich pastures are destroyed*

Zech 11:15,16 *I am going to raise up a shepherd who will not care for the lost*

Zech 11:17 *Woe to the worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock!*

This is a theme of Jeremiah. NIV does not have the word 'shepherd' in Jeremiah 2:8 but some other translations do.

The shepherds are castigated for being stupid, for letting the flock be scattered, for destroying the sheep (presumably by letting wild animals get them), for leaving the flock altogether, and even for leading the flock in the wrong direction. Shepherds who do this are interested much more in looking after Number One rather than caring for their sheep.

### 3: Ezekiel chapter 34

This is the Old Testament chapter which takes the concept of sheep and shepherd in greatest detail. It includes many the concepts described in Part 2, drawing them together in one chapter.

The passage concerns leadership. There is a promise of good leadership to come, preceded by a fierce attack on the greed and selfishness of the leaders of the past. The rulers had exploited the people as if the flock belonged to them, the shepherds. But the people were the Lord's flock ('My sheep' v6) and the kings ruled over them by the Lord's appointment ('My shepherds' v8). The chapter demonstrates the high ideal of kingship in the Old Testament and of the place of Yahweh as the true king of Israel.

#### What the shepherds did

In verses 1 to 10 the bad shepherds are described as taking care only of themselves and not the flocks:

- they exploited the people, taking the best of the food and wool (v3);
- they showed no pastoral qualities, failing to care for the weak, the sick, the injured, the strays, the lost (v4);
- they ruled in brutal fashion (v4).

As a result the flock was scattered and, once scattered, became prey to wild animals (v5). The shepherds did not care; they never searched for the lost sheep (v6). So the people were as sheep without any shepherd, left to wander and be destroyed.

Because of their abysmal behaviour and performance God's wrath is upon the shepherds. First, he holds them accountable for

what they have done. Secondly he will remove them from their responsibility. Thirdly he will rescue his sheep (all in v10). There is a similar passage in Jeremiah 23 which, if anything, is stronger. In fact the Exile had removed most of the leaders anyway but the passage still stands as a grim warning for all.

#### God's rescue plan

In verses 11 to 16 God is brought in as the Good Shepherd. There is an immediate contrast as far as the sheep are concerned in that God will look after them.

- He will search for them all and rescue them from wherever they have ended up (v11,12);
- he will, bring them back to their own land (v13);
- he will give them good pasture (v13,14);
- he will look after them with justice (v16);
- he will give them tender care, binding up the injured and strengthening the weak, an interesting picture for the Old Testament which shows there is no dichotomy between the two parts of the Bible (v16).

Verse 12 may well be a picture for the parable of the lost sheep ('I will rescue them'), and the reference to clouds and darkness has eschatological overtones.

## Judgment on the sheep

In verses 17 to 22 the theme of judgment is introduced, following on from the ideas of justice in the preceding verses. It is God who will bring justice to the flock, a possible reference to the oppressive upper-classes. The emphasis is still on feeding because the sins committed are linked to trampling on the grazing and muddying the water for drinking. Stronger sheep were butting weaker ones. It is important not to link this passage with Jesus' teaching about the sheep and the goats. *Seh* in Hebrew simply means a member of the flock. So the flock will be purified of both bad shepherds and bad members. Social justice and freedom of oppression go together.

## The age to come

In verses 23 and 24 the picture of the Messianic Shepherd is introduced. The picture changes from the previous verse (or there is a clear

inconsistency). The context would appear to be the new age. Three titles are used: 'my servant', 'prince', and 'David'. This cannot be a human king but the servant of the Lord, an idealised David. The title Prince supports this; it cannot be a human king but the link with David is clear. So, as Christians, we can take this to refer to the coming age. This then leads into verses 25 to 31 with the idea of a covenant of peace.

In these final verses there seems to be a mix of the sheep/shepherd picture and of the real human scene. The scenario includes:

- no wild beasts, so awake or asleep the flock is safe (v25);
- a time of great blessing from God (v26);
- the land will be fruitful (v27,29).

The theme that is repeated throughout these verses is one of security, safety and lack of fear. And the result? 'They will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Sovereign LORD.' (v30)

# 4: The NT references

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The New Testament references are analysed under the following headings:

- 1 Literal references (since there are few)
- 2 Jesus, the lamb of God ('sacrificial')
- 3 People as God's sheep
- 4 Sheep that are lost or scattered
- 5 Christ as the good shepherd
- 6 Christian leaders as shepherds

There are under 100 New Testament references, but few are literal and it is possible to list every one (although a large group referring to the 'lamb of God' in Revelation is omitted).

## 1: Literal references

There are just three narrative passages using 'sheep' and 'shepherds' literally, and one of these appears in Revelation.

- Luke 2:8,20 (The angels appearing to the shepherds)  
 John 2:14,15 (The cleansing of the temple)  
 Rev 18:13 (The fall of Babylon)

However, Jesus (and in one case Paul) used 'sheep' as literal illustrations in teaching. See:

- Matt 12:11,12 *If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit*  
 Matt 18:12-14 *If a man owns a hundred sheep*  
 Luke 15:3-7 Ditto  
 Matt 25:31-46 *As a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*  
 1 Cor 9:7 *Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?*

These passages include famous 'sheep/shepherd' stories. But they are taken as an everyday picture to illustrate some point that is being made that is not as such about leadership. So they are grouped here rather than in a later metaphorical section. Even the parable of the lost sheep is one of a series of three stories (lost coin and prodigal son too) to illustrate God's longing to bring sinners to himself.

## 2: Jesus, the Lamb of God

As already noted in the Old Testament section, this is a metaphorical use of lamb for Christ based on the system of Jewish sacrifices. So this is a separate picture from the one of leadership. Apart from noting the references, this paper takes it no further. See how the theme is worked out in the book of Revelation.

John 1:29,36	<i>Look, the Lamb of God</i>
Acts 8:32	<i>He was led like a sheep to the slaughter (Is 53:7)</i>
Heb 9:12-22 & 10:4	<i>The blood of goats and bulls .... the blood of Christ</i>
1 Pet 1:19	<i>Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect</i>
Revelation	A total of 27 references not listed here

The Hebrews reference differs from the others, but the underlying concept is the same.

### 3: People as God's sheep

This Old Testament idea still appears in the New Testament, but only in:

Matt 10:16 & Luke 10:3	<i>I am sending you out like sheep (lambs) among wolves</i>
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Here it is used specifically of seemingly weak disciples being sent out on an evangelistic mission.

Luke 12:32	<i>Do not be afraid, little flock</i>
John 10	Various refs such as 'my sheep know me'
Heb 13:20*	<i>Our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep (see below)</i>

The idea of the disciples being as weak as sheep is slightly different from the Old Testament concept of being helpless. See also all the cross-references in section 6.

### 4: Sheep that are lost or scattered

Matt 9:36	<i>They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd</i>
Matt 10:6	<i>Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel</i>
Matt 15:24	<i>I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel</i>
Mark 6:34	<i>Crowds .... they were like sheep without a shepherd</i>
1 Pet 2:25*	<i>You were like sheep going astray</i>

and in rather a different sense:

Matt 7:15	<i>Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing</i>
Rom 8:36	<i>We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered (Psalm 44:22)</i>

Clearly it is mainly Matthew who picks up on the Old Testament concepts of sheep without a shepherd, and of the people of God who have

been deserted by their human shepherds and now need rescuing.

### 5: Christ as the good shepherd

John 10	(See separate treatment below)
Heb 13:20*	<i>Our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep</i>
1 Pet 2:25*	<i>But now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls</i>
1 Pet 5:4	<i>When the Chief Shepherd appears</i>

See also Jesus citing Zechariah 13:7 in

Matt 26:31 & Mark 14:27	<i>I will strike the shepherd</i>
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And, from Micah 5:2:

Matt 2:6	<i>Out of you will come a ruler .... the shepherd</i>
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### 6: Christian leaders as shepherds

We finally come to four key references where the concept of shepherding is applied to Christian leaders over their churches. Four references may seem to be a very slim body of evidence for the widespread use of the metaphor today (consider, for example, the use of the term 'pastor'), but the four include Jesus' use for Peter, Paul's farewell talk to the Ephesian elders, Paul's separate teaching to the Ephesians, and Peter's teaching.

John 21:15-17	<i>Take care of (feed) my lambs (sheep)</i>
Acts 20:28,29	<i>Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock .... be shepherds of the flock</i>
Eph 4:11	<i>Some to be pastors and teachers</i>
1 Pet 5:2-4	<i>Be shepherds of God's flock .... not lording it .... but being examples to the flock</i>

The Ephesians 4 reference does not include the word shepherd as such, but the concept of pastor is virtually identical. Note that the leadership gift listed here is probably a joint one of pastor/teacher (the two terms are not separated out in the same way as the others).

In the 1 Peter passage the marks of the good shepherd are to be willing, not greedy for money, eager to serve, not lording it over the sheep, but giving an example for them to follow. There are clear similarities with the passages for overseers and deacons in 1 Timothy and Titus, and with Ezekiel 34 and other Old Testament passages.

## 5: John chapter 10 verses 1-18

If Ezekiel 34 is the Old Testament chapter where the metaphor of sheep and shepherd is worked through in detail, John 10 is the equivalent in the New. Jesus teaches about himself in shepherd language, but this is not a simple parable. For a start the word used in verse 6 ('figure of speech' NIV) is not the same as the Bible normally uses for a parable. Instead it is a word for a proverb.

Secondly, it is not in any case possible to allegorise each part neatly since Jesus first likens himself to the gate of the sheep-pen and then to the shepherd. The chapter is a series of compressed sayings put in a very visual way; it is important not to tie every detail up too neatly. For example, the watchman seems to have no special significance in a metaphorical sense.

### The figure of speech

The key contrast is between the shepherd and the robber, and the picture is of the sheep put in the pen overnight and then called out to be led to pasture in the morning. The robber cannot get in by the gate so seeks to climb in across the wall (v1). We noted earlier that he would have dislodged the loose stones doing this and given himself away. If he should then try to take the flock (v5), the sheep will not recognise his voice and will run in the opposite direction.

The shepherd has free access to the gate (v2). He knows every sheep and can call them by name before he leads them all out (v3). The picture seems to imply there are other sheep also in the pen. He then leads his flock to pasture and they willingly follow.

Those listening obviously recognised the picture that Jesus was using. He comes in with the point about the robbers since he has just been castigating spiritual blindness. But the people did not understand the deeper meaning, so he explains, but first takes a different picture. It is certainly no step-by-step explanation!

### Jesus as the gate

In verses 7 to 10, Jesus pictures the gate as the way in and the way out. The main point is that people can only come to God through Christ. No other real shepherd can come before him (v8), reverting to the shepherd analogy for a moment. He is the only way into the kingdom, the only gate in for salvation (v9). The message to Christians is that if we seek to teach any other way or, if we promote ourselves rather than Jesus, we are as

robbers trying to climb over the wall. Christ must be supreme in all our evangelistic preaching if we are to lead people to salvation. So our aim must be the will of God, not to promote ourselves.

But the door is also the way out from the place of safety. The sheep go out to be led to pasture, to food (v9). This is the way to life both in (to salvation) and out (to spiritual food). 'I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full' (v10).

### Jesus as the good shepherd

In verse 11 Jesus now introduces the second idea into his picture and, in likening himself to the good shepherd, picks up the Old Testament theme of the coming Shepherd in Ezekiel 34 and also in Micah 5.

He states that he is the good shepherd twice, in verses 11 and 14, and each time makes one significant point about his style of shepherding. First, the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (v11 but repeated in w15,17,18). This is hardly the point that his hearers would be expecting: tender care, leading to pasture, keeping the flock together would all be ideas from both daily practice and Old Testament teaching. Instead Jesus focuses on his death for his flock.

In verses 11 to 13 the contrast is made with the hireling who cares little for the sheep and who therefore considers his own safety first when the wolf appears. The wolf scatters the flock, an idea we are by now more than familiar with. The hireling is nowhere to be seen. He cares nothing.

By contrast Jesus cares so much that he is prepared to sacrifice himself. It would be dangerous here to identify too closely at every point of detail with the wolf attacking the flock; after all if the shepherd is killed the sheep are left defenceless. The point must be the unimaginable depth of care. Perhaps the idea is taken from the shepherd lying down across the opening to the sheep pen at night. He lays down his life to protect the sheep and to keep them together.

Jesus reiterates this idea in verses 17 and 18 and incorporates his death, his resurrection, his authority and his links with the Father – truly compressed theology in a few words! The point seems to be that the ultimate in leadership is sacrifice for the sake of those being led. This is the depth of care for the flock that the good shepherd demonstrates.

The second point made, following the second statement that Jesus is the good shepherd in verse 14, is that the shepherd knows his sheep and they know him. This again gives a slightly different slant to the Old Testament picture of the shepherd, but would have been clearly understood by people in rural Palestine. The shepherd would have known each sheep by name and the sheep would have recognised their shepherd's call. Jesus goes on to make a separate point within the picture: that of other sheep (Gentiles) being drawn into the one flock.

## Leadership

In these few verses Jesus manages to make a number of different points. By no means do all of

them apply directly to Christian leadership today, and we need to be careful how much we take from this passage to apply to the Church. Jesus was, after all, teaching about himself in the context of a sheep/shepherd illustration.

What the passage does not teach is Jesus as a nice, homely person as some traditional paintings depict this scene. The picture is of absolute reality and ultimate commitment of Christ to his people. His kingly rule over his people is marked by a close relationship with each person and an utter dedication to their good, to the extent of giving up his life. And he gives away his life, so that they might have life in all its fullness. If nothing else, it reminds us yet again that the picture of the biblical shepherd is never cosy but always tough, real and true to the real-life carer for those wayward, exasperating, rough sheep.

This concludes a review and analysis of the use of 'shepherd' and 'sheep' words throughout Scripture. For principles to draw from this research see Article A13 (Part 2: Practical application). To continue reading that, simply click [here](#) and you will be taken straight to A13.

This article is available at [www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/articles/a12.pdf](http://www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/articles/a12.pdf). It forms part 1 of two articles, with A13 being part 2. For notes on changing leadership styles in a church see TN28, *No two leaders are the same*. For indexes of all items available on the site, visit the [resources page](#).

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of using his consultancy or training services.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A12 under Leadership.

Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

69 Sandridge Road, St Albans, AL1 4AG Tel+Fax: 01727 832176 Web: [www.john-truscott.co.uk](http://www.john-truscott.co.uk)