

THE BIBLICAL SHEPHERDING MODEL: ITS ROLE IN CAREGIVING FOR PEOPLE WITH BIOETHICAL-RELATED ISSUES

Author

Mutuku Justus Musila 

Email: jmutuku@kabarak.ac.ke

Kabarak University, Kenya.

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Abstract

This paper seeks to underscore the development of the Shepherd motif in Scriptures as well as its Biblical and theological significance for the pastoral vocation and for the discipline of Bioethics. Aspects of missional implications of the shepherd motif in pastoral vocation and bioethics will also be discussed. God's word was written in a specific context. This implies that it utilised human categories and language to express divine truths. A desktop research was this study adopted. The study concludes that from the development and usage of the shepherd theme that it was such a central motif in God's word and mind. The Prophets and other Bible writers used it to show a unique relationship between God and his people. This is because it was a well-understood metaphor used in the context on a regular basis showing the relationship between a shepherd and the sheep or the flock. However, we should remind ourselves of the responsibility that it was to be a shepherd. This expresses the truth that shepherding was not an easy task, but it was worth it. This shepherding motif or theme is a special calling to the Church and Christians to take up the role of shepherding as modelled out by God and Jesus Christ.

Key terms: Biblical shepherding model, caregiving bioethical-related issues.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Genesis 1:1, we read that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth". God is not only introduced to us as the source of all creation but also as the one who owns everything, according to Psalm 24: 1- 2. Further, God is unequivocally introduced to us as interested and actively involved in every detail of the creation's day-to-day being and functions. This is evident in His nature of being and existence, showed in Jeremiah 23: 23 – 24. Bartholomew and Goheen summarize this for us when they observe that "God is the source of all that is. He stands apart from all other things in the special relationship of Creator to creation (Craig, 2014)". It is this special relationship between the sheep of God and creation and, in particular, humanity that gives birth to the *'Shepherd motif'* that runs throughout the scriptures and will be the focus of this paper. God relates with humanity as a Shepherd does to the flock or sheep. This paper seeks to underscore the development of the Shepherd motif in Scriptures as well as its Biblical and theological significance for the pastoral vocation and for the discipline of Bioethics. Aspects of missional implications of the shepherd motif in pastoral vocation and bioethics will also be discussed.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Biblical Theme of Shepherding

God's word was written in a specific context. This implies that it utilized human categories and language to express divine truths. Bill Joel observed that "The Bible was written in a certain historical, political, social and cultural context (Biwul, 2013)". In this case, it is necessary for Bible readers to be aware of the contextual issues underlying scriptural expressions and teaching. Divine truths, as found in scripture, are expressed using common day-to-day language and metaphors of a given people. However, Fee and Stuart noticing the danger of stopping at that point, are quick to remind us that "Even though the Word was originally given in a concrete historical context, its uniqueness Centre's in the fact that, though historically given and conditioned, this Word is ever a living Word (Gordon & Goheen, 2014)". Among the many themes taught in scriptures is that of shepherding.

The Bible in both testaments (Old and New) are painted with images of and lessons on the shepherd and shepherding. Bill Joel observes, "Our understanding of the Old Testament is incomplete apart from its history, whether that of its religious or theological expressions or of its socio-political and anthropological involvement (Biwul, 2013)". This explains the choice of this significant theme of shepherding.

Echoes and aspects of the theme of Shepherding are as old as the creation of man. This is first and foremost in the Pentateuch. God himself is seen to be playing the role of a shepherd in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 1: 29, God is seen providing food for a man, among other things something that a shepherd does as will be discussed later in this paper. Additionally, in the same Garden of Eden, God is seen entrusting man with the responsibility of caring for creation which is another facet of shepherding. (Genesis 2: 15). As early as in Genesis 4, we are introduced to Abel, who is keeping the flock while his brother Cain is farming or working on the soil. Even though the term shepherd is not directly used in these early parts of scripture, it is implied in every way. Later, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are shown in the rest of the book of Genesis as engaged in serious shepherding of their flock.

In the Exodus event, God is seen again to clearly play the role of a shepherd in not only rescuing and delivering the Israelites from enslavement by Egyptians but also in leading, guiding, and protecting them in the wilderness (Exodus 13 – 17). Particularly, John (1983), commending the pillar of fire and cloud that led the Israelites from Egypt, note that "This feature has been naturalistically explained as a glowing brazier carried by guides (John,

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1983)".² The concern for me here is the guiding role or function of God as a shepherd does to the flock or sheep. What these texts are expressing is the fact that God is presented as a Shepherd of His people within the Pentateuch in many ways. The historical books that are from Joshua to Esther are in the same manner characterized by the theme of God as the shepherd of His people. In particular, the sub-themes of caring, restoring, leading, protecting and feeding are displayed in the various texts of the historical books of the Bible. An example is in the Book of Ruth, chapter 2 when Ruth meets Boaz in Bethlehem. She is protected and provided. (Ruth 2: 8 – 9).

The Poetry book is likewise full of shepherding expression. For instance, Psalm 23 is a song describing God as the Shepherd of His people. Keller Philip, in commending about the shepherd, says, "David, the author of the poem, himself a shepherd, and the son of a shepherd, later to be known as the 'Shepherd King' of Israel, stated explicitly, 'The Lord is my Shepherd (Keller, 1977)". In other words, in a great portion of the poetry, the poems or songs describe God as a shepherd and that His people are the flock of his pastures. Psalm 100: 3 declares, "*Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture*". The Psalmist is here in the poetry, describing God's people as sheep. God is, in turn, the shepherd. Keller concludes this aspect by saying, "Now the beautiful relationships given to us repeatedly in Scripture between God and man are those of a father to his children and a shepherd to his sheep (Keller, 1977)".

The Prophets are also full of the images of God as shepherds of his people. The most classic example of this is Ezekiel 34. Bill says, "The shepherd motif right from the Patriarchs up to the last prophet in Israel, had been in Jewish traditions an ever-fresh concept; picturing Yahweh as the shepherd of the patriarchs and of Israel (Biwul, 2013)". Many other prophets are known to utilize this metaphor in describing God as the shepherd. Micah 2: 12 and 4: 6-8 clearly describe God's people's action of bringing back Jacob from oppression as that of gathering sheep in pen, like a flock in its pasture. Again the image of shepherding is here demonstrated by the Prophets. In the New Testament, Jesus is shown describing himself as the 'good shepherd'. (John 10: 1-13). Paul, in Acts 20: 28 -30, is charging the Ephesian elders to take care of God's flock. Paul directly instructs the Ephesian elders to be shepherds of the church. Peter will come later in I Peter 5: 1 – 4 to instruct elders to be shepherds of God's flock and await the chief shepherd's reward. All these scriptural utterances and teachings are simply alluding to the inevitability of the centrality of the shepherding motif throughout the scripture.

The Literary and Historical Context of the Shepherding Motif

Every biblical motif is founded and grounded on a specific literal and historical context. Ignatius Obinwa observes that "The concept of the Shepherd which is found in both Old and New Testaments of the Holy Scriptures is a reflection of the shepherd motif in the Ancient Near East (Obinwa, 2012)". The Shepherd motif was not just a Jewish context aspect but went beyond. In the Middle East, the concept of the shepherd had four main connotations as described by Biwul on page 112, the first being the obvious one of one grazing flocks. The other three included "a title for the reigning kings and gods, representative terms for the king who acted on behalf of the gods or a god, and it had a military import to depict the protection role of a king to his society or subjects" (Biwul, 2013).. Okinawa, on his part, is quick to help us understand how the title of the shepherd was acquired in the Near Ancient East context when he says, "The attribute or the title of the shepherd was either adopted personally by the kings and rulers, or it was conferred on them by their subjects (Biwul, 2013)".

In the Babylonian and Assyrian case, common usage of the term was that of talking about 'one grazing flocks'. However, for Babylon, the term had a representative function. Bill says, "It had a titular function assigned to Babylonian deities and humans (Biwul, 2013)". Just like in the Babylonian context, the Assyrians, too, had a

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representative sense of the term but further had a positional and protective sense of the term shepherd. But what necessitated the Shepherding endeavour in the Ancient Near East? Bill suggests it was the fragile and sensitive nature of sheep. He summarizes aspects of the sheep that lead to the need for shepherding as follows: "They require more frequent watering, are less physically adaptive to difficult terrains, dependent on creatures, prone to wandering, unintelligent and unable to find their way to a sheepfold even when it is within sight (Biwul, 2013)". This leads Biwul to conclude that "Basically, the shepherd's functions and responsibilities fall neatly into three categories, namely provision, protection and production (Biwul, 2013)".

In justifying the use of the metaphor of shepherd in scriptures, especially in Ezekiel 34, Wright notes that "Ezekiel chooses a metaphor for kingships that was well known throughout the ancient Near East, from Babylon to Egypt – the shepherd of the flock (Wright, 2001)". In other words, it was a commonly used metaphor among the people of the Ancient Near East and other places, as stated earlier. A more inclusive explanation for why the metaphor of shepherd was used is offered by Biwul when he says, "Due to the self-sacrifice and intensive care shown by the good shepherd for their flocks, therefore, the term shepherd gradually began to be metaphorically applied, in people's culture and religion to those gods and goddesses that were known to be benign to human beings (Okinawa, 2012)".

3.0 FINDINGS

Theological Significance of Shepherding

Harold Taylor, in his book 'Tend My Sheep' begins us well when he states that, "The work of the shepherd in guiding, feeding, and protecting the flock was essential if the animals were to be productive and valuable for their owner" (Taylor, 1983). This sets the tone for thinking about the theological significance of shepherding. Three major aspects of the significance of shepherding surface from scriptures. First is the indictment of Israel's kings and leaders. Why? Because Yahweh is the Lord over the whole creation and is interested in the wellbeing of all creation including that of His people. Ezekiel 34 shows clearly that the flock or the sheep of God were left without any caring or concerned shepherd. Exploitation and self-interest had taken precedence among the Shepherds or leaders of Israel. Wright notes that "Basically, they had served themselves at the expense of their people, rather than serving the people at any cost to themselves (Wright, 2001)". The point being made here is that God wants Shepherds of all time to care for his flock. If they do not, then God will indict them for the same.

The second aspect of the significance of Shepherding is the eschatological dimension. Repeatedly in the scriptures, God spells out his intention to rescue, deliver or save his people from suffering or from difficult and painful experiences. In many instances, scripture shows that at some time, Yahweh will definitely act on behalf of his people. In commending Ezekiel 34, Biwul observes that "The oracle in verses. 11- 16 reveals Yahweh's action of stepping on the scene in a rescue mission to do for his flock what the bad and imperfect human shepherds of the house of Israel had failed to do (Biwul, 2013)". God will definitely shepherd his sheep. He is actively involved in the welfare of his people.

Thirdly, shepherding offers an arena for God's people to participate in the mission of God. As Wright puts it, "Mission arises from the heart of God himself, and is communicated from his heart to ours (Wright, 2006)". God has constantly been using this metaphor of a shepherd to remind his people of the great mission in which they are supposed to be involved. At its core is the aspect of shepherding God's flock. (John 21: 15 – 18- feed, care for my flock). God intends to transform the entire world to His likeness. Israel is central to this task. Bartholomew and Goheen acknowledge that "Israel is to be a display-people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with

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Yahweh changes a people (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2014)". But how will this happen, if God's people are not shepherded? It is for this reason that shepherding motif becomes necessary for the Israelites' community. It forms the core of the mission of God's people.

Missiological Implications of the Shepherding Motif

Our contemporary world is constantly confronted by enormous and unfamiliar challenges. Many people are not sure of the right decisions to take on matters of life choices. A pluralistic world it is. Kilner and Mitchel quotes Bill Joy describing the contemporary realities as follows, "We are being propelled into this new century with no plan, no control, and no brakes (Kilner & Mitchel, 2002)". What is being expressed here is the fact that the dilemmas of our everyday are increasingly becoming untenable to many people. It is easy to lose sight of God and begin to live for our own humanistic ends. This explains the necessity of a missional mind.

The first Missiological implication of this aspect of the shepherding motif is the call to be caregivers of our time. Just like it was in the Old Testament and especially in the case of Ezekiel 34, a lot of people (sheep) in the contemporary world are being wounded, especially due to ethical decisions and choices made. For instance, in issues of infertility, due to the cultural demand in any setting, a couple who are unable to have children might end up being exposed to a new technological way of getting children. Some of these are expensive in terms of finances. Other methods are emotionally and psychologically disturbing. In addition, in some cases, the children do not even come. In other cases, pre-determination of the sex or gender of the child may turn the opposite, and so the people end up wounded emotionally. Mitchell observes that "Increasingly, biotechnologies are being created and used not for therapeutic ends but for the purpose of enhancing mental or athletic functions or altering the physical appearance (Mitchell, 2007)". They add that, "most of these are being used not for the purpose of healing or restoring but in the hope of making us 'better than well (Mitchell, 2007)". A close look at this statement shows a troubled and dissatisfied world. When this is not met, people are wounded. Shepherding is missional in that we partake in restoring, healing and caring for those that are wounded in our society.

A second Missiological implication of the shepherding motif is that of being witnesses of God. Wright argues that "The mission of God's people is to be witnesses for the living God in a world of competing claims by multiple gods (Wright, 2010)". Our world is ruled by competing notions most of which are setting God and his word as an option among many. People need guidance and instruction into God's truth. This calls for us to be witnesses in our vocations and disciplines. In my case, I have to be a witness of God in my pastoral work and also in the bioethics-related issues that I face daily. As Bartholomew and Goheen explain, we should become witnesses through the Word of God, prayer, lifestyle and sharing in the needs of others. They attest that "The apostolic witness depends on a community that verifies the truth of the gospel with its winsome lifestyle (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2014)".

Thirdly, the shepherding motif has implications for recognizing the Lordship of Yahweh and His interest in worldly affairs. Obinna notes that "Yahweh's lordship and interest in worldly affairs entail partly the insistence that the dignity of individual persons should not be toyed with (Okinawa, 2012)". A lot of what happens today that is related to bioethics has, in some sense, to do with destroying or preserving human dignity. This is why bioethics should have an advocacy dimension. Here we are thinking in terms of advocating for human dignity as a mission endeavour, which is at heart the Yahweh.

Having discussed in brief some of the Missiological implications of the shepherding motif, it is necessary to mention that this is not a motif that was only applicable in Biblical times only. It does have practical implications

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even in contemporary times. First, it has implications for leadership practice. This is to say, recognition of this shepherding motif is helpful for leaders and rulers in discharging their duties creditably. Secondly, is the need to listen and obey the chief shepherd in executing our humanly shepherding of our fellow human beings. This is because the Chief shepherd will hold us accountable for our actions. Bill reminds us that "Israel's leaders were often regarded as shepherds, and even though God was always their principal shepherd, responsible human agents were necessary (Biwul, 2013)".

4.0 CONCLUSION

We have already seen from the development and usage of the shepherd theme that it was such a central motif in God's word and mind. The Prophets and other Bible writers used it to show a unique relationship between God and his people. This is because it was a well-understood metaphor used in the context on a regular basis showing the relationship between a shepherd and the sheep or the flock. However, we should remind ourselves of the responsibility that it was to be a shepherd. Obinna says, "The care for the flock was simply phenomenal; going about with the animals in the heat of the day and being near them in the cold of the night, defending them against strong, wild animals like lions and jackals, and also against robbers, sometimes the risk of their own lives (Okinawa, 2010)". This expresses the truth that shepherding was not an easy task, but it was worth it. This shepherding motif or theme is a special calling to the Church and Christians to take up the role of shepherding as modelled out by God and Jesus Christ.

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