



“I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:14): Towards the *Relational* Shepherd

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Summary: The image of the Good Shepherd has many Old Testament precedents. It seems to undergo a steady progression in the New Testament: within the Synoptic Gospels and Apostolic Letters, he becomes the compassionate Chief Shepherd watching over his ecclesial flock. A highpoint is reached in the Fourth Gospel where an even more intimate, intense and passionate relationship is established between Shepherd and sheep. His willingness to die for them could be called the most complete development of the shepherd imagery in Scriptures.

Keywords: Good Shepherd, relationality, Covenant.

Resumen: La imagen del buen pastor tiene muchos precedentes en el Antiguo Testamento. Sin embargo, parece ser sometido a una progresión constante en el Nuevo Testamento: en los evangelios sinópticos y cartas apostólicas, se convierte en el compasivo Pastor, vigilando sobre su rebaño eclesial. Se llega entonces a una culminación en el Cuarto Evangelio, donde se establece una relación aún más íntima, intensa y apasionada entre Pastor y ovejas. Su deseo de morir para ellas podría ser llamado el más completo desarrollo de la figura de Pastor en las Sagradas Escrituras.

Palabras claves: Buen Pastor, Relacionalidad, Alianza.

INTRODUCTION

Among the varicolored biblical images of universal appeal features that of the shepherd tending his flock. “Shepherding was one of the most common occupations in the ancient world and would be readily understood in most ancient cultures. Many of the famous figures of Israel’s early history were shepherds”¹. As someone who has taught Johannine Literature at a Seminary level over the past two decades, the writer of this essay was increasingly fascinated by the line of development of this bucolical figure². More concretely, with its roots in the Old Testament historical, prophetic and sapiential books, it appears to gradually unfold up to its fulsome bloom in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John. After inquiring more into this matter, the realization ensued that over the course of at least these past fifteen years nobody had written about the way the author of the Fourth Gospel seems to out-shine even the Synoptic writers in his treatment of the shepherd imagery. Thus, the intention formed in my mind to explore, document and interpret that apparent literary progression. Beginning with the Old Testament, therefore, let us seek to uncover the way this biblical figure is presented to the reader, and what shape it takes through the inspired words of the sacred author of the Fourth Gospel. We are confident that a thorough research into these texts will in the end yield at least one firm theological conclusion. Without further ado, then, let’s get down to work.

I. OLD TESTAMENT PRECEDENTS: PRESENT HUMAN SHEPHERDS COMPARED TO A FUTURE DIVINE ONE

The pastoral imagery of “shepherd and flock” traces a line of development from the Old into the New Testament; let us succinctly survey some of the most salient passages that revolve around this image: At the very beginning we find a historical prototype in the person of Abel, who features as the very first shepherd in the Scriptures (רֹעֵה צֹאן, *LXX ποιμήν προβάτων*, NVg “pastor ovium”, NRS “keeper of sheep”), bringing “of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions; and the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering”, Gen 4:2-4. He is succeeded by the shepherds Abraham (Gen 13:5-10) and Jacob (Gen 30:40). Later the story of Joseph and his clan of shepherds is narrated (Gen 37:2), driven into exile in Egypt (Gen 46:32.34). Jacob’s patriarchal blessing

1 von WAHLDE, U.C., *The Gospel and Letters of John*, vol. 2, Eerdmans Critical Commentary: Grand Rapids – Cambridge 2010, p. 452.

2 From the Greek βουκόλος, “the herdsman”.

over Joseph contains the earliest allusion to God as “the Shepherd” of Israel (Gen 49:24). For the time after the exile a rather devastating prospect is opened up in Num 14:33: “your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness”³.

An important milestone toward the person of Christ as the future Good Shepherd is marked out during the time of Moses’ leadership: “Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep which have no shepherd”, Num 27:16-17. We then recognize in the Books of Samuel a similar foreshadowing in the person of David, 1 Sam 16:11; 2 Sam 5:1-3; see also Psa 78:70-72.

In Israel the shepherd was a common metaphor for a leader; in fact, God himself was depicted as a shepherd (Gen 49:24; Psa 23; 78:52; Mic 2:12), as were the kings of Israel (Num 27:16-17; 1 Kgs 22:17; Jer 10:21; 23:1-2; Eze 34)⁴. With this in mind, let us move now from the historical to the prophetic books of the Old Testament, arriving at Isa 40:10-11(cf. Gen 49:24) where God himself is foretold as the future shepherd of his people: “Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young”. Isa 53:7 even holds a shrouded allusion to his vicarious suffering and dying for his flock: “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 also at Act 8:32. It will be the Baptizer at John 1:29 to point out the presence of this Lamb, and the Latin Easter Sequence accordingly sings *Agnus redemit oves*. In that same vein the Psalms carry repeated mentions of God as the Shepherd of Israel (cf. Psa 28:9; 78:52; 80:1; 95:7).

Jeremiah announces God’s future gift of “shepherds after my own heart”, who will feed Israel “with knowledge and understanding”, Jer 23:15 (see also Jer 23:4). However, at a later juncture the somber prospect of divine judgment and curse is also evoked regarding “the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” (cf. Jer 13:17). This is followed by the renewed confirmation of God himself coming to gather the remnant of his flock out of all the countries, bringing them back to the one fold, Jer 23:1-8; 31:9-11. In the heart of

3 Cf. von WAHLDE, *John*, p. 452.

4 Cf. von WAHLDE, *John*, p. 453.

this particular passage can be found the eminent messianic prophecy: “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land”, 23:5.

Ezekiel famously contrasts the various unfit shepherds of the past with the one divine Shepherd of the eschatological era: because of the deplorable failure of human shepherds, God himself will intervene and search out and salvage his sheep. He will gather them from among the nations and feed them on lavish pasture in the land of Israel. An apex is reached at Eze 34:23, “I will save my flock, they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant, David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd”. Nevertheless, there is a number of passages in the Old Testament denouncing the desolate state of a flock, scattered because of inattentive shepherds: e.g., Jer 10:21; 12:10; 22:22; 23:1; 25:34-36; 50:6; Eze 34:2-10; Zec 10:2ff; 11; 13:7 (cf. Mat 26:31; Mk 14:27); Amos 1:1. “Both Eze 34 and Zec 9-13 were especially productive as the source for much reflection on the role of the shepherd in the Gospels”⁵.

Ever more plainly the notion of “one shepherd” who will create “one flock” is emerging, corroborated by Eze 37:24: “My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes”. Although there is divine dissatisfaction over the wicked shepherds, it is precisely from among them that the future Messiah will be recruited: “My anger is hot against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders; for the Lord of hosts cares for his flock, the house of Judah, and will make them like his proud steed in battle. Out of them shall come the cornerstone, out of them the tent peg, out of them the battle bow, out of them every ruler”, Zec 10:3-4. Zechariah also alludes to the notion of the Good Shepherd’s sacrifice: “So I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slain for those who trafficked in the sheep”, 11:7. That same prophet chooses classical Covenant language to characterize the relationship between God and his people in a passage that again mysteriously foreshadows Christ’s Passion: “‘Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me’, says the Lord of hosts. ‘Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, They are my people; and they will say, The Lord is my God’”, 13:7.9b (cf. Mat 26:31).

5 FREEDMAN, D.N., ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday: New York –London – Toronto – Sydney – Auckland 1992, Vol. 5, p. 1190.

That same prophecy of God himself taking care of Israel like a shepherd tending his flock finds equal expression in the prophet Micah: “I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob, I will gather the remnant of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture, a noisy multitude of men”,2:12. In fact, the prophecies reveal a more concrete Messianic nature of that future shepherd: “Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, who dwell alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old”,7:14; “and he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth”,5:4; cf. Mat 2:6.

Next then, within the Wisdom books this bucolical theme experiences a prayerful deepening. Especially in the Song of Songs we find it employed in the broader context of nuptial love: “If you do not know, O fairest among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your kids beside the shepherds’ tents”, 1:8. Moreover, there are also Psalms that echo Israel’s profound longing for the restoring appearance of a perfect shepherd: “The Lord is the strength of his people, he is the saving refuge of his anointed. O save your people, and bless your heritage; be their shepherd, and carry them forever”, 28:8-9; “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh! Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!” 80:1-3.

An undisputed Old Testament highpoint is achieved in Psalm 23:1-6 with its poetic focus on the relationship between that divine Shepherd and an individual personified sheep, described from its viewpoint (cf. Gen 48:15). He former is the one who provides food and protection to his sheep: “The principal duty of the shepherd was to see that the animals found enough food and water (cf. Psa 23); and it was important that he guard the sheep, since they were easy prey for wild animals. There was also a danger that thieves might sneak among the sheep and carry them off”⁶. A closer look at the grammatical configuration of this Psalm clearly underscores the closeness of the sheep’s bond with its shepherd: in this comparatively short text there are no less than seventeen first person pronouns (underlined) used by the sheep, as well as five third person (vv. 1-3) and five second person pronouns (italics) referencing the shepherd:

6 FREEDMAN, *Anchor Bible*, p. 1187.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; *he* makes me lie down in green pastures. *He* leads me beside still waters; *he* restores my soul. *He* leads me in 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* anoint my head with oil, my cup over flows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”.

Throughout this song the sheep’s heartfelt admiration for its shepherd, its trust and gratitude toward him, is on magnificent display, a loving friendship that had never before been expressed on such a scale.

As we prepare to scrutinize the New Testament passages regarding the Shepherd imagery, let us appreciate this recapitulating comment by MOLOONEY: “When the exile caused many to doubt, God was presented as the future shepherd of the people (cf. Jer 31:10). Eze 34:11-16 speaks of God as the future good shepherd gathering the flock; this image is sustained and confirmed by later writings (cf. Zep 3:19; Mic 2:12; 4:6-7; Qoh 12:11; Sir 18:13). As the monarchy disappeared, prophets spoke of a future Davidic figure who would be shepherd to the people (Mic 5:3; Jer 3:15; 23:4-6). Eventually, the notion emerges of one shepherd who will form one flock. The image continues and strengthens in other Jewish literature (Ps Sol 17:24.40; CD 13:7-9; 2 Bar 77:13-17), and undoubtedly provides the backdrop for Jesus’ words in Joh 10:1-18”⁷.

II. NEW TESTAMENT PROGRESSION: THE COMPASSIONATE CHIEF SHEPHERD AND HIS ECCLESIAL FLOCK

This pastoral motif in its relative complexity is continued also in literature contemporaneous with the Four Gospels (cf. 1 Enoch 89; 90; *T. Gad* 1). Yet it becomes embedded especially in the New Testament, building on the Old Testament traditions as illustrated above. References to “shepherd and flock” can be gathered into five groups:

First, there is the person of Jesus himself, portrayed as someone who benevolently cares for the people like a shepherd: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like

7 MOLONEY, F., *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina 4: Collegeville 1998, p. 301.

sheep without a shepherd”, Mat 9:36 (Mar 6:34). He compellingly defines the extent of his pastoral mission when he says: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”, Mat 15:24. Additionally, and by virtue of his Resurrection, Christ has become “the great shepherd of the sheep”, Heb 13:20. Rounding out this collage is the image of the Lamb, whose birth in Bethlehem was surrounded by the presence of humble shepherds. This Lamb not only takes away the sin of the world, Joh 1:29, but also one day “in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”, Rev 7:17. At this eschatological stage his role noticeably expands into the domain of a *Paraclete* (cf. Joh 14:16).

Second, Christ commissions his apostles to assist in his mission, giving them the following directives prior to his Resurrection: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”, Mat 10:5-6. After his rising from the dead, he entrusts his entire flock to Peter: “feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep”, Joh 21:15-17.

Third, that Petrine mission will in its turn be perpetuated by the successors of the apostles, as elucidated by Peter himself: “Tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it, not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away”, 1 Pet 5:2-4. Paul subjoins his own exhortation: “Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock”, Act 20:28-29.

In the fourth place we recognize the lessons imparted for future Christian generations within the Church, who will be placed in a vulnerable position as compared to the powerful in world and history: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”, Luk 12:32. Yet their journey will also be marked by error, persecution and corruption as can be gathered from these passages: “For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls”, 1Pet 2:25; “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, Mat 10:16; “As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered’”, Rom 8:36; “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves”, Mat 7:15.

As a fifth and final aspect we discern the notion of a Final Judgment, in which God is envisioned in pastoral terms, like a shepherd managing and inspecting his flock: “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left”, Mat 25:32f.

Above and beyond this captivating canvas of shepherd sayings, there appears to be one that spans like a bridge towards the characteristic Johannine teaching on this matter, namely, the one describing Jesus’ personal joy at finding a lost sheep. In a unique way it emphasizes empathy and love for his flock: “What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray”, Mat 18:12-13. Luke slightly enhances the parable with the studied detail of having the lost sheep rest on the shepherd’s shoulders; “and when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost’”, Luk 15:4-6⁸. GREGORY of NAZIANZUS, incidentally, contemplates a connection between those pastoral shoulders and the Cross, symbolizing Christ’s redemptive Passion⁹, and shortly we will discover how this thought will become explicit in John’s Gospel.

All of these facets of “Shepherd and flock” in the Old and New Testaments will however culminate in the way John remembers him in his Gospel, the exploration of which will form the upcoming central part of this essay.

III. APOGEE IN JOHN’S *PAROIMÍA*: INTIMATE RELATIONALITY BETWEEN SHEPHERD AND SHEEP

There is a longstanding and judicious consensus among Biblicists concerning the comparatively late publication of the Fourth Gospel, likely toward the end of the first century. This circumstance justifies the argument that

8 GREGORY THE GREAT appositely identifies the entire human family with that one lost sheep: “Ubi pascis, o pastor bone, qui super úmeros tollis totum gregem? Una enim est ovis unívêrsa humána natúra, quam suscepísti super úmeros”, *Ex Commentário in Cânticum Cantícorum*, cap. 2: PG 44,802.

9 “Ad ovem errántem bonus ille Pastor événit, ánimam suam pro óvibus ponens, ad montes et colles, in quibus sacrificábat; et errántem invénit et invéntam, íisdem úmeris, quibus et crucis lignum, sústulit, et accéptam ad supérnam vitam redúxit”, *Oratio* 45.26: PG 36, 658.

its sacred author was able to add to the deepness of biblical deposit in the Early Church. Yet before we give in to any precipitous assumptions about the Johannine treatment of the “Shepherd-flock” metaphor, let us first examine the text in case, namely, Joh 1:1-18.27-29. It is widely acknowledged that it does not contain any direct citation from the Old Testament, even though there is a strong biblical tradition presenting unfaithful leaders of Israel as bad shepherds who consign their flock to the wolves, as expounded on above. Nevertheless, “the imagery of this discourse owes much to the concepts found in Num 27:17 and Eze 34”¹⁰.

Taking now a closer look at this “Palestinian pastoral”¹¹, one cannot but being enthralled by the originality of wording that conveys an unprecedented familiarity between a shepherd and his flock. Here are some of the most prominent examples: “The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out”, 10:3; and “when he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice”, 10:4; “I know my own and my own know me”, 10:14b; “and I lay down my life for the sheep”, 10:15b; “I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice”, 10:16b; “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand”, 10:27-28.

Even a superficial gaze at these phrases makes it clear that, “along with the polemical emphases in vv. 1-2 and v. 5”¹², the shepherd’s close friendship, goodness and self-sacrifice are revealed and accentuated. Most outstanding, however, is the fact that all of these passages, wholly peculiar to John’s Gospel, plainly denote an intimate bond between the person of the Good Shepherd and his personified sheep. “Jesus no longer concerns himself with others who claim to be shepherds, but with the relationship he has with his flock (vv. 14-16) and with his Father (vv. 17-18)”¹³. As an auxiliary point of departure let us recall this eloquent paragraph from BARCLAY’s commentary: “The relationship between sheep and shepherd is quite different in Palestine. [...] the sheep are kept largely for their wool. It thus happens that in Palestine the sheep are often

10 Cf. BEUTLER, J. – FORTNA, R.T., eds., *The Shepherd Discourse of John 10 and its Context*, SNTS.MS 67, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge – New York – Melbourne – Sydney 1991, pp. 32.49.

11 FULLER, R.C. – JOHNSTON, L. – KEARNS, C., eds., *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, Nelson: New York 1975, p. 1057.

12 SCHNACKENBURG, R., *The Gospel According to St. John*, Vol. 2, Commentary on Chapters 5-12, The Seabury Press: New York 1980, p. 280.

13 MOLONEY, *John*, p. 304.

with the shepherd for years and often they have names by which the shepherd calls them. [...] It is strictly true that the sheep know and understand the eastern shepherd's voice; and that they will never answer to the voice of a stranger. [...] The shepherd calls sharply from time to time, to remind them of his presence. They know his voice, and follow on; but, if a stranger call, they stop short, lift up their heads in alarm, and if it is repeated, they turn and flee, because they know not the voice of a stranger. I have made the experience repeatedly. [...] Every detail of the shepherd's life lights up the picture of the Good Shepherd whose sheep hear his voice and whose constant care is for his flock"¹⁴. At this juncture, let us probe a little more thoroughly into the various facets of this pastoral relationship, following the scriptural outline of Joh 1:1-18.27-29.

a.) "They hear his voice", v. 3b: Similar expressions are found inv. 4d, "they know his voice", in v. 16b, "they will listen to my voice", and in v. 27a, "My sheep hear my voice". Nowhere else in Scripture can we find such an endearing portrayal of bonding between the shepherd and his flock owing to them ere sound of his voice: "the sheep's hearing is attuned to the call of the shepherd (cf. v. 27)"¹⁵. Verse 16 even reminds the hearer that there are also "others more", not belonging to this flock, that need to be guided; they heed his voice, too. Thus, all of these Johannine expressions point towards that distinct pastoral relationship.

b.) "He calls his own sheep by name", v. 3c: SCHNACKENBURG admits that "giving each sheep a name would have been unusual"¹⁶, yet in light of BARCLAY's experience quoted above, this naming of sheep reveals the shepherd's devoted familiarity with them. In addition to the trait of love and affection, there is underlying the reality of ownership and belonging, as we see in Isa 43:1: "But now, thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine". What is made patent is that these are the Good Shepherd's own sheep; indeed, they will definitively become his personal acquisition by "laying down his life" for them ("all his own", v. 4a). They can never be possessed by anyone else: "What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand", v. 29. THOMAS AQUINAS enlarges the horizon by tying the individual naming of the sheep into eternal awareness: "which shows his knowledge of and familiarity with his sheep, for we call by name those whom we know familiarly (Exo 33:17; Prov 27:23). This applies to Christ according to his

14 BARCLAY, W., *The Gospel of John*, Westminster Press: Philadelphia 1975, 2:56-57.

15 SCHNACKENBURG, *John*, p. 283.

16 *Ibd.*; cf. also BEUTLER-FORTNA, *Shepherd*, p. 25.

present knowledge, but even more so considering eternal predestination, by which he knew them by name from eternity (Psa 147:4; 2 Ti 2:19)”¹⁷.

c.) “He leads them out”, v. 3d: Once the sheep have recognized that voice, they are being drawn after their shepherd who “goes ahead of them” (v. 4b), intensifying their connection with him. St. THOMAS expounds on this passage: “the good shepherd goes before his sheep by the example of a good life; so he says, he goes before them, although this is not what the literal shepherd does, for he follows, as in ‘I took him from following the ewes’ (Psa 77:70). But the good shepherd goes before them by example, ‘not as domineering over those in your charge but being example to the flock’ (1 Pet 5:3). And Christ does go before them: for he was the first to die for the teaching of the truth (Mat 16:24); and he went before all into everlasting life (Mic 2:13)”¹⁸.

d.) “The sheep follow him”, v. 4c: All of these components of rapport between the shepherd and his flock are interconnected and reiterated in this passage of chapter 10 of John’s Gospel; thus, we find also the resembling expression “they follow me”, v. 27c. RAY justly points out that this affiliation is not without broader context, but unfolds against a backdrop of opposition between good and evil shepherds¹⁹. As a matter of fact, five out of seven characters featuring in this text (“thief”, v. 1; “stranger”, v. 5; “robber”, v. 10; “hireling”, v. 12; “wolf”, v. 12) are effectively inimical to the peaceful relation between the shepherd and his flock. Only two characters foster it: “shepherd” and “gatekeeper”. Thus, the shepherd becomes an indispensable father, teacher and guide for those entrusted to him, preventing them from falling into the unforgiving clout of their various enemies.

e.) “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”, vv. 11.14a; “I lay down my life for the sheep”, v. 15b: At this juncture, the liaison reaches an even higher level, namely, that of love expressed in holo-caustic self-sacrifice, in that the shepherds deems the life of his sheep higher than his own: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly”; v. 10b: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand”, v. 28; “What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no

17 THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Chapters 6-12, transl. Larcher, F. – Weisheipl, J.A., The Catholic University of America Press: Washington 2010, p. 187.

18 AQUINAS, *Commentary*, pp. 187f.

19 RAY, S.K., *St. John’s Gospel. A Bible Study Guide and Commentary*, Ignatius Press: San Francisco 2002, pp. 212ff; for an extensive list of references in both the Old Testament and New Testament, the author suggests VANCIL, “Shepherd” pp. 1189-90; he adds KOESTER, *Symbolism* pp. 16-17, for the range of connotations (positive and negative) associated with the image of shepherd.

one can snatch it out of the Father's hand", v. 29. Here is a passage from another commentator that describes it best: "John's shepherd gives his life that his sheep may have eternal life, Joh 10:28. [...] Jesus' development of the key ideas, vv. 11-18, becomes not just a polemic against the Pharisees but a teaching on the whole work achieved by his voluntary death, and a prophecy whose import will be realized in the Church. [...] The climax: 'I am the good shepherd', not just kindly, but noble, splendid (*kalós*), with all the name denotes: self-sacrifice, tenderness, even some sternness; [...] vv. 14-15, Repetition of 'the good shepherd' to stress the mutual, loving knowledge between shepherd and disciples (cf. Joh 15:15), not only like but rooted in the loving mutual knowledge of the Father and his incarnate Son, cf. Mt 11:27. By laying down his life for his sheep, Jesus creates the new flock and gives it increase"²⁰. We could complement this observation by underlining the natural presupposition for this pastoral sacrifice: "As a compassionate and trustworthy shepherd, his mission and quality of leadership are marked by a willingness to die for the sheep"²¹.

What is more, Christ's assertion that He is the "Good" Shepherd is an unequivocal claim to Messiahship: the adjective *καλός* stands not only in contrast to that strong biblical tradition presenting unfaithful leaders of Israel as "bad" shepherds who consign their flock to the wolves (cf. Jer 23:1-8; Eze 34; 22:27; Zep 3:3; Zec 10:2-3; 11:4-17), but it also hints at the shepherd's handsomeness (cf. 1 Kgs 1:3f) and efficaciousness (cf. 1 Sam 9:2). In contrast to the moral goodness ("to be good") as described by ἀγαθός *καλός* means rather to be skilled and "good at something". Thus, this Johannine shepherd is good at loving his flock to the point of laying down his own life for their well-being. Although in the Old Testament no direct link exists between the use of the shepherd imagery and offering up one's life, there are several texts where the self-oblation of the Messiah is possibly present, e.g., Isa 53:12 and Zec 13:7. CHRYSOSTOM subjoins his theological reasoning: "Here he is speaking of his passion, making it clear this would take place for the salvation of the world and that he would go to it freely and willingly"²². GREGORY THE GREAT, on his part, amplifies the theological vision to embrace the actual life of the Church: "He did what he said he would do, he gave his life for his sheep, and he gave his body and blood in the Sacrament to nourish with his flesh the sheep he had redeemed"²³. At this moment we arrive at a crucial feature of that marvelous correlation between the shepherd and his sheep.

20 FULLER-JOHNSTON-KEARNS, *Commentary*, p. 1057.

21 FREEDMAN, *Anchor Bible*, p. 1190.

22 *Hom. in Ioannem*, PG 59,3.

23 *In Evangelia Homiliae*, PL 76, 14, *ad loc.*

f.) “I know my own and my own know me”, v. 14b; “I know them”, v. 27b: Since Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, their knowledge is ultimately about his goodness; thus, they know what is good and who is good! “The respective terms ‘to know’ and ‘to not know’ play, in a particular manner, an important role in the three preceding chapters (cf. 7:27f; 8:14.19; 9:24f.29ff)”²⁴. It is again the *Doctor Angelicus* who connects this knowledge (γινώσκειν) with the concept of predestination: “‘I know my own’, not just with mere knowledge, but with a knowledge joined with approval and love (Rev 1:5). ‘And my own know me’, by predestination, by vocation, and by grace. This is like saying: they love me and obey me (Jer 31:34)”²⁵. MOLONEY calls it “a spiraling play on the use of the verb to know”²⁶. John employ sit to indicate Jesus’ knowledge of the human heart and mind (Jn 1:48; 2:24; 21:17), but also to illustrate the understanding of the early Church (Jn 21:24). Yet most of all, it functions as an equivalent to expressions like “to believe in” (πιστεύειν εἰς), “to receive Him” (λαμβάνειν), “to hear His voice” (ἀκούειν), “to see” (θεωρέω), “to confess” (ομολογεῖν), and “discipleship” (μαθητής). They are all fundamentally directed to the person of Jesus, expressing a personal union of the believer with the divine Revealer.

Furthermore, SCHNACKENBURG rightly opines: “Jesus speaks in positive terms of his inward union with his own [...] and the relationship between them is one of friendship and intimacy. The term γινώσκειν does not denote knowledge of the theoretical-rational kind but, in an Old Testament Semitic sense, a personal bond, a knowing that leads on to communion. [...] thus the phraseology approximates to the reciprocal immanence formulae that express Jesus’ being and abiding in his disciples and theirs in him”²⁷. Those characteristic immanence sayings do flow from, and bring to completion, that all-important hypostatic union in the God-Man. JOHN DAMASCENE summarizes this intimate unification by tersely saying: “Pasce me, Domine, et pasce mecum”²⁸. To which we might add the sapiential logic: “For to know you is complete righteousness, and to know your power is the root of immortality”, Wis 15:3. Lastly, the biblical idiomatics of “knowing” implies nuptial love: thus, the Good Shepherd reveals himself as the covenanted Spouse of his flock.

g.) “Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father”, v. 15a, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again” v. 17a, and “I have received this command from my Father”, v. 18c: This

24 SCHNACKENBURG, *John*, p. 283.

25 AQUINAS, *Commentary*, p. 188.

26 *John* p. 304.

27 *John* p. 297.

28 *E Declaratiōne Fidei*, Cap. 1: PG 95, 419.

is a culminating moment in Christ's self-revelation to the world. What is being unveiled is an even deeper relationship that serves as source and matrix for the Good Shepherd's unreserved dedication to his flock, namely, the Father's *knowledge* of (v. 15a), *love* for (v. 17) and *command* to (v. 18c) his Son. Here we have to take stock of the important circumstance that the author of the Fourth Gospel in v. 6a chooses *παροιμία* (NVg *proverbium*, "figure of speech") over *παραβολή*, (NVg *parábola*, "parable") preferred by the Synoptics: "John's *paroimía* is equivalent to Syn. *parabolé*, but accentuates the enigma, cf. Joh 16:25.29. In LXX either word translates *māshāl*, whose original meaning, 'proverb' (Prv 1:1; cf. 2 Pet 2:22) developed into 'parable', a figurative, symbolic word picture needing interpretation"²⁹. This cryptic aura of the *paroimía* is immediately validated by what follows in v. 6b: "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them". Now, in metaphysical terms we are faced with a classical analogy, rising from the earthly "I know – they know" to the transcendent "like the Father knows me" (v. 15). For the human mind, this analogy is bound to remain mysterious, inscrutable, precisely "paroimianic". Especially in this v. 15, then, we recognize the transposition of the shepherd/sheep relationship unto the Father/Son relationship, an emblematic literary device in this Gospel (cf. 10:38). MOLONEY maintains that "behind the mutuality of the Good Shepherd and his sheep lies the fundamental mutuality between the Father and Jesus: as the Father *knows* Jesus so also does Jesus *know* the Father (v. 15a). The use of "*kathós* (as) [...] *kagó* (and I)" expresses an intimacy between the mutual knowledge of Father and Son. This mutuality can be seen in the self-gift of the Good Shepherd. The sharing of knowledge and oneness between Jesus and the sheep, and between Jesus and the Father, leads logically to the Good Shepherd's laying down his life for the sheep (v. 15b). The expected Davidic shepherd-messiah has been eclipsed by Jesus, the Good Shepherd Messiah who lays down his life for the sheep"³⁰.

Additionally, v. 17 provides us with a most profound glimpse into the heart of God as it stresses the very purpose (*propterea*) of the Father's divine love for his Son: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again". Equally, the Son's self-immolation corresponds to the faithful and obedient execution of his Father's will (έντολή, *mandatum*, "commandment"): "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father", v. 18. Another interpretation broadens that association between paternal love and filial self-offering: "v. 14, 'I know

29 FULLER-JOHNSTON-KEARNS, *Commentary*, p. 1057.

30 *John* p. 304.

my own', more typically Johannine, since it speaks of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep as analogous to the close relationship between Jesus and his Father. This relationship is the basis for the sacrifice that Jesus makes on behalf of the sheep. John 15:12-17 uses the imagery of friendship to describe Jesus' death in the context of such a relationship"³¹.

As a consequence of the above, and at the same time as a certain zenith of theological reasoning, we could ponder the resultant divinization of the sheep: "CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA: When Jesus says, 'I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father', it is equivalent to saying, I shall enter into a close relationship with my sheep, and my sheep shall be brought into a close relationship with me, according to the manner in which the Father is intimate with me, and again I also am intimate with the Father. For God the Father knows his own Son and the fruit of his, i.e., the Father's, substance because he is truly his parent. And again, the Son knows the Father, beholding him as God in truth, since he is begotten of him. In the same way, we also, being brought into a close relationship with God the Father, are called his family and are spoken of as children"³². Mutual knowing, therefore, implies consubstantiality, as if to say, "I know the sameness of nature and the affinity of substance of the Father, being consubstantial with him, and he also knows mine". From here flows the climactic declaration, "So there will be one flock, one shepherd", v. 16c. Naturally, the oneness of Father and Son implies the oneness of Son/Shepherd and flock: "the Father and I are one", v. 30.

CONCLUSION

As this exegetical inquiry draws to a close, it is the suitable time now to draw one main conclusion, as well as several subordinate ones.

The striking insight gleaned from our research is that Joh 10:1-18.27-29 represents the most complete scriptural development concerning the bucolical metaphor: "The use of shepherd imagery is also common in the New Testament although the development in chapter 10 of John is the most complete"³³. This clear-cut statement is seconded by several other current commentaries, e.g.: "The most developed shepherd and flock imagery of the New Testament appears in the Gospel of John (10:1-18.22-29), where Jesus' concern for Israel

31 BROWN, R.E. – FITZMYER, J.A. – MURPHY, R.E., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1990, p. 968.

32 ELOWSKY, J.C., ed., *John 1-10*, ACCS NT IVa, Inter Varsity Press: Downers Grove 2006, p. 349.

33 von WAHLDE, *John*, p. 453.

is contrasted with the feigned care of their present leadership. As a compassionate and trustworthy shepherd, his mission and quality of leadership are marked by a willingness to die for the sheep”³⁴. What is so extraordinary about this final stage of biblical reflection on the shepherd motif is that only in John’s Gospel does the Shepherd relate to his flock with such intensity and passion. His bonding takes on the more profound connotation of divine acquisition and ownership, even of predestination. It is a relationality of leading by teaching, of dying in a holocaustic self-sacrifice, of mutual immanence drawing the sheep into a consubstantial union with the Divine. This Shepherd reveals himself as the unique spouse of the flock, bringing his own hypostatic union to perfection.

Flowing from this principal inference is a number of smaller extrapolations:

First, in the Gospel of John the prophecies concerning the shepherd have finally found their biblical fulfilment: “Kings and priests are also described as shepherds or pastors. [...] Yahweh will take the flock away from them (bad shepherds, Jer, Eze) and he himself will look after their sheep; indeed, a unique shepherd will appear, descended from David, who will graze them and protect them (Eze 34). Jesus presents himself as this shepherd who looks after his sheep, seeks out the strays, cures the crippled and carries the weak on his shoulders (cf. Mt 18:12-14; Lk 15:4-7), thereby fulfilling the ancient prophecies”³⁵. And again, this accomplishment resides in the fact that in an unparalleled fashion John highlights the analogical relationality existing between shepherd/flock and Son/Father. Seen from that vantage point, the Johannine text supplements and surpasses the bond portrayed in Psa 23: while the Psalm has the sheep speak in first person, the author of the Fourth Gospel has Jesus himself define this unique relationship, focusing on the Good Shepherd’s perspective of nuptial, holocaustic and divinizing immanence.

Second, due to this characteristic relationship language, we could read Joh 10:1-18.27-29 as a renewal and fulfilment text of the Exodus Covenant. To expand on this, however, would be a possible topic for another essay.

Finally, the intensity and intimacy of friendship disclosed in this pastoral figure points forward to and prepares for the eschatological texts in the Book of Revelation, where Christ the Lamb-Shepherd calls by name those who are found worthy to be inscribed in his “Book of Life” (cf. Rev 2:17; 3:5).

³⁴ FREEDMAN, *Anchor Bible* p. 1187; cf. also SIMONIS, A.J., *Die Hirtenrede im Johannes-Evangelium. Versuch einer Analyse von Johannes 10,1-18 nach Entstehung, Hintergrund und Inhalt*, *Analecta Biblica* 29: Rome 1967.

³⁵ AA.VV., eds., *The Gospel and Acts of the Apostles*, The Navarre Bible, Scepter Publishers: Princeton, NJ 2000, p. 601.