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## JESUS, THE GREAT SHEPHERD-KING



“**T**he Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters” (Psalm 23:1–2). So begins one of the most beloved psalms and best-known biblical passages mentioning a shepherd. Shepherd imagery is utilized in scripture to depict three important aspects of Jesus’s identity and mission: His roles as Savior, King, and Jehovah, the God of Israel. Of these three, His role as compassionate Savior, devoted to protecting and saving the flock of God, is the aspect of shepherd symbolism that typically comes to mind. Less well known, but equally important, is the royal dimension of the title “Shepherd.” This study highlights both of these facets of shepherd symbolism associated with Jesus, giving extra emphasis to the royal

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one. Jesus's claim to be the Good Shepherd of Israel was also an unequivocal claim to His contemporaries that He was Jehovah, the God of Israel. A brief review of ancient shepherds' duties and of the figurative use of shepherds and sheep to refer to deities and humans in ancient Near Eastern texts, including the Bible, provides a context in which to consider Jesus as the great and divine Shepherd-King.

### SHEPHERDS AND SHEEP IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST<sup>1</sup>

Psalm 23 is not only a beautifully lyric expression of sincere convictions about Jehovah's love and protection; it also provides valuable insight into the work and attributes of real shepherds in ancient Israel. By culling information from this and other biblical passages, it is possible to obtain a good overview of the duties of ancient shepherds. As one scholar has observed: "Shepherding was one of man's earliest occupations. Flocks and herds, always a prominent feature in Palestine and other Near Eastern societies, consisted specifically of cows, sheep, and goats, but could also include horses, asses, and camels; the principal animal, however, owing to size, abundance, and usefulness, was the sheep."<sup>2</sup>

By day, a shepherd's duties consisted of leading his or her flock to food and water and protecting the sheep from wild animals and thieves. At night, shepherds often led their sheep into a cave or a "fold," a minicorral often built against the side of a hill, to keep the sheep from straying and to protect them from danger. Quality shepherds were

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thus dedicated, hardworking, compassionate leaders who provided for and protected and guided their flocks. Keeping a flock together was essential to accomplishing this mission.

### SHEPHERDS AND SHEEP IN SCRIPTURE

Terminology for sheep in the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament) is varied and somewhat overlapping. The words *šō'n* and *śeh* designate “flocks,” which can consist of both sheep and goats, but are often rendered as just “sheep,” and *śeh* many times designates a “lamb” (e.g., Genesis 21:27; 22:7; Leviticus 5:7; Nehemiah 3:1).<sup>3</sup> The word *‘ēder* also refers to a “flock” of sheep and goats but could also be used for a herd of cattle.<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word *kebeś* means “young sheep” and is also often translated “lamb” (e.g., Exodus 12:5; 29:38).<sup>5</sup> Only occasionally attested is *ṭēlā’*, which also means “lamb.”<sup>6</sup> More specifically, *’ayil* is a “ram” (e. g., Isaiah 1:11), *rāḥēl* is a “ewe” (e. g., Isaiah 53:7), and *gēdī* is a “kid,” whether sheep or goat (e. g., Exodus 34:26).<sup>7</sup> Finally, the words *nōqēd* (e. g., Amos 1:1) and, more commonly, *rō’eh* (e. g., Psalm 23:1) translate as “shepherd.”<sup>8</sup>

The usual word for “sheep” in the Greek New Testament is *probaton*.<sup>9</sup> A “flock (of sheep)” is designated by the terms *poimnē* and *poimnion*.<sup>10</sup> The most commonly attested word for “lamb” is *arnon* (it also can indicate “ram” or “sheep”); *amnos* and *arēn* also occur with the same meaning.<sup>11</sup> “Shepherd,” someone who tends or pastures (*poimainō*) the herd, is *poimēn*.<sup>12</sup>

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There are many scripture passages in which real-life sheep and shepherds are mentioned. Some well-known biblical characters had flocks and worked as shepherds for at least part of their lives, including Abraham, Lot, Rachel, Jacob, Moses, and David. Two examples must suffice. Upon arriving in Haran, Jacob spoke with shepherds. “And while he yet spake with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep [šōʾn]: for she kept [rōʿāh, shepherded or pastured] them.” Jacob, wanting to make a good first impression on his cousin Rachel, whose name means “ewe,” “went near, and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth, and watered the flock [šōʾn] of Laban his mother’s brother” (Genesis 29:9–10). In one of several biblical passages mentioning David and sheep, David drew on his shepherding experience to present himself as capable of fighting Goliath, “And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept [rōʿeh, “shepherded”] his father’s sheep [šōʾn], and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb [śeh] out of the flock: . . . and [I] delivered it out of his mouth. . . . Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear” (1 Samuel 17:34–36). Much later in David’s life, the Lord reminded him “I took thee from the sheepcote, from following the sheep [šōʾn], to be ruler over my people, over Israel” (2 Samuel 7:8).

Sheep figure in a number of other biblical passages. For example, Abel “was a keeper [rōʿeh] of sheep [šōʾn]” (Genesis 4:2). At least one lamb [*kebes*] was sacrificed every morning and every evening on the altar in front of the Israelite tabernacle (see Numbers 28:3–4; Exodus 29:39) and later at the temple in Jerusalem. The Bible recounts laws regulating the punishment for stealing or killing someone’s sheep [śeh] and other animals (see Exodus 22).

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The counsel of the wise in ancient Israel was to “be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks [*šōʿn*], and look well to thy herds” (Proverbs 27:23). Centuries later, Jesus referred to real sheep (to make a point about people) when he said, “What man of you, having an hundred sheep [*probaton*], if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?” (Luke 15:4). On another continent, Alma drew upon people’s experience with sheep to support a religious point he was making: “For what shepherd is there among you having many sheep doth not watch over them, that the wolves enter not and devour his flock?” (Alma 5:59).

The commonness of shepherding in the ancient Near East, including ancient Israel, helps explain why shepherds and sheep became such regular and productive metaphors in scripture. Human rulers and God are referred to as shepherds, and people are referred to as sheep. This metaphor is productive because people have needs and challenges similar to sheep. The following sampling of the many pertinent scripture passages demonstrates the use of this imagery.<sup>13</sup>

*Human leaders as shepherds.* Toward the end of Moses’s prophetic ministry, he requested that the Lord “set a man over the congregation [of Israel]. . . . which may lead them out, and which may bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep [*šōʿn*] which have no shepherd [*rōʿeh*]” (Numbers 27:16–17). Joshua was the shepherd-leader Jehovah chose to succeed Moses. Centuries later, through Isaiah the Lord prophesied of the future Persian king Cyrus II (538–530), stating that, “He is my shepherd [*rōʿeh*]” (Isaiah 44:28). After conquering the Babylonian

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empire, Cyrus allowed the Babylonian exiles, including many Jews, to return to their homelands, thus physically gathering some of these scattered Israelite “sheep.” After His Resurrection, Jesus recommissioned Peter in his role as apostolic leader to “Feed my [Jesus’s] lambs [*arnion*]. . . . Feed my sheep [*probaton*]” (John 21:15–17).

*The Lord as shepherd.* Since Latter-day Saints understand that Jehovah and Jesus are the same being,<sup>14</sup> passages in both the Old and New Testaments are cited here to show the range of scriptures in which shepherd imagery is associated with the Lord. One passage usually missed by readers of the King James Version (KJV) is Genesis 48:15: “And he [Jacob] blessed Joseph, and said, God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed me all my life long unto this day.” The Hebrew word rendered “fed” in the KJV is the participle *hārō‘eh*, which literally means “the one who shepherds or pastures, shepherd.” Thus the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates the last phrase in Genesis 48:15 as “the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day.”<sup>15</sup> Genesis 49:24 preserves another reference to Jehovah as a shepherd. In Jacob’s blessing of Joseph, Jehovah is referred to as “the mighty God of Jacob; (from thence is the shepherd [*rō‘eh*], the stone of Israel)” (KJV, Genesis 49:24), or as rendered in the NRSV, “by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel.”<sup>16</sup> “Shepherd” and “Stone/Rock” are titles for Jehovah/Jesus.

Several biblical psalms contain passages praising Jehovah as a shepherd. For example, “The Lord is my shepherd [*rō‘eh*]. . . . He maketh me to lie down in green

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pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters” (Psalm 23:1–2); “[God] made his own people to go forth like sheep [*šōʿn*], and guided them in the wilderness like a flock [*ʿēder*” (Psalm 78:52); and “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock [*ʿēder*” (Psalm 80:1). Similarly, Jehovah, referring to Himself, prophesied through Jeremiah that in the latter-days, “He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd [*rōʿeh*] doth his flock [*ʿēder*” (Jeremiah 31:10).<sup>17</sup>

What is lost in translation is that the expression “the LORD,” in all capitals, renders the Hebrew divine name YHWH, or Jehovah.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, to say with the Psalmist, “The LORD is my shepherd,” is the same as saying “Jehovah is my shepherd,” which can be theologically rendered as “Jesus is my shepherd.” Jesus proclaimed during His mortal ministry that He was “the good shepherd [*poimēn*” (John 10:14), thus making a specific identification: He and Jehovah were the same being, the same Shepherd.

Passages in the New Testament in which Jesus refers to Himself or is referred to by others as a shepherd include Jesus’s reference to Himself as the Judge of the world before whom “shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd [*poimēn*] divideth his sheep [*probaton*] from the goats” (Matthew 25:32); Jesus’s application of the prophecy in Zechariah 13:9 to Himself as He headed to Gethsemane, “For it is written, I will smite the shepherd [*poimēn*], and the sheep [*probaton*] shall be scattered” (Mark 14:27);<sup>19</sup> “I am the good shepherd [*poimēn*” (John 10:14); “our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd [*poimēn*] of the sheep [*probaton*” (Hebrews 13:20); “the Shepherd [*poimēn*] and Bishop of

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your souls” (1 Peter 2:25); “and when the chief Shepherd [*archipoimēn*] shall appear” (1 Peter 5:4). Restoration scripture preserves similar usage, as illustrated by these two passages: “Their Redeemer, and their great and true shepherd” (Helaman 15:13) and “I am the good shepherd, and the stone of Israel” (D&C 50:44; compare Genesis 49:24).

These passages demonstrate how the use of “shepherd” as a title for Jehovah or Jesus was an appropriate expression of the intersection between the roles of a human shepherd—leading, protecting, providing for a flock—and Jesus’s role as Savior of God’s children.

*People as sheep in scripture.* Five of the many passages in the Old Testament in which people are metaphorically referred to as sheep are: “I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep [*šōʾn*] that have not a shepherd [*rōʾeh*]” (1 Kings 22:17); “we are his people, and the sheep [*šōʾn*] of his pasture” (Psalm 100:3); “all we like sheep [*šōʾn*] have gone astray” (Isaiah 53:6); “Israel is a scattered sheep [*šeh*]” (Jeremiah 50:17); and “therefore they went their way as a flock [*šōʾn*], they were troubled, because there was no shepherd [*rōʾeh*]” (Zechariah 10:2).<sup>20</sup>

The authors of the New Testament Gospel accounts report that Jesus often employed sheep imagery in reference to people. The following verses illustrate this: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s [*probaton*] clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matthew 7:15); “And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd [*poimēn*] divideth his sheep [*probaton*] from the goats” (Matthew 25:32); “Fear not, little flock [*poimnion*]” (Luke



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12:32); “He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? . . . Feed my sheep [*probaton*]” (John 21:16). Jesus’s audiences would have surely recognized the Old Testament roots of His figurative use of sheep to represent people.<sup>21</sup>

Other scriptural examples of such use include Paul’s prophecy that “grievous wolves enter in among you [Christians], not sparing the flock [*poimnion*]” (Acts 20:29) and Abinadi’s prophecy that Noah’s priests would be “smitten on every hand, and shall be driven and scattered to and fro, even as a wild flock is driven by wild and ferocious beasts” (Mosiah 17:17).<sup>22</sup>

*The Lord’s flock consists of His covenant people.* In reviewing the many passages of scripture in which sheep and shepherds are employed as metaphors, it is clear that Jesus and His prophets use the symbol of a flock of sheep to designate the Lord’s covenant followers. But it is equally clear that there are multiple flocks of people in the world. All do not choose to be part of the same flock. Thus, for example, “Jesus answered [some Jewish leaders and said] . . . the works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness of me. But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep [*probaton*], as I said unto you” (John 10:25–26; see also John 10:4, 16; Mosiah 26:21). And as Alma explicitly stated, “If ye will not hearken unto the voice of the good shepherd, . . . ye are not the sheep of the good shepherd; . . . the devil is your shepherd, and ye are of his fold” (Alma 5:38–39; see also Alma 5:60; Helaman 5:13). Thus, the relationship between the true Shepherd and His flock represents a covenant relationship between Jesus and those who follow His lead.<sup>23</sup>

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*John 10: Jesus is the door to the sheepfold and the Good Shepherd.* During the last autumn of His life, six months before His crucifixion, Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:10–10:21). The events narrated at the end of John 9, in which Jesus spoke with some Jewish leaders following His healing of a man born blind (9:1–41), continue into John 10.<sup>24</sup> At this point, Jesus told these Jewish leaders one parable that contained two instances of sheep imagery: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd [*poimēn*] of the sheep [*probaton*] . . . and he calleth his own sheep [*probaton*] by name, and leadeth them out . . . and the sheep [*probaton*] follow him: for they know his voice. . . . This parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not . . . Then said Jesus unto them . . . I am the door of the sheep [*probaton*] . . . I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:1–10).<sup>25</sup>

Drawing on the commonplace image of a shepherd with sheep in a sheepfold, Jesus specifically identified Himself as “the door,” the means by which the flock entered the fold for protection. The fold can be metaphorically understood to represent Jesus’s covenant followers on earth and, ultimately, the heavenly fold of the exalted.<sup>26</sup> Jesus thus emphasized the exclusive nature of His role as Redeemer. No one can enter into the Father’s presence except “through” Jesus. There is no other “door.” As He later taught His Apostles, “I am the way, the truth, and

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the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).

Having made this point, Jesus highlighted a second use of sheep imagery in the parable He taught the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem: “I am the good shepherd [*poimēn*]: the good shepherd [*poimēn*] giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd [*poimēn*] . . . seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep [*probaton*], and fleeth: and the wolf . . . scattereth the sheep [*probaton*] . . . I am the good shepherd [*poimēn*], and know my sheep [literally, “know my own”], and am known of mine . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep [*probaton*]. And other sheep [*probaton*] I have, which are not of this fold . . . they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold [*poimnē*], and one shepherd [*poimēn*]” (John 10:11–16).

Jesus’s devotion to His “sheep” as He taught here is a public announcement of His forthcoming sacrifice. His reference to Himself as the protecting and sacrificing “good Shepherd” motivated by compassion for His flock drew upon a shepherd’s real-life duties. This correlation is further strengthened when other biblical passages are considered, such as, “He [Jehovah] shall feed his flock [‘ēder] like a shepherd [*rō‘eh*]: he shall gather the lambs [*tēlā’*] with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young” (Isaiah 40:11).

Jesus, however, was teaching far more on that occasion in Jerusalem than that He was a devoted and compassionate leader of God’s “sheep.” Seeing only this aspect of Jesus’s identity as Shepherd in John 10:11–16 is to miss a powerfully pointed aspect of His message to the Jewish leaders, who would have found nothing offensive

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or inflammatory in Jesus's claims to be a compassionate person who was willing to give up His life. It was the royal and divine dimensions of the symbolism of the title "Shepherd" that was so troublesome to them. The inherent implication that as the good Shepherd He was Jehovah, their God, has already been explicated. The association of the title "shepherd" with kings will now be set forth.

### THE TITLE "SHEPHERD" IN NONBIBLICAL ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TEXTS<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the figurative use of shepherd and sheep in the Bible and other scriptures (reviewed above), such use is also documented in other ancient Near Eastern texts during the two millennia prior to Jesus's mortal ministry. The following passages, extracted from ancient Mesopotamian (Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian)<sup>28</sup> and Egyptian texts, illustrate that the use of the title "shepherd" in reference to deities and kings was an age-old tradition with which people in the ancient Near East were well acquainted.<sup>29</sup>

*Deities.* Marduk, the chief deity of Babylonia, is referred to in the Babylonian "Epic of Creation" (*Enuma elish*) as a "faithful shepherd,"<sup>30</sup> and at one point other deities proclaim, "He [Marduk] shall be the shepherd of the black-headed folk [humans], his creatures."<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, a prayer includes the request, "May he [Marduk] shepherd human beings like sheep!"<sup>32</sup> Shamash, the Babylonian sun god and god of justice, is proclaimed the "shepherd of the lower [mortal] world, guardian of the upper."<sup>33</sup> An

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unnamed Mesopotamian deity is described in one text as “the god of the man, the shepherd who seeks pasture for the man.”<sup>34</sup> The Egyptian god Re is described as a “Valiant shepherd who drives his flock, / Their refuge, made to sustain them.”<sup>35</sup>

Many ancient Near Eastern personal names, including those of Israelites, were compounds that included a divine name.<sup>36</sup> Elijah, for example, means “My-God-is-Jehovah.” Examples of pertinent Mesopotamian personal names include, in translation, “Shamash-is-my-shepherd,” “Adad-is-my-shepherd,” and “My-Lord-is-(my-) Shepherd.”<sup>37</sup>

*Kings.* As earthly representatives of their deities, ancient Near Eastern kings were often described as shepherds of the people they ruled. Examples of royal claims employing shepherd and sheep imagery are cited here in chronological order.

- Gudea (Sumerian *ensi*; 2144–2124 BC) was a “shepherd who leads the people with a good religious hand.”<sup>38</sup>
- Lipit-Ishtar (Isin; 1934–1924 BC): “Lipit-Ishtar, the wise shepherd, whose name has been pronounced by the god Nunamnir.”<sup>39</sup>
- Hammurabi (Babylonia, 1792–1750 BC): “I am Hammurabi, the shepherd, selected by the god Enlil, he who heaps high abundance and plenty . . . [the one] who gathers together the scattered peoples.”<sup>40</sup> “I provided perpetual water for the land . . . [and] gathered the scattered peoples. . . . In abundance and plenty I shepherded them.”<sup>41</sup>

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- Amenhotep III (Egypt; 1411–1374 BC): “the good shepherd, vigilant for all people.”<sup>42</sup>
- Seti I (Egypt; 1313–1292 BC): “the good shepherd, who preserves his soldiers alive.”<sup>43</sup>
- Merneptah (Egypt; 1225–1215 BC): “I am the ruler who shepherds you.”<sup>44</sup>
- Merodach-baladan I (Babylonia; 1171–1159 BC): “[I am] the shepherd who collects the dispersed (people).”<sup>45</sup>
- Adadnirari III (Assyria; 810–783 BC): “unrivalled king, wonderful shepherd . . . whose shepherdship the great gods have made pleasing to the people of Assyria.”<sup>46</sup>
- Esarhaddon (Assyria; 680–669 BC): “the true shepherd, favorite of the great gods.”<sup>47</sup>
- Assurbanipal (Assyria; 668–627 BC): “those peoples which Ashur, Ishtar and the (other) great gods had given to me to be their shepherd and had entrusted into my hands.”<sup>48</sup>
- Nabopolassar (Babylonia; 625–605 BC): “the king of justice, the shepherd called by Marduk.”<sup>49</sup>
- Nebuchadnezzar II (Babylonia; 604–562 BC): “Marduk . . . gave me the shepherdship of the country and the people,” and “the loyal shepherd, the one permanently selected by Marduk.”<sup>50</sup>

In addition to such royal claims, the connection between royalty and shepherd symbolism occurs in ancient Egypt “in the widespread [artistic depictions] of the simple shepherd’s crook as an insignia of kings, princes, and chieftains. The instrument symbolized the ruler’s power

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and eminence, and especially the nature of his rule, the king’s obligation to maintain order and justice [*ma’at*] in the land.”<sup>51</sup>

As is evident from these examples selected from the many that could have been cited, the imagery and title of “shepherd” was commonly used to represent divine and human royal leadership in the ancient Near East for two millennia before Jesus’s ministry. Kings employed it to illustrate their divine sanction to rule, their ability to provide and care for their subjects, and their power to protect their people from enemies. This title “Shepherd” and the attributes it conveys overlap with the shepherd imagery preserved in the Bible and must be considered in connection with John 10. Jesus claimed to be not only the door of the sheepfold but the Good Shepherd Himself. Understood in the cultural context of the ancient Near East, there was a *royal* dimension to Jesus’s claim. He thus employed the image of shepherd to communicate His identity as the devoted and compassionate Savior *and* His identity as a King. This assertion is further borne out by prophecy in the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Ezekiel.

### EZEKIEL 34 AND 37: THE MESSIANIC SHEPHERD-KING

The first half of the book of Ezekiel contains a series of prophecies of judgment and destruction against the Israelites in the kingdom of Judah (in its last gasp of existence before 586 BC) and against neighboring nations. This is followed by a series of prophecies about the future

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restoration of the house of Israel, including these statements in chapter 34 in which shepherds and sheep symbolize the leaders and people of Israel:

Woe be to the shepherds [*rō'eh*] of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds [*rō'eh*] feed [*yir'û*, shepherd or pasture] the flocks [*šō'n*]? . . .

They [the people/"sheep"] were scattered, because there is no shepherd [*rō'eh*]: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered.

My sheep [*šō'n*] wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my flock [*šō'n*] was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them. . . .

As a shepherd [*rō'eh*] seeketh out his flock [*'ēder*] . . . will I [Jehovah] seek out my sheep [*šō'n*]. . . .

I will feed [*'er'eh*, shepherd or pasture] them in a good pasture. . . . and I will cause them to lie down. . . .

And they shall no more be a prey. . . .

And I will set up one shepherd [*rō'eh*] over them, and he shall feed [*rā'āh*, shepherd or pasture] them, even my servant David; he shall feed [*yir'eh*, shepherd or pasture] them, and he shall be their shepherd [*rō'eh*]. . . .

My servant David a prince among them. . . .

Ye my flock [*šō'n*], the flock [*šō'n*] of my pasture, are men, and I am your God, saith the Lord God. (Ezekiel 34:2, 5-6, 12, 14, 22-24, 31)<sup>52</sup>

This notion of a royal servant, "David," who will gather and shepherd the lost sheep of Israel is prophesied again a few chapters later, in Ezekiel 37: "And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one



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shepherd [*rō‘eh*]” (v. 24). Given that King David died about four centuries before Ezekiel prophesied, to whom do these prophecies of a future Davidic Shepherd-King refer? Most Christians, and certainly Latter-day Saints, accept these as messianic prophecies about the future deliverer of Israel, of whom the shepherd-turned-king David was a tragically flawed “type.” They foretell that Jesus, as the “son [or descendant] of David,” will gather the flock of covenant Israel and reign with justice as King of kings. These prophecies will be most fully realized during the Millennium, when the kingdom of God is fully established on this earth.<sup>53</sup>

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The passages reviewed above abundantly illustrate that shepherd symbolism was inextricably associated with ancient Near Eastern kings and their claims about themselves. This evidence is consistently represented throughout many centuries, and is contained in some important messianic prophecies in Israelite scripture (see Ezekiel 34; 37).

So Jesus’s proclamation to Jewish leaders in Jerusalem that He was the Good Shepherd relayed three important aspects of His identity. He *was* claiming to be a devoted and compassionate leader who was willing to sacrifice His life for His sheep. He was *also* claiming to be a king, a *royal* shepherd. In this context, Jesus was specifically claiming to be the “son of David,” the royal Messiah come in fulfillment of prophecy. Furthermore, His use of shepherd

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imagery conveyed that He was Jehovah, their God, come in the flesh.

Both the widely accepted royal nature of the title “shepherd” and the specific messianic passages in Ezekiel must have come quickly and powerfully to the minds of those who heard Jesus’s proclamation in Jerusalem. The message of the imagery He employed in relation to Himself was not lost on His audience. If we miss the royal and divine dimensions of the symbolism in Jesus’s teaching on that occasion, we miss the full and clear measure of His self-declaration. Referring to Himself as the Good Shepherd of Israel was an open announcement by Jesus that He was Jehovah, the Messiah, the King of Israel. This helps explain why “many of them said, he hath a devil, and is mad” (John 10:20), and why He was eventually charged with blasphemy, since most Jews at that time did not believe Jehovah would come in the flesh, did not understand that their Messiah and Jehovah were the same being, and did not accept Jesus’s claims, implicit and explicit, that He was their divine and royal Messiah.<sup>54</sup>

## CONCLUSION

A wonderfully illustrative passage in Revelation 7 provides a fitting conclusion to this study. The Apostle John recounts that as he gazed in vision upon the heavenly throne room he saw “a great multitude . . . of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, [that] stood before the throne, and before the Lamb [*arnion*], clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb [*arnion*]” (Revelation

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7:9–10). John learned the identification of these people from the angelic messenger who was conducting him through this vision. Notice how the imagery reviewed above—a Shepherd and His “sheep”—comes together to dramatically represent King Jesus and His redeeming accomplishment. John’s escort said to him, “These are they who have . . . washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb [*arnion*] . . . they will hunger no more, and thirst no more . . . for the Lamb [*arnion*] at the center of the throne will be their shepherd [*poimainō*], and he will guide them to springs of the water of life” (NRSV, Revelation 7:13–17).<sup>55</sup>

From prophetic statements about Jehovah in the Old Testament to Jesus’s teachings about Himself during His mortal ministry, from the additional witness of Restoration scripture to John’s apocalyptic vision, Jehovah/Jesus is consistently represented as the great Shepherd-King who gathers, leads, provides, protects, and saves. He is worthy of all the praise His sanctified flock can render.<sup>56</sup>

## NOTES

1. The Near East is essentially the same region more popularly known today as the Middle East.
2. Jack W. Vancil, “Sheep, Shepherd,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:1187; hereafter *ABD*.
3. See *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, rev. Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson (Brill: New York, 1994–2000), 992–93,

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and 1310–11; hereafter *HALOT*. The masculine singular forms of all Hebrew words are cited in the body of the text because they are the lexical forms. Other grammatical forms are attested. *HALOT* provides further examples. This is not the place to discuss the impact of context on the use of these various terms, nor how the biblical text often augments the use of particular terms to help clarify the intended meaning. Further comments can be found under the pertinent entries in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974–).

4. See *HALOT*, 793.
5. See *HALOT*, 460. See also the variant *kešeb* (*HALOT*, 501). The KJV translation of Exodus 12:5 provides one illustration of the overlapping interplay between the use of these different terms: “Your lamb [*šeh*] shall be without blemish, a male of the first year: ye shall take it out from the sheep [*kēbāšim*], or from the goats.”
6. See *HALOT*, 375.
7. See *HALOT*, 40, 1216, and 178.
8. See *HALOT*, 719–20; 1260–62. The word *rō‘eh* is a participle, derived from the verb *r‘h*, “to pasture” (*HALOT*, 1258–60).
9. The oldest extant manuscripts of the New Testament are in Greek, which was the language in which most, if not all, of the New Testament writings were originally composed.

For information on the Greek terms cited herein and their occurrence in the New Testament, see *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and

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Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990–1993); hereafter *EDNT*. For the Greek word *probaton*, see *EDNT*, 3:152–53.

10. See *EDNT*, 3:127–28.
11. See *EDNT*, 1:70–72.
12. See *EDNT*, 3:126–27.
13. Above and in the following comments only a few examples are given from the many scripture passages that could be cited, so as not to belabor the obvious. For further citations, see the Topical Guide under “Sheep,” “Shepherd,” and “Flock,” and the summary accounts on the pertinent entries in *ABD* and *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).
14. This doctrinal perspective is well attested in both canonical scripture and latter-day prophetic statements. See, for example, the LDS Guide to the Scriptures ([www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org)), s. v., “Jehovah” and “Jehovah is Christ.”
15. Other modern English translations, such as the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) and the New International Version (NIV) render this phrase the same (“the God who has been my shepherd”) as in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). See note “c” for Genesis 48:15 in the LDS edition of the KJV for a similar explanation of the Hebrew.
16. The KJV renders the phrase preserved in the Masoretic Text (the traditional Hebrew text) literally, even though it is hard to understand. Because this phrase is quite challenging, the NRSV translators chose to ignore the traditional vocalization. Their rendition of the Hebrew word “there” (KJV, “thence”) as “name” is based on a

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revocalization of the consonants in the Masoretic Text, influenced by the reading in the Syriac version of this verse. However, Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 343, accepts the reading in the Masoretic Text, “there” (or “from there”) as the best option, suggesting that Jacob “may have pointed heavenward” as he said this.

17. See also Isaiah 40:11 and Ezekiel 34:12, both of which are cited below.
18. For a discussion of this practice, see Dana M. Pike, “Biblical Hebrew Words You Already Know, and Why They are Important,” *Religious Educator* 7, no. 3 (2006): 106–9.
19. For a non-LDS discussion of this passage and its relation to the important but challenging prophecy in Zechariah 13:7–9, see F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 100–14. Bruce’s remarks are in a chapter he entitled “The Shepherd King,” which I thank John W. Welch for sharing with me. The similarity between Bruce’s chapter and the title of this study is due to the topic under examination, since I did not see Bruce’s publication until after much of this paper was written and its title had been selected. See also Clay Alan Ham, *The Coming King and the Rejected Shepherd: Matthew’s Reading of Zechariah’s Messianic Hope* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005).
20. Some other passages illustrating such usage include Numbers 27:17; 2 Samuel 24:17; Psalms 44:11, 12; 74:1; 119:176; Jeremiah 50:6, 17; and Micah 2:12.
21. Some other passages illustrating such usage include Matthew 9:36; 10:6, 16; and 15:24.

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22. Some other passages illustrating such usage include Isaiah 63:11; 1 Peter 5:2, 3; Alma 5:60; Helaman 5:13; 3 Nephi 15:21, 24; 18:31; and D&C 6:34.
23. Victor L. Ludlow, *Principles and Practices of the Restored Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 203, expressed it the other way around when he observed that “being the Good Shepherd and the appointed caretaker of God’s children on earth, Christ is the administrator of God’s covenants.”
24. The chapter indication and summary at the beginning of John 10 interrupt the flow of the narrative. The “you” in John 10:1 links back to “them,” the Jewish leaders (specifically Pharisees) to whom Jesus was speaking in John 9:40–41.
25. This is one of a few biblical passages that indicate that shepherds in ancient Israel *led* their flocks, rather than driving their flocks from behind (see also Psalms 23:2; contrast 2 Samuel 7:8). Many modern shepherds in the Middle East still practice this type of shepherding.
26. For further comment on this concept, see Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary, Volume 1, The Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 1:484.
27. The following passages, for the most part, are cited from standard collections of ancient Near Eastern texts in translation.
28. “Mesopotamia” is a term first used by the Greeks to designate the region now occupied by Iraq. The two major nations in Mesopotamia anciently were Assyria and Babylonia. Sumer was located in southern Mesopotamia.

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29. As with the scriptures, only a few of the many examples that could be cited are included here. I have not included the Sumerian, Akkadian, or Egyptian terms in brackets, since this language is less well-known than Hebrew and Greek. Suffice it to say that Akkadian *rē'û*, “shepherd,” is cognate with Hebrew *rō'eh*.
30. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1969), 71; hereafter *ANET*.
31. *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William H. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (New York: Brill, 1997–2002), 1:402 (text 1.112); hereafter *COS*.
32. *COS*, 1:469 (text 1.138).
33. *ANET*, 388.
34. Quoted in *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 14/R. ed. Robert D. Biggs, and others (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1999), 309; hereafter *CAD*.
35. *COS*, 1:44 (text 1.27).
36. These are known as theophoric names. For a discussion of this type of ancient name, see Dana M. Pike, “Names, Theophoric,” *ADB*, 4:1018–19.
37. Quoted in *CAD*, 14:310. Such personal names, compounded with “shepherd” and the names of various deities are attested all over the ancient Near East. For references to such, see the citations of comparative evidence in *HALOT*, 1258–59.
38. As cited by Vancil, “Sheep, Shepherd,” *ABD*, 5:1187.
39. *COS*, 2:411 (text 2.154).
40. *COS*, 2:336 (text 2.131).
41. *COS*, 2:257 (text 2.107B).
42. Quoted in *ABD*, 5:1189.



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43. Quoted in *ABD*, 5:1189.
44. Quoted in *ABD*, 5:1189.
45. Quoted in *CAD*, 14:311.
46. *COS*, 2:275 (text 2.114E).
47. *ANET*, 289.
48. *ANET*, 298. See also, *COS*, 1:473: “May Shamash, king of heaven and earth, raise you [Assurbanipal] to shepherdship over the four regions!”
49. *COS*, 2:307. See also, “The shepherd who pleases Papnunanki” (*COS*, 2:308).
50. Both quotations from *COS*, 2:309.
51. *ABD*, 5:1188. See representative examples in James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pictures 379, 383, 545, 557 (the god Osiris).
52. For another passage in which delinquent shepherd-leaders are condemned, see Zechariah 11:15–17.
53. This is evident from the paradise-like content of the following verses (24–28). See also the comments of Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1982), 606–8. For a new study of this topic, by a non-Latter-day Saint, see Youngs. Chae, *Jesus as the Eschatological Divinic Shepherd: Studies in the Old Testament, Second Temple Judaism, and in the Gospel of Matthew* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).
54. Furthermore, most Jews believed their Messiah would be a human endowed with great powers, not the Son of God in the flesh.

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55. This last quotation, Revelation 7:17, was taken from the NRSV. Compare the KJV, “For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them.” Somewhat similarly to the situation in Genesis 48:15 (noted above), the KJV translators here rendered the Greek verb *poimanei* (from *poimaiño*, “to herd or shepherd”) in Revelation 7:17 as the vague “feed,” while many modern English translations, including the NRSV and the NIV, render it with more focus, but less grammatical accuracy, as “their shepherd.”
56. I thank my research assistants Adam Anderson and Justin Soderquist for their help gathering source material for this article (much more than is included here!).