

Is the Concept of Ποιμήν in Jn 10 relevant today in the Church?

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Introduction

In the Church today it is common to hear Church ministry or works associated with pastoral images. Furthermore, those who perform these works in the Church are attributed with pastoral titles like pastor or shepherd (ποιμήν). The present usage of the pastoral image for Church leaders and for the ministry of the Church has its roots not only in the Bible but far beyond it in the extra - biblical usage in the Middle East. It is the aim of this work to trace the usage of the pastoral image “Shepherd” in the extra - biblical world, in the Bible, in a special way in Jn 10 and its relevance today for the Church. In Jn 10 Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who takes care of his sheep and gives his life for the sheep. The fact that Jesus is the Good Shepherd has its basis in his relationship to the Father that he is the Son of God and the Messiah. Functions and roles of Jesus as the Shepherd have been entrusted to the Church (Jn 21,15-17). Thus this work intends to show how the concept of “Shepherd” is relevant for the Church today and how the Church should organize and continue the pastoral works entrusted to her.

1. Metaphorical Usage of the Term Ποιμήν

The functions of the shepherd are reflected both in the Bible and in extra - biblical sources. The shepherd’s function was to lead the flocks of the sheep to the pasture and to the refreshing waters (Ps 23,2). Because shepherds were responsible to locate food and water for their flocks, they were required to go far from their homes and endured numerous hardships (Gen 31,40; Isa 38,12; Song 1,8).¹ During pasture the sheep were exposed to dangers of being attacked by wild animals like lions, bears and wolves (1 Sam 12, 24) or being stolen by thieves or robbers (Jn 10,1.9.10). So it was the task of the shepherd to make sure that the sheep were safe from these external dangers. The shepherd was also responsible to find any sheep that was missing (Ezek 34,11-12; Mt 18,11-14). The shepherd’s particular attention was also required for the expectant ewes, newborn lambs, and sick animals or lame ones which he would carry in his bosom. At night the shepherd kept watch, sometimes out in the open and sometimes in his tent (Isa 38,12) or in a special stone tower erected for watch purposes (Gen 35,21).² In this sense the shepherds were providers, guides, protectors and constant companions of the sheep which they took care of. They were also figures of authority and leadership to the animals which were under their care.

Above we have seen the roles the shepherd played for his sheep. In the light of this context, an important question must be asked: What was it that made the image of the shepherd

become such a widely-used metaphor for both human rulers and gods in the Bible and in extra-biblical world? The reasons depend very much on the nature of the work of the shepherd and the nature of the animals which he took care of.

Conditions of shepherding in ancient Palestine and Mesopotamia provide the foundation for figurative references. In ancient time sheep had no fences in which they were left to fend for themselves. They completely depended on shepherds for protection, guidance, grazing, watering, shelter and tending to injuries.³ Sheep could not survive long without a shepherd. It is in that connection that the shepherd came to be a key element in the pastoral complex of symbolism in the Bible and in the extra - biblical world. Shepherding is the occupation which required courage, endurance and a great amount of practical wisdom in order to handle the flock in a proper way. In Mesopotamia and Assyria the image of the shepherd came to be used for gods.⁴ In Egypt around 20th B.C.E gods were also referred to as good shepherds who took care of human beings.⁵ Ancient writers made use of shepherd imagery also for kings and princes. This is because kings were expected to behave and do to their subjects what shepherds do to their sheep. According to the Sumerians' list of kings, some kings were shepherds even before they became kings. The famous kings, for example, Etana and Lugalbanda had begun as shepherds even before their kingship.⁶ This reminds us of Moses (Ex 3,1) and David (1Sam16,11) who were shepherds even before they became famous leaders of their people.

2. Biblical Usage of the Term Ποιμήν

Sheep and goats are the most important animals that are associated with the shepherd in the biblical world.⁷ Even though both sheep and goats are mentioned in the Bible, sheep are the most frequently mentioned, with nearly four hundred references if we include those referring to the flock. While the figure of the sheep receives that number of references, the figure of the shepherd receives approximately one hundred references. The prominence of these two figures comes from the importance of sheep to the nomadic and agricultural life of the Hebrews to the extent that the qualities of sheep and shepherds gradually became adequate sources of metaphor for spiritual realities. Apart from the economic context of shepherds in Israel, the shepherd started to become - because of the nature of his work and the role he fulfilled to his sheep - an idealized figure of simple virtue, spiritual and exemplary leadership and moral innocence (Gen 4,2-4).⁸

2.1. Old Testament

In keeping with the shepherd's role as leader and provider, Old Testament authors use the image of the shepherd and of the sheep for civil and religious leaders respectively. A Psalmist, for example, describes God leading his people "like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Ps 77,21). Joshua is also described as one who will lead Israel, so that Israel would not be "like sheep without a shepherd" (Num 27,17). David and judges are also called shepherds of their people (2 Sam 5,1-2; 2 Sam 7,7). It has also been common use in the Old Testament for false leaders to be depicted as bad shepherds. Ezek 34,1-10 for example, rebukes selfish and unreliable shepherds who do not preserve and take care of their people. As a result God promises to send a shepherd from the line of David who will genuinely take care of his people (Ezek 34,23). Other prophets criticise political and religious leaders for their misbehaviour and mismanagement of their tasks (Jer 2,8; 10,21; 50,6). The consequence of such behaviour is the final destruction of these shepherds (Jer 25,34-38; Zech 10,2-3; 11,15-17) and being replaced by shepherds of God's own choice (Jer 3,15; 23,1-3).

The Old Testament uses also the image of the shepherd for God. In many passages God is depicted as a shepherd who guides (Ps 77,20; 80,1), protects (Ps 78,52), saves (Ezek 34,22), gathers (Jer 31,10; Ezek 34,12), leads out into pasture (Jer 50,19; Mic 2,12-13). Ps 23 pictures God as a shepherd with a threefold responsibility, namely as one who cares, guides and protects.

2.2. New Testament

In the New Testament there is only one literary reference to shepherds and this is found in Lk 2,8-20. The rest of references appear in parables, figures of speech and allegories and they mainly refer to Jesus (Cf. Mt 2,6; 15,24; 18,12-14; 25,32-33; Lk 15,3-7; Jn 10,1-29; Hb 13,20; 1Pet 2,25; 5,4) and partly to the disciples of Jesus (Mt 10,6; Eph 4,11). When the New Testament refers to the shepherd be it in a parable, figure of speech or in an allegory, it mainly elaborates the duties, virtues, concern, responsibilities and watchfulness of Jesus as the shepherd towards his sheep.

3. The Concept of Ποιμήν in Jn 10

Jn 10 can be divided into two main parts, namely vv. 1-21 and vv. 22-42. In the first part Jesus identifies himself as the shepherd and the gate of the sheep. He explains his roles to the sheep as the shepherd and the gate. The passage is a long monologue discourse interrupted by a commentary of the narrator in 10,6 and concluded by the report of the narrator on the schism which emerges after Jesus' words. The discourse may have been occasioned by the encounter between Jesus, the blind man and the Pharisees in chapter 9.

The second part (vv. 22-42) is a mixture of the narrator's report, the Jews' questions, Jesus' answers and the Jews' reactions on Jesus' answers. This work, however, will only treat some verses in the first part which are directly connected with the concept of the shepherd.

The Shepherd enters through the Gate, Jn 10,1-3

These verses draw a sharp distinction between the shepherd and the thief/robber. The thief and the robber gain access to the sheepfold not by the gate but illegally. The shepherd enters lawfully and as usual by the gate. Since the gatekeeper knows the shepherd as the lawful owner of the sheep he opens the gate for him. The way one enters the sheepfold identifies whether one is a shepherd or not. Here the main emphasis lies on the gate because the gate serves as a symbol for the rightful access of the shepherd to his sheep.⁹ The fact that the shepherd calls his sheep by name and they hear his voice and leads them out signifies obedience (Cf. also Jn 1,37; 5,25.28; 10,16.27; 18,37)¹⁰ and a bond of trust and good relationship between the shepherd and the sheep.

The Good Shepherd Lays down his Life for the Sheep, Jn 10,11-13

Jesus identifies himself with the good shepherd. The goodness of Jesus as the shepherd is seen in his relationship or his role to his sheep. He is the good shepherd because he is so preoccupied with the sheep that he lays down his life for them. 'Laying down his life' does not merely mean the shepherd puts his life at risk or stake but much more, it shows the readiness to give his life for others.¹¹ Giving life for the sheep points to the future death on the cross (11,50). The death of Jesus for the sheep is a proof of his goodness as a shepherd.

Laying down his life for the sheep in this part is closely related to Jn 15,13 whereby one is prepared to die for his friends as a sign of love for them.¹²

The goodness of Jesus as the shepherd in Jn 10,11 is contrasted with the hired man in Jn 10, 12 who takes care of the sheep on the basis of money and not on the grounds of personal relationship with the sheep. When the hired man sees the wolf he runs away and the wolf snatches and scatters the sheep. He runs away because he does not care about the well being of the sheep. The question is, how can we interpret this scene of the hired man and the wolf? Theobald uses the idea of Schenke who identifies the hired men with heretics described in 1 Jn and sees in them the apostate Christian leaders and other Christian figures that cause division and mislead the Johannine community.¹³ In other New Testament writings the wolf stands for heretics. Jesus, for example, warns against false prophets saying, “Beware of false prophets who come to you disguised as sheep but underneath are ravenous wolves” (Mt 7,15; Cf. also 10,16). Paul also warns Ephesians against the wolves that would come after him (Acts 20,29). Taking into consideration the interpretation of Schenke and the way the New Testament describes the wolves as heretics or false prophets, we may affirm that the figures of the hired man and the wolf are not for the welfare of the sheep whereby Jesus is for the sheep to the extent of giving his life for them for their well being.

The association of death with being a shepherd is present in other parts of the New Testament and in other sayings attributed to Jesus (Hb 13,20; Mk 14,27). The parable of the Lost Sheep in the Synoptic Gospels shows the painstaking work which a shepherd does in order to get back his lost sheep (Lk 15,1-7; Mt 18,12-14); but John goes further: to the risk of death of the shepherd.

The Good Shepherd's Knowledge of his Sheep, Jn 10,14-15

The idea of the good shepherd emerges here again but this time associated with the mutual knowledge between the shepherd and the sheep, and between the shepherd and the Father and the theme of laying down his life for the sheep. Jesus is the good shepherd because there is mutual knowledge between the shepherd and the sheep and the shepherd is ready to offer his life for the sheep. This knowledge is already presupposed in Jn10,3 when the shepherd calls his sheep by their name, they hear his voice and follow him because they know his voice. The key word here is knowledge. The Greek tradition considers knowledge as analogous to seeing, with a view of grasping the nature of an object. On the other hand, in the Hebrew tradition knowledge means experiencing something. In the religious arena, for the Greeks, knowledge of God is the contemplation of the divine reality; while for the Hebrew, knowledge of God means coming into a relationship with him.¹⁴ If knowledge of God according to the Hebrew tradition means relationship, that means it involves the reciprocal knowledge between the two parts. The question to be answered is, on which background is Jn 10,14-15 based? Most probably, the verses date back to the Hebrew understanding of the knowledge of God. We have a reason to justify our position. God's intimate knowledge of his people is proclaimed in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (Am 3,1-2; Nah 1,7; 1Cor 8,3; Gal 4,9; 2Tim 2,19). Taking into account that the activity of Jesus to his followers is always patterned on the activity of the Father to him (Jn 8,28-29; 15,9-10), then it is just a logical consequence to say that the way Jesus knows his disciples is like Jesus and the Father know each other.¹⁵ The Father - Son relationship is not mentioned for its own sake but for the sake of Jesus - 'his own' relationship. The intimate knowledge between Jesus and his own is based upon the intimacy between the Father and the Son and that this is a model intimacy.¹⁶

The fact that the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (Jn 10,15) is the utmost expression of the goodness of the shepherd (Jn 10,14).¹⁷ Since we have said that the knowledge between the Father and Jesus and between Jesus and his own implies also close communion between them, then laying down life for his own here may be intended to show the highest point of communion between the sheep and Jesus up to the extent of giving his life for them.

One Shepherd, One Flock Jn 10,16

Jesus says that he has other sheep which are not yet in his fold. These too must come to his fold and they will hear his voice and be one flock and under one shepherd. This verse sheds more light and makes the whole metaphor more concrete in the sense that it gives way to interpret Jn 1-3 that the sheep which are meant here are most probably the Jews who already believe in Jesus and follow him. Jesus has already established a relationship with them, for the salvation comes first to the Jews (Jn 4,22) and from there it proceeds to other nations (Jn 4,42).

The use of ἄλλα πρόβατα makes us aware that there are other sheep apart from those which are mentioned in Jn 1-3. This ἄλλα πρόβατα must also be brought into the flock of Jesus. But who are these other sheep and how will Jesus bring them into his flock? Other sheep are most probably the gentiles (Jn 4,42). The second question, as to how does Jesus bring ἄλλα πρόβατα into his flock, can be answered with the fact that the mission to the gentiles is the mission of Jesus, it is the continuation of his mission to Israel's flock. At the same time the mission of Jesus is also the mission of the disciples, just as the Father sent him so he sends his disciples to do the same mission (Jn 20,21). In Jn 21,15-17 Jesus entrusts to Peter the role which basically belongs to him, the role of taking care of the sheep. The Synoptic Gospels also portray Jesus to be preoccupied with the mission to the gentiles (Mt 28,18-20; Mk 16,20).¹⁸ Hearing Jesus' voice and the use of the future (γίνομαι) that there will be one flock and one shepherd may be also understood in the light of what Luke reports that Jesus tells his disciples, "Anyone who listens to you listens to me" (Lk 10,16). So the activity of the disciples to the gentiles is the activity of Jesus. It is in the light of paschal event that Jesus will bring the other sheep into his fold. This is done through laying down his life for the people (Jn 11,50-52; 3,14-17; 6,51; 12,20.24.31-32). Bringing other sheep into the fold is the will of the Father (Jn 6,38) and they will belong to him just as the sheep in Jn 10, 1-3 belong to him and it is his duty to take care of them all and bring them into unity with him and with one another.

4. ποιμήν in Jn 10 and the Commission to be Ποιμήν in Jn 21,15-17

The image of the ποιμήν comes directly in Jn 10 as Jesus addresses himself to be ὁ ποιμήν ὁ καλός (Cf. Jn 10,11). In Jn 21,15-17 there is no direct image of the shepherd but the commission of Jesus to Peter: "Look after my sheep". This commission elevates Peter to the status of a shepherd. The role which Peter has to do is the role of the shepherd. So we affirm that in Jn 21,15-17 the risen Jesus commissions Peter to carry out the duties of a shepherd and so he is shepherd.

If Peter in Jn 21,15-17 is commissioned to perform the role of the shepherd then this brings these verses into connection with Jn 10. Peter has to carry upon himself and continue Jesus' functions and care for the sheep.¹⁹ In other words all qualities and roles of Jesus as the shepherd in Jn 10 are taken by Peter. The statement of Jesus: "And I have other sheep which are not in this fold; and I must bring them also, and they will hear my voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (Jn 10,16) gets more meaning in Jn 21,15-17. Jesus has other

sheep which must be brought into his fold. But this work will be further carried out by Peter (and of course other disciples) after Easter event. The commission to feed and look after the sheep is nothing other than ruling, guiding, protecting them before the wolf, maintaining the unity of the sheep (Jn 10,16) and leading them to life. The possibility of Peter to fulfill his role as a shepherd is love. This is why Jesus asks him three times whether he loves him. Beasley-Murray goes further when he sees God as a principal shepherd as he writes: “God is Shepherd; he delegates authority to rule; as in 20,21 Jesus sends his disciples in the manner that he was sent, so here he, as the model Shepherd, makes Peter the same. The ideal of 10,16 is carried over into chapter 21: one sheep herd, one shepherd.”²⁰

5. The Relevance of the Concept Ποιμήν Today in the Church

The qualities which Jesus reveals in Jn 10 as a shepherd and the commission which he gives to Peter in Jn 21,15-17 portrays the truth that Peter has to take the role of Jesus of taking care of the sheep in the way Jesus does. Influenced by the biblical pastoral image of Jesus and the pastoral image of Peter, the early Church theologians and Church fathers applied the pastoral image to the Bishop of Rome. Cyprian of Carthage and Tertullian go a step forward by holding that the pastoral image is not only limited to the Bishop of Rome but to all bishops in their respective Churches.²¹ I would call this way of attributing the pastoral image to the Bishop of Rome and to all bishops as a hierarchical tendency. As leaders of the Church they represent Jesus the shepherd and they carry forward the commission given to Peter “take care of my sheep” the commission which is based on love (Jn 21,15-17).

The relevance of the pastoral image is further seen today in the Church in both, namely, hierarchical tendency and in a more extended way. It is common today to hear that the Popes make pastoral visits and write some encyclicals with pastoral titles, e.g., *Pascendi domini gregis* (Pius X) or *Pastores dabo vobis* (John Paul II) or bishops write pastoral letters, or priests are attributed with the title pastor, or lay people attributed with the titles like pastoral assistant or pastoral referent.²² The idea which is derived here is that these people play the role of representatives. They play the role of the shepherd which is to lead, protect, take care, nourish and give life to people entrusted under their care.

Just as Stenger writes that there are many people today who are shepherds but many do not accept it because being a shepherd is more than an occupation or profession,²³ it is in the same way I see that leaders of the Church and all Christians are shepherds. From the Christian theological point of view that any baptized person shares the offices of Jesus of teaching, guiding and sanctifying, I may rightly also say that any Christian is called to share the role of Jesus as the good shepherd in Jn 10.

Amid many challenges and problems facing the Church, it is the duty of any Christian as a shepherd according to his/her state of life to engage actively in the pastoral works of the Church. St. Boniface writing about the responsibility of each Christian to take care of the Church and of others even in the time of tribulations, says: “Die Kirche fährt über das Meer dieser Welt wie ein großes Schiff und wird von den Wogen - das sind dei Anfechtungen dieses Lebens – hin und her geworfen. Wir dürfen das Schiff nicht verlassen, wir müssen es lenken”.²⁴ Each Church leader and each Christian as a shepherd is called to actively take care of others and thus fulfilling his/her call to share the shepherdness of Jesus.

Conclusion

The image of Jesus as the shepherd of the sheep in Jn 10 shows his role of leading, caring, feeding, protecting, saving and uniting. Jesus as a shepherd sets an example for the Church and its members. The Church and her shepherds are challenged to be at the service of humanity after the example of Jesus the good shepherd. What Jesus does for the sheep in Jn 10 is what the Church is called to do for humanity. This service is not possible without love. That is why before Jesus commissions Peter to take care of his sheep he asks him three times whether he loves him. The manner, in which Peter is commissioned to take care of Jesus' sheep, is in the same manner we are commissioned today. The Church's mission and the mission of each Christian should be based on love. Without love Christian pastoral mission is handicapped. It is on the basis of this love that Jesus as the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (Jn 10,11-13), he knows them (Jn 10,14-15) and he wants that they become one flock (Jn 10,16). Every Christian leader and every Christian is called to learn from Jesus, the main shepherd.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Cf. Mattingly L. G., "Shepherd", in: Freedman N. D., (ed.), Dictionary of the Bible, Michigan 2000, 1208.
- ² Cf. Mattingly L. G., "Shepherd", in: Friedman N. D., 1208.
- ³ Cf. Ryken L., "Shepherd", in: Wilhoit C. J., Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, Illinois 1998, 782.
- ⁴ Cf. Bauer B. J., „Hirt“, in: Marböck J., Woschitz M. K., (Hg.), Bibeltheologisches Wörterbuch, Köln 1994, 311.
- ⁵ Cf. Nitz G., „Hirt, Guter Hirt“, in: Kasper W., Baumgartner K., (Hg.), Lexikon Für Theologie und Kirche (Band 5), Freiburg 1996, 155.
- ⁶ Cf. Toorn V. K., "Shepherd", in: Brill J.E., Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (DDD), Köln 1995, 1457.
- ⁷ Cf. Mattingly L. G., "Shepherd", in: Friedman N. D., 1208.
- ⁸ Cf. Schneidau H., "Shepherd", in: Jeffrey L. D., (ed.), A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature, Michigan 1992, 710.
- ⁹ Cf. Schnackenburg R., Das Johannesevangelium. Kommentar zu Kap. 5-12 (HthK IV/2), Freiburg 1972, 354.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Theobald M., Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1-12 (RNT), Regensburg 2009, 667.
- ¹¹ Cf. Schramm T., Τίθημι, in: Balz H., Schneider G., (eds.), EDNT (Vol. iii), Michigan 1994, 356.
- ¹² Cf. Theobald M., Das Evangelium nach Johannes Kapitel 1-12, 676.
- ¹³ Cf. Theobald M., Das Evangelium nach Johannes Kapitel 1-12, 678.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Beasley - Murray R.G., John (WBC Vol. 36), Texas 1987, 170.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Brown E. R., The Gospel According to John, (i-xii), New York 1966, 396.
- ¹⁶ Cf. MacGregor G. H. C., The Gospel of John (The Moffatt New Testament Commentary), London 1928, 239.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Theobald M., Das Evangelium nach Johannes Kapitel 1-12, 680.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Beasley - Murray R.G., John, 171.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Hasitschka M., Vorlesung: Exegese Neues Testament WS 07/08: Passionsbericht und Ostererzählungen nach Johannes, 78.
- ²⁰ Cf. Beasley - Murray R.G., John, 406.
- ²¹ Cf. Stenger M. H., Im Zeichen des Hirten und Lammes, Wien 2002, 201.
- ²² Cf. Stenger M. H., Im Zeichen des Hirten und Lammes, 111.
- ²³ Cf. Stenger M.H., Im Zeichen des Hirten und Lammes, 115.
- ²⁴ <http://unzeitgemaesse-betrachtungen.blogspot.com/2008/06/hlbonifatius.html>: 07.05.2012.