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THE SHEPHERD MOTIF IN EZEKIEL 34:1–16: AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS AND ITS ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

The roots of prophecy are deeply implanted in history, and the cultures of Israel and prophets were positioned as intermediaries between the divine and human realms. Their messages, grounded in specific historical contexts, often transcend to theological insights relevant to various historical, social and ethical situations. Ezekiel a priest and prophet during the Babylonian captivity, preached messages of hope to the exiled Israelites using allegories and metaphors from their own context, including the metaphor of the

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Shepherd in Ezek 34:1–16. This passage brings to light the merciful love, care, compassion and concern of the Good Shepherd towards his flock, the Israelites in contrast to those irresponsible shepherds of Israel. While God entrusted the responsibility of his flock to the hands of efficient leaders, their selfishness led to exploitation and abandonment of the sheep. Consequently, God condemns these wicked shepherds, takes back the sheep from their hands, and assumes the responsibility of caring for the sheep.

For Christians, the Holy Scripture serves as both a source of revelation on which to ground one's faith but also an indispensable reference point for morality.[1] The Holy Scripture provides moral precepts and directions for ethical living. This study interprets the biblical text of Ezek 34:1–16 through the lens of virtue ethics, highlighting the moral qualities or attributes of YHWH, the Good Shepherd. Since it serves as moral precepts for modern leaders and society, the present study becomes relevant and significant, enabling us to lead a life aligned with the moral decrees and precepts in the Holy Scripture.

Relevance of the Study

The metaphor of the shepherd is an important theological imagery in the Scripture, particularly in Ezekiel 34:1–16. In this passage, YHWH is depicted as the Good Shepherd who gathers and cares for his flock, contrasting with Israel's irresponsible shepherds who scattered the sheep due to their harsh rules. This study emphasizes the roles and characteristics of the shepherd, metaphorically referring to YHWH, to inspire hope, motivation, dependability, and trust in him. YHWH as the Good Shepherd possesses all that is needed to provide for his flock.

The Scripture shapes our character distinctively as Christians. It defines, first, the Christian virtues and thereby shapes believer's character. Thus, the Bible actually occasions the formation of moral character.[2] Since everyone plays a shepherd-like role in caring for others, studying this text from a virtue ethical perspective is relevant for both personal and social lives of the individuals as it explains the moral virtues or qualities of the Good Shepherd as an example to follow.

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[1] Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality: Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct* (Vatican: VaticanLibrary, 2008), 5.

[2] Yiu Sing Lucas Chan, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life* (Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2015), 16.

In a modern world affected by greed, injustice and corruption due to self-centred attitudes of the leaders and authorities, this study is still relevant. Herein is the significance of the prophetic voice that accuses Israel's wicked shepherds, with YHWH assumes the responsibility of caring for his vulnerable sheep. Jesus' declaration, "I am the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11), highlights the responsibility of leaders and individuals to emulate the sacrificial care of the Good Shepherd.

Leadership exemplified by the good shepherd is, basically, an office of service, offering hope to the oppressed and disadvantaged members of society. The shepherd metaphor in Ezekiel highlights a deep bond between God and the people of Israel, similar to that between a shepherd and his sheep. Therefore, this study is both an invitation and a challenge for emulating the good shepherd's way of life, emphasizing ethical implications for both personal and social responsibilities in caring for others.

The Main Focus of the Research

One of the most significant metaphors used in the Bible to illustrate the covenantal relationship between YHWH, the shepherd, and the people of Israel his flock, is the shepherd metaphor. Hence, in this thesis, an attempt has been made to study the shepherd motif in Ezekiel 34:1–16 with an exegetical and ethical analysis. It focuses on the way YHWH cares for his flock and redeems them from their wretched situations caused by the cruel shepherding of wicked shepherds. The shepherd metaphor has persisted in the Bible and in our Christian tradition since very early times and is a powerful pastoral symbol. Its profound meaning, simplicity, enormous depth and value make it ever-new. The virtue ethical connotations that are applied to the qualities or characteristics of YHWH, the Good Shepherd play a significant role.

Scope and Limits of the Study

The scope of this study is to explore the importance of the shepherd metaphor in the Scripture and its relevance in the field of biblical ethics, especially in virtue ethics. As this research is done on biblical ethics and there has no such study been made so far on this particular biblical passage, this study focuses on the virtues or moral qualities which are prominently seen in the good shepherd. Also, it emphasizes that those who are entrusted with the responsibility of shepherding the church, society and family are expected to imitate the living example

of the Good Shepherd in leading and guiding their flock. This study may also contribute to the exploration of other biblical passages in this field of study and research.

Even though the entire chapter (Ezek 34) discusses the metaphor of the shepherd and depicts the two dimensions of the relationship, such as the shepherd-sheep and the sheep-sheep relationships, in this research, we limit our study to the shepherd-sheep relationship, which is one of the subunits from the entire text. The shepherd metaphor used in the text has enormous theological implications. But in our study, we limit our attention to the virtue ethical aspects of this specific text, focusing on the qualities and role of YHWH, the Good Shepherd, contrasting them with the irresponsible shepherding of the wicked shepherds. While emphasizing its practical side, we also address shepherding as servant-leadership and examine the advantages and challenges of shepherding the church, society and family in the modern era.

Methodology

The study of this particular passage employs both the diachronic and the synchronic methods for exegetical and theological analyses. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of Ezekiel 34:1–16 is done by focusing on both the biblical and ethical points of view. The practical application of the text will be studied with an analytical-theological approach.

Overview of the Chapters

The thesis comprises five chapters, along with a general introduction and conclusion. The first chapter examines the shepherd metaphor in the Bible, originating in West Asian culture where shepherding was central to life. In the Old Testament, this metaphor represents God's love and care for his people, describing divine, political, religious, and messianic figures. The Old Testament portrays key leaders like Moses and David as shepherds of Israel. The New Testament portrays Jesus as the Good Shepherd, selflessly giving His life for His flock. The metaphor emphasizes compassionate leadership and service, encouraging all believers, especially leaders, to care for others. The Book of Revelation also highlights enduring suffering for following Christ, the ultimate Shepherd. The chapter concludes that the shepherd metaphor reflects the close, caring relationship between God and his people, promoting leadership based on service, not control.

The second chapter, "The Shepherd Metaphor in the Book of Ezekiel," explores the theme of shepherding through the prophet Ezekiel's perspective. Ezekiel, who lived during the Babylonian exile, was called by God to deliver three key visions. These visions emphasized his role as a prophet to the exiles, the departure of God's glory due to Israel's sins, and the eventual return of God's glory when the people repented and were restored to their land. Ezekiel's message shifted from judgment and condemnation to one of comfort and redemption. Using allegories, metaphors, and symbolic acts, Ezekiel urged the exiles to repent for their sins, especially idolatry, while promising YHWH's restoration and a hopeful future. The chapter highlights how the shepherd metaphor represents God's protection and care, symbolizing the renewal of the covenant, the people's return from exile, the restoration of the land, and the rebuilding of the temple and city. Despite their suffering, the exilic community experienced a deepening of faith, showing that exile positively impacted their spiritual growth.

The third chapter explores YHWH's intervention to rescue His people from corrupt leaders, focusing on an exegetical interpretation of the shepherd motif. The metaphor contrasts Israel's selfish leaders with YHWH's compassionate care. While human leaders misuse their authority, YHWH gathers the lost, heals the sick, provides good pastures, and protects his flock. As a true shepherd, YHWH corrects the failings of Israel's leaders, ensuring the flock's safety and well-being. Ezekiel emphasizes that a good leader must have the mindset of a shepherd, prioritizing the people's welfare with a sense of responsibility, self-sacrifice, courage, and patience. The chapter concludes that societal progress depends on strong leaders who embody the qualities of a good shepherd and prioritize the well-being of their people.

The fourth chapter, a key contribution to the research, explores the ethical implications of the shepherd metaphor from a virtue ethics perspective. This approach, increasingly relevant among biblical scholars and ethicists, focuses not just on norms and principles, but also on the inner life of individuals and their relationships. Virtue ethics encourages the cultivation of moral virtues and prioritizes the person over actions, aiming to create a better world. The chapter contrasts YHWH's true shepherding—marked by fidelity, vigilance, compassion, justice, and prudence—with the failed leadership of Israel's self-serving and oppressive shepherds. YHWH's care for His

scattered flock, as He brings them back to their homeland, exemplifies the self-giving nature of a good shepherd. The chapter concludes that embodying these virtues, following YHWH's example as the shepherd, is the foundation of ethical leadership and living.

The fifth and final chapter, titled "Shepherding as Servant Leadership in the Contemporary World," presents shepherding through the lens of servant leadership, emphasizing its practical applications. The subject of servant leadership and shepherding ministry provide a great deal of insights into the positive aspects as well as the challenges a leader might encounter in these roles. The chapter explores the biblical roots, traits, and diverse manifestations and implications of shepherding as servant leadership in the Church, society and family. Jesus exemplified servant leadership by prioritizing the needs of others to empower them. Servant leadership places a strong emphasis on the 'caring principle,' with leaders acting as 'servants' who help their followers become more independent, knowledgeable, and service-oriented. The shepherd metaphor prominent since the time of Jesus, illustrates leaders as shepherds who provide care, direction and safety.

Shepherding in the Church is a continuation of Jesus' ministry, where leaders guide, protect, and serve the faithful. Church leaders should act as compassionate shepherds, but issues like clerical dominance, injustice, caste systems, patriarchy, and lack of lay participation affect the Church. Servant leadership promotes humility, inclusion, and lay leadership for a more collaborative Church. In society, leaders should foster growth and unity, while addressing challenges like discrimination, corruption, and violence. They must ensure justice and support the marginalized. In the family, parents play a shepherding role, protecting family welfare and teaching values, though challenges like patriarchy and domestic abuse can undermine family unity. Overall, leaders in the Church, society, and family should draw inspiration from the shepherd metaphor, emphasizing care, service, and the wellbeing of those they lead.

God has given some people the divine mission of shepherding, which is a call to serve, even to the point of giving one's life to protect the flock, not exploiting them for personal gain. Pope Francis advises those in authority to lead with the smell of the sheep in the home, society, Church and nation. He challenges them to act like the good shepherd who knows his sheep, emphasizing the need to approach them with gentleness, humility and tenderness.

Major Findings of the Study

(1) The significance of the shepherd metaphor in Biblical context is highlighted. The Shepherd metaphor is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious life of ancient Israel and holds significant theological and ethical implications. It is a powerful symbol of divine care, leadership, and protection. In both the Old and New Testaments, the metaphor serves as a profound illustration of the relationship between God and his people, as well as the responsibilities of human leaders.

(2) Ezekiel's unique contribution to the shepherd motif is another point of reflection. Ezekiel 34:1–16 presents a vivid contrast between the negligent shepherds (Israel's leaders) and YHWH, the Good Shepherd. This distinction highlights YHWH's commitment to His people, promising restoration and care. Ezekiel's context during the Babylonian exile adds a layer of urgency and hope to the metaphor, as it addresses a community in crisis, offering a vision of divine intervention and redemption.

(3) Ethical implications of the shepherd metaphor are emphasized. The virtues exemplified by YHWH as the Good Shepherd—such as fidelity, vigilance, compassion, justice, and prudence—serve as ethical standards for leaders in any context. Virtue ethics, which focuses on the cultivation of moral character and virtues, is particularly relevant in interpreting the Shepherd metaphor. It highlights the importance of leaders embodying these virtues in their actions and decisions.

(4) Shepherding as a model of servant leadership is focused well. The Shepherd metaphor aligns closely with the concept of servant leadership, where leaders prioritize the needs of their followers and serve with humility and selflessness. In the Christian tradition, Jesus' example as the Good Shepherd provides a model for leadership that is rooted in service, compassion, and sacrifice. The shepherd motif, with its rich imagery and ethical implications, serves as a profound basis for discussing leadership from a virtue ethics perspective. By examining the shepherd motif through the lens of virtue ethics, we see that true leadership is deeply rooted in moral character and the practice of virtues. It highlights the importance of ethical principles in leadership and offers a timeless guide for leaders seeking to serve with virtue and excellence.

(5) Relevance to contemporary leadership is explained. The ethical principles derived from the Shepherd metaphor are applicable to various forms of leadership in the modern world, including religious,

social, and familial contexts. Leaders today are called to emulate the Good Shepherd by prioritizing the well-being of those they lead, fostering trust, and ensuring justice and protection for the vulnerable.

(6) Practical applications and challenges of shepherding are elaborated. In the Church, leaders are encouraged to practice collaborative and compassionate shepherding, addressing issues such as clerical dominance and promoting lay participation. In society, leaders should foster solidarity, unity, and dialogue, combating discrimination, corruption, and violence. They must be vigilant in protecting the most vulnerable and ensuring equitable justice. In families, parents and guardians should nurture and protect their children, embodying the virtues of love, care, and responsibility.

(7) Integration of ethical and biblical perspectives is emphasized. The study highlights the importance of integrating biblical narratives and ethical theories to address contemporary issues. The Shepherd metaphor provides a rich source of moral guidance that transcends its original context. The focus on virtue ethics encourages a holistic approach to moral development, where individuals and communities are inspired to cultivate virtues that promote overall well-being and ethical conduct.

(8) Emphasis on moral development and responsibility is an important point. The research underscores the necessity of moral development and personal responsibility in leadership. Leaders are called to reflect on their character and actions, striving to align them with the virtues exemplified by the Good Shepherd. The study advocates for ongoing moral education and formation, encouraging leaders at all levels to continuously develop and practice virtues that contribute to a just and compassionate society.

Conclusion

The shepherd metaphor in Ezekiel reveals the critical importance of leadership quality in determining the success or failure of a society. Ezekiel condemns the selfish, negligent leadership of Israel's shepherds and contrasts it with YHWH's selfless, caring approach to shepherding, presenting it as a remedy to societal failure. This comparison underscores the broader lesson that effective leadership is rooted in responsibility, accountability, and a selfless concern for the well-being of others. In both religious and secular contexts, leaders must adopt a servant-leadership mindset, modeled after YHWH and Jesus as the Good Shepherd. This requires leaders to prioritize the

needs of those they lead, fostering a culture of care, sacrifice, and accountability. The prophetic dynamic in Ezekiel also calls for transformative leadership that emphasizes justice and compassion, encouraging modern leaders to embrace humility, service, and collaboration. Ultimately, successful leadership focuses on elevating others, setting higher standards, and inspiring followers to achieve their best. Leadership reform, especially in religious and societal institutions, is necessary to foster greater collaboration and participation, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable groups. By embodying the shepherding qualities of care and service, leaders can promote a more just, compassionate, and inclusive society.