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Jesus Christ, The Good to Great Shepherd

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The Christology of the New Testament cannot be understood apart from the book of Hebrews. Yet, the portraiture of Christ in the book is overwhelming. The introduction is perhaps the most provocative of any epistle as it launches into the famous Christology. What is, on balance, neglected is that the benediction of the book is equally provocative.

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight (Heb 13:20).¹

There are many notable commentators on the book of Hebrews including Peter O'Brien, F.F. Bruce, and David Allen. What is unique about Allen is that he is a linguist by discipline and often argues from a position of semantic structural analysis. His outline of Hebrews is helpful.

1. Prologue 1:1-4
2. Superiority of the Son (1:5-4:13)
3. Obligations of Jesus' Priestly Office and Saving Work (4:14-10:18)
4. Exhortations to Draw Near, Hold Fast, and Love One Another (10:19-13:21)
5. Conclusion and Final Greeting (13:22-25)²

So, to rephrase this outline of the book, Christ is better 1-4; Christ is the ultimate High Priest 4-10; and because of this the church is exhorted to obey 10-13.

It is this triad of Christ's exclusive work, superiority, and corporate na-

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

²David Lewis Allen, *Hebrews* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 93-94.

ture that is addressed in this title. The title is definitive – *the* great Shepherd; it is specific and superior – the *great* Shepherd; it is corporate – *of the Sheep*.

It would be presumptuous to suggest that this template has authorial intent. However, this title, with its theological trajectory that runs through Scripture generally, and through Hebrews specifically, is a wonderful summation of the nature of Christ in the book of Hebrews. What follows is an examination of each of the implications of the title respectively.

Definitive

John Owens observes the connection between the title and the trajectory of the shepherding motif in Scripture when he writes, “He doth not say he is the great shepherd, but ‘that great shepherd;’ namely, he that was promised of old, the object of the faith and hope of the church from the beginning, - he who was looked for, prayed for, who was now come, and had saved his flock.”³ In other words, his greatness, at least in Hebrews, is lighted by his singular messianic role. This is the only one who could call himself the good Shepherd, and therefore is the only one who could be the great Shepherd. And the word order is important, τὸν ποιμένα τῶν προβάτων τὸν μέγαν; literally “the shepherd, of the sheep the great.” The adjective μέγαν, great, being last in the phrase, is given prominence.⁴ The emphasis is on the greatness of the Shepherd; a greatness that, again, seems tied to his messianic shepherding trajectory throughout Scripture.⁵ Bruce suggests that the title is “derived from the Septuagint version of Isa. 63:11: ‘Where is he who brought up out of the sea the shepherd of the sheep?’” This is an allusion that, if warranted, makes the messianic connection to the title stronger.⁶ Shepherds were seen as leaders. Moses was a shepherd, as was David, thus the Messiah would be one who would lead his people out of bondage like Moses, and bring military conquest like David.⁷

The author of Hebrews certainly affirms the messianic role of Jesus. This begins with an allusion to Psalm 110:1 in 1:3, he “...sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high”; then in 1:5 the author quotes Psalm 2:7,

³John Owen and W. H. Goold, *The Works of John Owen, vol. 7 Hebrews* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991).

⁴See Allen, *Hebrews*, 627.

⁵From the adjective μέγαν one could make a lexical case, through perhaps strained, for the sovereign majesty of the Messiah; the word can be understood as, “great, greatly, greatness, to a great degree, intense, terrible.” μέγας: δυνάμει μεγάλης ‘with great power’ Ac 4:33; καῦμα μέγα ‘great heat’ or ‘intense heat’ Re 16:9.” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Society, 1988), μέγαν. This is certainly the Messiah of Is. 63:1 who comes riding from Edom “marching in the greatness of his strength.” This is the rider on the white horse of Rev 19:11-16.

⁶F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 388.

⁷Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 534.

“You are my Son today I have begotten you.” This is explicit in 1:13, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet,” another quotation from Psalm 110:1. There are so many messianic references to the Psalms it is as if the entire book of Hebrews is an exposition on select Psalms. Still, the messianic nature of Christ is assumed as much as it is affirmed. In fact, these texts are used in service of other arguments such as Christ is better than the prophets (1:1-3), and the angels (1:4-14). Clearly the shepherding nature of the Messiah is a significant theme as there is an entire trajectory of messianic texts that contain the shepherding motif. So, while stopping short of looking at each use of the shepherding motif in the Scriptures, the following section will briefly examine select texts within the trajectory of the shepherding motif as it relates to the Messiah.

Ezekiel 34

In Ezekiel 34 the prophet Ezekiel exploits the shepherding metaphor in a shocking way: The shepherds are feeding themselves and not the sheep. Pointing to the failure of the shepherd leaders of Israel he notes,

The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?’”³

The second issue that God has with the shepherd leaders is that they do not seek lost sheep, making them vulnerable for the prey.

You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.⁸

Finally, the gravity of their poor leadership is summed up in the fact that instead of protecting the sheep, and feeding the sheep, they actually eat the sheep.

⁸It is impossible not to see a connection with this text and the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18 and Luke 15. Jesus is the seeking Shepherd.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

In fact this is what God decides he will do. He will shepherd them himself, and he will do so by using David as the Shepherd King to establish his rule over, and protection of, his flock.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

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. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

Psalm 78

Psalm 78 chronicles the history of Israel to the time of David the Shepherd King. Psalm 78:72 explains that David shepherded God’s people with an “upright heart and skillful hand.”⁹ This brings to mind Psalm 23 and a host of other Psalms that would connect the shepherding motif in David and bring it to Christ.¹⁰

David was the leader that God wanted to shepherd his people; however, David’s rule was limited by his humanity. His success and failures were profound. So Christ would come to be the Shepherd that David never could have been.

⁹Psalm 78:2 is quoted in Matthew 13:35. Christ is the one who would ultimately come in speak in “parables of old.” The fact that the Psalm ends with David is an interesting messianic connection.

¹⁰There are many other places in the prophets that could be searched for this motif. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and of course Amos all carry the shepherding motif; however Ezekiel 34 makes the connection the most explicit.

Gospels

There are many allusions to the shepherding motif in the Gospels. Jesus is the Shepherd that will arise out of Bethlehem (Matt 2:5, 6). Jesus weeps over Jerusalem like sheep without a Shepherd (Matt 9:36/Mark 6:34). Jesus is the Shepherd who is seeking the lost (Matt 18/Luke 15), and will ultimately be the Shepherd who eschatologically separates the sheep from the goats (Matt 25).

The reason Jesus was crucified was to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah 13:7 that if the Shepherd were stricken the sheep would be scattered (Matt 26:31/Mark 14:27).

The striking of the Shepherd is the explicit notion of John 10:1-18. This is the clearest explanation of the shepherding nature of Christ. Jesus is the sheep gate (v.7), the good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (v.11), and the one Shepherd of one flock. (v.16). The description of the ultimate Shepherd is the exact opposite of the weak shepherds of Ezekiel 34. The contrast is so obvious it seems that Christ is in fact alluding to this Old Testament passage.¹¹ Jesus is the Shepherd who is greater than the OT shepherds of Israel and he is the Shepherd King to be what David could never be.

Epistles

Outside of Hebrews, the only other references in the epistles to Jesus as a shepherd are found at the hand of the apostle Peter. Jesus is “the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25), and he is the Chief Shepherd to whom all the other shepherds will answer (1 Peter 5:4). It is interesting that the one to whom Jesus commanded to feed his sheep (John 21:15-17) is the one apostle who charges the elders to act like shepherds.

Revelation

In a wonderful twist on the metaphor John sees the lamb in the midst of the throne (5:6-14) as their Shepherd (Rev 7:17). In Rev. 19:15 the rider on the white horse will overcome the enemy and “He will rule (ποιμαίνω) them with a rod of iron.” This is an allusion to Psalm 2:9. Yet there is a slight but significant change in the choice of words. In Psalm 2:9 the King/Son/Anointed One will “*break* them with a rod of iron”. The rider on the horse is not there to deal them a blow, he is there to shepherd (ποιμαίνω) them, to have absolute rule and dominion. As Osborne notes, “the ‘shepherding’ is not the care of the sheep here but the destruction of their predatory foes (as in 12:5, where Ps. 2:9 is also used).”¹²

Perhaps the western mind is thrown by the idea of a dominating shepherd. When we think of the shepherd we think of a gentle meek nurturer of the lambs, but that is a highly filtered image. Shepherds were tough, blue-

¹¹Andreas J. Köstenberger, “John,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. Gregory K. Beale and Donald A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 461-67.

¹²Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 685.

collar workers who did difficult work in difficult circumstances. Part of that work was leading the sheep, but the other part of that work was beating the wolves. Both were involved. So, the truth is that the rugged view of a shepherd is closer to reality than the gentle view of the shepherd. More precisely, for Jesus graciously to protect the sheep, he must vigorously destroy the enemy. Ellingworth's comment on Hebrews 13:21 read as if it were a commentary on Revelation 19. He notes, "The image of a shepherd, inherited from the OT, is of one who both cares and rules. The author of Hebrews does not limit the work of Christ as shepherd to the ingathering of Israel (as, e.g., in Ezk. 34) but neither does he have the gentile mission in mind."¹³

In this way, the metaphor comes full circle. Jesus was the Shepherd sent to replace the weak shepherds of Israel. In order to do this he becomes the stricken Shepherd, but returns as the conquering Shepherd. It is not an overstatement to say that the trajectory of the humiliation and exaltation of Christ is portrayed in the shepherding motif as explicitly as anywhere else in Scripture. To say it another way, God wants us to think of Jesus as the Shepherd who nurtures and protects his sheep. It is this function, seen in his offering of himself, that fulfilled in his high priestly role in Hebrews. He is singular: *The* Shepherd.

This exclusive nature of Christ's role is a theme in Hebrews. Christ is better than the angels and better than the prophets; he is better than Moses; he is better than the priest; he is better than the tabernacle; he is better than Melchizedek, and he is the guarantor of the better covenant. Jesus is exclusive and definitive. He is *the* Shepherd.

Specific and Superior

Jesus is the Great Shepherd for many reasons in Hebrews, but most proactively because he is exclusive, superior and absolute.

Peter O'Brien, hints at this when he writes,

As Jesus is called the great high priest in Hebrews thus emphasizing his absolute and definitive quality, so here he is designated the *great* Shepherd, which underscores his incomparable superiority. He surpasses all other leaders of God's people, including Moses, and uniquely fulfills the role of Yahweh as he shepherds and leads God's flock...¹⁴

In this one brilliant rhetorical strike, the writer of Hebrews has captured not only the definitive nature of Christ's person, but the singular nature of Christ's work. This is most clear 9:23-26:

¹³Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 729.

¹⁴Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 2010), 535.

Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Note the language: “better,” “not copies,” “not repeatedly,” “once for all,” and “offered once.” The work of Christ is singular, definitive, absolute and superior. This text is not alone in establishing the definitive work of Christ. Jesus is better than the prophets, angels, and Moses, chapters 1-3. He is better than Melchizedek, leading to a better covenant, chapter 7.

Then, starting in 9:11 one sees the emerging superlative language, “but when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing eternal redemption.”

Here Christ is at once the High Priest, the Tabernacle, and the Holy Place in the very throne room of God.

Returning to 9:23-26, the idea is that Christ appeared before the very throne of God, not a copy on our behalf: “For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”

The great vestiges of Jewish religious life were copies: the high priest was a picture of the great High Priest; the tabernacle was a foreshadowing of the great flesh of Christ; and the Holy of Holies was a picture of the great throne room of God.

It is as if Jesus is so great that when he steps out of heaven he casts an enormous shadow that precedes him, being manifested in buildings, and tents, and positions that are later explained ultimately in his great presence.¹⁵

¹⁵Ellingworth ties the superior nature of Christ to the title of “great shepherd” when he notes, “Christ is the great shepherd, as he is the great (high) priest (4:14; 10:21) by contrast with lesser levitical high priests, and perhaps with subordinate leaders of the Christian community, such as the ἡγούμενοι of vv. 7, 17; also of Moses, mentioned in Is. 63:11, and who is traditionally known as ‘the shepherd of Israel’ (P. R. Jones 101-103).” Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 729.

How, then, is the atoning work in this passage to be understood? One immediately reaches for metaphors: like a congressman before the legislature, like a family member paying bond, like a lawyer going before a judge to defend a guilty criminal, or like an ambassador representing people to a president. It is like all of those things, but not exactly like any of them, because of the descriptor, “great.”

He is the Great Shepherd. He is singular and superlative. That being the case, to understand this passage’s tone we must attach a superlative in front of each metaphor: It is the most significant congressman going before the most important session of Congress. This is a family member going to court to pay the highest sum ever, to release the worst criminal ever. This is a lawyer who has never lost a case, defending a criminal for a crime of which he is obviously guilty, going before a judge who always finds defendants guilty of this crime. If you were guilty of a crime that is always punished, and you went before a judge who always convicts, then you would need a lawyer who never lost a case.

He is the great and only Savior going to the most holy of all places, to defend the worst of sinners. The worst crime before the highest judge demands the greatest defense. There is no court higher than God’s; there is no judge higher than God; there is no crime worse than mine; and there is no Savior like Jesus.

Kistemaker sees the connection between the superlative title and the work of Christ when he writes, “In effect, the metaphor of the shepherd who dies for his sheep is equivalent to that of the high priest who offers himself as a sacrifice for his people. Especially the adjective *great* is telling, for the writer of Hebrews calls Jesus the great high priest (4:14).”¹⁶ Yes, Jesus is the good Shepherd, but more specifically he is the Great Shepherd. Jesus is the one who secures access to the Father for us and he is the one who sustains our access to the Father by the fact that he is always before the Father interceding for us. He is simultaneously the “way maker” and he is the way. He grants access and he is himself the access. He brings us to the throne and keeps us before the throne.

Now it becomes clear how this fits into the argument of the book. It is as if the superior nature of Christ, supported by the messianic passages is necessary to build the argument for his superior work in chapter 9. His nature is superior therefore his work is superlative. Jesus is the Great Shepherd.

Corporate

The definitiveness of the title helps us understand the implicit messianic role of Christ. The fact that it is singular helps us understand the superlative nature of Christ. Yet there is also a corporate aspect that cannot be overlooked. He is the Great Shepherd *of the Sheep*.

¹⁶Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 430.

Hebrews is, as much or more than any other book, a corporate book. The book of Hebrews, like most of the epistles, is written to a congregation of believers. Christ is sovereign over all, therefore fallen sheep are comforted, and straying sheep are warned. Morris notes, "It is a piece of imagery that stresses the care of our Lord for his own, for the sheep are helpless without their shepherd. But an aspect we in modern times sometimes miss is that the shepherd has absolute sovereignty over his flock ..." ¹⁷ Thus the sovereignty of the shepherd embedded in the title motivates the flock to heed the warning passages.

Among the chief exegetical concerns is whether the warning passages were written to believers in a congregation, or to a community of believers within who are true and false believers. The answer to this question determines how one will interpret the warning passages.

The Warning Passages (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29)

One approach to the warning passages is that the warning passages were written to believers. If so, the warning is to continue in faith or you will lose reward, or lose your salvation, depending on your exegetical approach or theological disposition.

Another option is to understand the warning passages as written to a community of faith more generally. In the community of faith there are those who are true believers, and some who think they are, but are not. They are in the community, but are not connected to its source. Thus they are warned not to stray away from the faith and in so doing prove that while they are in the community, they are not a part of the church. These general categories express the heart of the issue, but there are a number of approaches. ¹⁸

Whatever view one takes, the problem is extreme. They are not paying attention so they have neglected salvation (2:1-4); they have an unbelieving heart (3:7-19), therefore they fail to reach the promised land and will not enter the rest (4:6-13); they have fallen away from what they have heard (5:11-6:12); they do not endure (10:19-39), and they fail to receive the grace of God (12:14-29).

Now the tragic irony of all of this is that because it is true, those being warned cannot see that it is true. While the lack of evidence that they are truly in the faith should be shocking to them, it is lost on them due to their unbelief. They are in the community so that they have some semblance of corporate identity with this community, but no real relationship with Christ. The evidence of this missing relationship should alarm them, but they do not see it. Some will not heed the warning.

Again, the warning passages demonstrate the corporate nature of the book as the Sovereign Shepherd addresses the communal whole. It is the corporate nature made explicit in the title, the Great Shepherd *of the Sheep*.

¹⁷Leon Morris, *Hebrews*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Zondervan, 1981), 154.

¹⁸See Herbert W. Bateman IV, *Four Views of the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007).

This nature is perhaps best seen in the Shepherd's Psalm.

In Psalm 23 the Psalmist paints a picture of Christ. Those afraid to press that point here are aided by John 10 where Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd, forever linking the two images. The conclusion of the Shepherd's Psalm is vv. 5-6, where David writes,

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

All of these benefits flow from v. 1. "The Lord is my Shepherd," therefore "I shall not want."

Laying the shepherding language in the context of Hebrews, if the Lord is the Shepherd, he will give the grace to heed all the warnings. He will keep one from falling away, from lack of endurance, etc. So be warned! Don't fall away! It is in pressing in and heeding the warning that the grace of God is shown to be operative and confidence grows that the salvation secured objectively by the grace of Christ is not some esoteric vacuum, but an experiential presence. Thus, heeding the warnings give greater confidence that believers are in fact protected from the things that they warn against.

In sum, what we have in Hebrews are some who want to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, but they do not want the Lord to shepherd them. Hebrews is a warning to those who do not want Christ to shepherd them. Sadly, they want the fellowship of the fold without the governance of a Shepherd.

It was C.S. Lewis who said there are only two kinds of people. Those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "Thy will be done." The warning is this, "Pay attention, and don't drift because if the Lord is not your Shepherd you will not dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

This wonderful, rich and precious title—Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep—this vanguard against all that would harm us—this protection and joy, is exclusive. It is only for those who heed his warnings. Those who will not be shepherded will not be saved. For, they are not sheep.

Conclusion

He is *the* great Shepherd. The exclusive nature of this title points to his messianic role as referenced in Psalm 110 that the writer is treating. He is the *great* Shepherd. The adjective is given to Christ for all that he effected for us in his high priestly and mediatorial role that is the bulk of the argument as to why Christ is, in fact, exalted and high. Finally, the corporate nature of the title, the great Shepherd *of the Sheep*, shows the true danger of the warning passages as warnings against infiltration into the flock without behavior that imitates the Great Shepherd of the Sheep.

What has not been addressed above is the obvious. Hebrews was sent as a word of encouragement and hope for believers who were being urged to endure in the light of the temptation to fall away. The title, while used here as a picture of Christ in Hebrews, had a very practical function of encouraging believers in the faith. A Christ who was the Great Shepherd, a Christ who was raised for that purpose, could surely "...equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Heb 13:21). He is that great.

In opposition to the idea of a Great Shepherd providing himself every good thing is the notion of trusting things to fate. The modern idea of fate is not unlike the medieval idea. The medieval idea was that individuals were riding on a large *rota fortunae*, or "wheel of fortune." Like riding on a large wheel, fate took you up and up. However, your ascendance was tempered by the notion that this was in fact a wheel and not a ladder. Going up only meant that as the wheel turned your descent was inevitable; up, then down without an avenue of recourse. This is a horrible way to think of life, a Christless way, a Shepherdless way. The soul of the believer is not trusted to hapless fate. Rather, we are secured to a singularly wonderful Shepherd, who is exclusive in his work, and whose watch care over us does not wax or wane. He is Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep.