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A Biblical Theological Analysis of Ezekiel 34:11-24

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The prophecies which make up the book of Ezekiel speak of both judgment and restoration, the result of its original audience facing reprimand and needing encouragement. Working to give the word of the Lord in the midst of the Babylonian exile,¹ Ezekiel faced a world full of chaos and unrest. The focus of the book of Ezekiel is largely on the consistency of the character of God even in the face of this changing world, and as a result often draws on the image of Israel's covenantal relationship with the Lord, and the blessings and curses attached.² The final section of Ezekiel (verses 33:21-48:35) makes note of these in its reminder to the exiles "that the Lord was as faithful to the promises to bless as those to curse."³ Ezekiel 34:11-24 leans into each of these sides, presenting a message of both judgment and restoration. Ultimately, these come together in an offer of a hope for the future which is grounded in the image of a relational God who actively seeks his people and that of a perfect shepherd-prince who will lead with him.

Immediate Context

Outside of its own unique messages, Ezekiel 34:11-24 is situated in the middle of the broader conversation of Ezekiel 34. While verses 1-10 lean heavily into the idea of judgment, verses 25-31 are a promise of a coming peace and restoration for those in exile. Ezekiel 34:11-24 acts as a sort of transition between the two ideas through its depiction of God as the perfect shepherd of Israel: one who restores his flock *and* leads with justice. The nature of this structure means that each section builds on and transforms the ideas of the last, and as such, an examination of the message of verses 1-10 is key to understanding verses 11-24.

¹ Ezekiel's dated messages range from 593 to 571 BC. For further information on the dating of Ezekiel, see Ralph H. Alexander's discussion Ezekiel on pp. 647-548 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Jeremiah-Ezekiel Volume 7*, ed. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland.

² Iain M. Duguid. "Ezekiel," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander & Brian S. Rosner (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 229.

³ Ralph H. Alexander. "Ezekiel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Jeremiah-Ezekiel Volume 7*, ed. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 830.

Ezekiel 34 opens with the Lord telling Ezekiel: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel” (Ez. 34:2)⁴, and goes on to express the Lord’s condemnation of these shepherds for ensuring their own survival at the expense of the flock. This opening section introduces the extended metaphor which continues throughout the chapter, and which occurs in multiple places throughout Scripture: leaders as shepherds and their people as the flock. In these opening 10 verses, Ezekiel communicates not only the Lord’s discontentment with the leaders of Israel, but also establishes the fact that the sheep in their care—the people of Israel—ultimately belong to the Lord (cf. Ez. 34:5). The Lord’s response to this conflict, a declaration that he “will rescue [his] sheep from [the shepherds’] mouths” (Ez. 34:10), neatly leads into the next section—the body of text which this paper will focus on.

Ezekiel 34:11-24

Just as in the preceding verses, the metaphor of the shepherd and the flock is at the heart of this passage. In this section, however, God’s relationship with his people is the heart of the message rather than merely an image included within a message of condemnation. This idea is developed not only through the metaphor of the shepherd itself but also through the connections it has with the idea of kingship, particularly in the literature surrounding David. The roles of shepherd and king are often connected in passages discussing Davidic rule: before David’s anointing as king in 2 Samuel 5, for example, the tribes describe David’s role as both “shepherd of [God’s] people Israel” and “prince over Israel” (2 Sam. 5:2), while Psalm 78:70-72 entirely unites the two by using the image of David as the shepherd of his flock, Israel, to describe his leadership as king. Ezekiel 34:11-24 echoes these connections in its description of God’s

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the ESV.

shepherding of Israel as tender and caring as well as in the Lord’s promise of the installment of a new, perfect shepherd over his flock.

34:11-13a

The passage begins with Ezekiel’s declaration: “For this is what the Sovereign Lord says...” (Ez. 34:11 NET), the word “for” implying a continuation of the previous section—and, more specifically, of the Lord’s intent to rescue his sheep. That intention is given form in these verses, which introduce “an explanation of the *way* Yahweh intends to rescue...the sheep.”⁵ This plan is seen to be deeply personal. It is not a task which the Lord sends another to do; on the contrary, he declares through Ezekiel: “Behold, I, *I myself*, will search for my sheep and will seek them out” (Ez. 34:11, emphasis added), the repetition highlighting his involvement. The language of this verse, and of those following, is full of action: the Lord will search, seek, rescue, bring, and gather his people.⁶

The effect of this language is twofold. First, it characterizes God’s connection with his people as a purposeful pursuit of a relationship with them. God does not wait for his people to return to him or send someone to collect them, he goes after them himself. Second, it creates a juxtaposition between God as a shepherd and the failures of Israel’s leaders to shepherd their people. Where the leaders of Israel sacrificed the wellbeing of the flock for their own gain (cf. Ez. 34:3), God seeks out the flock for their own good, working *toward* their wellbeing. This intentionality is particularly significant in light of the situation of the original audience: this

⁵ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 25-48* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 288, emphasis added.

⁶ Though this language sees quite a bit of variety between translations, slightly altering the specific meanings of the phrases, the overall idea—that the Lord’s work in rescuing his flock is active—remains the same. Most notably, the NIV and NASB use “look after” and “care for” in place of the phrase “seek out” used by the ESV and NET translations.

message offers hope and the promise that God has not abandoned his people, in spite of how terrible their status as exiles and the neglectfulness of their leaders made their situation appear.

The image of God as a shepherd is by no means unique to this passage, nor did it first appear in Ezekiel's prophecy. It is a motif occurring throughout the Bible, starting with Jacob's description of God as the one "who has been my shepherd all my life long" (Gen 48:15) and ascribing him the title "the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel" (Gen 49:24 NIV). That this title is referenced in Asaph's cry in Psalm 80 to "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock" (Ps 80:1) demonstrates its enduring significance. The appeal which finishes this cry—"Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up your might and come to save us" (Ps 80:2)—indicates the weight of the title: God's people seek his care and protection, and as the Shepherd of Israel, he is expected to provide these. It is this role which the opening verses see God fulfilling. His people are scattered and in need, and he gathers them from the peoples and countries and brings them back to their own land.

34:13b-16

After its account of the Lord's intent to restore his flock to their own land, the word of the Lord continues with a new statement of purpose: the care of the flock. The description of this care heightens the juxtaposition between the shepherds of Israel and the Lord (the *true* Shepherd of Israel). Two main points, nourishment and rest, are emphasized in this section: "I will feed my flock" (or a similar statement) occurs four times in just three verses (cf. Ez. 34:13, 14, & 15),⁷ and it is stated twice that the Lord will bring the flock to a place where they can "lie down" (cf. Ez. 34:14 & 15). This promise of care is supplemented by verse 16a, which speaks of the Lord's

⁷ This verse also sees some discrepancy among translations, ESV and NIV translating the beginning of verse 15 as "I myself will be the shepherd of" and "I myself will tend," respectively. Since the original language of verse 15 aligns with that of the preceding verses, the translation "I will feed" (used in NASB and NET) seems most fitting, as it aligns with the surrounding usage.

attentions toward the weak and injured in his flock, once again using highly personal language (e.g. “I will seek...I will bring...I will bind up...I will strengthen...”). Where verses 11-13b focused on the needs of the community, this section highlights those of the individuals.⁸ This reveals yet another aspect of God’s personal care for his flock: that he does not only look out for them as a whole, but values and cares for each sheep.

The language and themes of this section echo those of Psalm 23, perhaps the most well-known occurrence of the shepherd motif in Scripture, the first few verses of which state: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul” (Ps. 23:1-3a). These opening statements usher in the theme of rest (cf. Ps. 23:2) as well as that of Lord’s provision for the nourishment of both the body and the soul, creating strong parallels between the shepherd of the Psalm and the Lord in Ezekiel 34. David’s opening declaration (“I shall not want”) speaks to physical well-being and care, while the restoration of the soul in verse 3a speaks to the meeting of spiritual needs. Central to all of this provision is the hand and care of the Lord, whom David continues to declare faith in throughout the psalm, his trust holding even in the face of evil and under the shadow of death (cf. Ps. 23:4).

By recalling the themes of Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34 calls to mind David’s image of the Lord as comforting, faithful, and welcoming—a particularly poignant message to those in exile. The reminder of David’s confidence in the Lord’s faithfulness even in the face of his own trials recalls the reason behind it: the covenant between him and the Lord. Although the connection to this covenant, yet another source of hope for the exiles, is not explored as fully until later in the passage, it holds a significance to this section as well. The Lord’s promise of an eternal kingdom

⁸ Alexander, 835.

for David seems to have been broken by the fall of Judah to the Babylonians. The Lord's repeated intent in this section, however, is not only to bring his flock to good pasture, but specifically to "the mountains of Israel" (Ez. 34:13-14)—a reassurance that he is still at work in the lives of his people *and* still true to the promises made to them.

Halfway through verse 16, this section turns away from the promises of rest and restoration, with God's declaration that "I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, *but* the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd⁹ the flock with justice" (Ezekiel 34:16b NIV, emphasis added). Starting with the transitional word "but," this sentence ushers in a change of topic from the restorative actions of God to judgment enacted by him. The shift which occurs at this point does not indicate a change in God's execution of his role as the Shepherd of Israel; on the contrary, it notes yet another aspect of his character which sets him apart from those who *have been* serving as shepherds of Israel: his justice. This emphasis on justice sees the narrative turn from its focus on the flaws of the shepherds to the shortcomings of the flock, specifically targeting the members of the flock who exploit others. The intent of this condemnation and the judgment it entails is to stop these sheep from "misusing their superior strength against the weaker sheep,"¹⁰ a goal in line with the previous descriptions of the role the Lord has been serving.

34:17-22

Along with this change in subject, Verses 17-22 see a slight shift in audience from the previous sections. Although all of Israel is still being spoken to, as seen in the fact that it is still "my flock" being addressed in verse 17, it is the strong sheep mentioned previously who are

⁹ Other translations substitute "feed" for shepherd; however, as both indicate the care the Lord has for his flock, the difference translation does not overly impact the meaning of the verse.

¹⁰ Block, 292.

more directly targeted by this section. The distinction between the strong and weak which was made in the previous section is here expounded, God declaring a coming judgment “between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats” (Ez. 34:17b).¹¹ This judgment is as much a promise as the provision of the previous section, the Lord’s declaration that “I will judge” (Ez. 37:17 NIV) a part of the promised restoration. This division is an expression of that justice which verse 16 noted.

34:18-19

The depiction of this division is interrupted briefly by verses 18-19, which form an interlude once more expressing condemnation. Within these verses, the Lord expands on the ideas presented in verse 16 in order to more fully explain the judgment coming down on the fat sheep. These two verses provide the *reason* for the condemnation outlined in the surrounding verses.

As Daniel Block points out, this section emphasizes the problems Israel faces outside of the need for deliverance from enemies and poor leadership.¹² This section makes it clear that the issue goes beyond the simple matter of looking after their own interests. The problem is not that these sheep are well fed and watered, but that they have gone out of their way to prevent others from being so. Rather than rejoicing in their good pasture and clear water and sharing this with those around them, they trample the pasture and muddy the water so that others are unable to experience the same benefits.

¹¹ Some scholars tie Matthew 25:32f to Ezekiel 34:17 due to the similar language of the two passages (see Craig L. Blomberg’s discussion of Matthew 25 in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. Beale & Carson); however, although the two have some similarities, the difference in the overarching ideas of the passages they are situated in makes this connection improbable, though not impossible.

¹² Block, 293.

Through these actions, these members of the flock show themselves to be in opposition to God’s goals as a shepherd: where the Lord provides his flock water, food, and pasture to lie down in, these sheep seek to take it away from those around them. These sheep act as though they are not members of the flock, and that is how they are treated: the result of the judgment seen in verse 17 appears to be the separation of the fat sheep from the Lord’s flock. The language of verse 19 clearly distinguishes the two as independent groups: “must *my sheep* eat what *you* have trodden...” (Ez. 34:19a, emphasis added). In their selfishness, these sheep have not only set themselves against some other sheep, but against the flock as a whole—including its shepherd.

34:20-22

The audience becomes still more specific in verse 20. Unlike the previous sections, which have had more general openings, this verse targets a specific group, saying “this is what the Sovereign Lord says to *them*” (Ez. 34:20, emphasis added). Although “them” is fairly ambiguous, the use of second person to address the condemned sheep in the following verses makes it clear that they are the direct recipients of the address given in these verses. Having been condemned, they now face their punishment

The following verses make it clear that it is the actions of the fat sheep which have brought about this judgment (cf. Ez. 34:21). As Ralph Alexander notes, there is no place for the abuse of strength in the flock.¹³ The section goes on to reiterate the personal nature of the Lord’s work within his flock: he himself is both the judge and the rescuer (cf. Ez. 34:22). The judgment, it is clear from these verses, is a work of grace—through this intervention, the Lord “offers hope to the oppressed.”¹⁴ This is the overall goal, as stated in verse 22: that the flock “shall no longer

¹³ Alexander, 835.

¹⁴ Block, 293.

be a prey.” Once more, the Lord is established as a leader with immense care for the wellbeing of his people.

34:23-24¹⁵

The final two verses of this section begin the transition to the ideas of verses 25-31, painting a picture of a peaceful future under a new shepherd appointed by God,¹⁶ whose identity is given as “my servant David” (Ez. 34:23).¹⁷ It is this statement which once more recalls the Davidic covenant. When establishing his covenant with David, the Lord addressed the failures of the judges to shepherd Israel (cf. 2 Sam. 7:7), raising David “from the pasture” to “be prince over my people Israel” (2 Sam 7:8) in their place. This language is echoed in the declaration of Ezekiel 34:24 that “I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them.”

As the passage goes on, God makes further promises to David, among which are the promise of rest and of a house for David from which will come an eternal kingdom whose throne will be established forever (cf. 2 Sam. 7:16). By promising a new leader who is a shepherd-prince connected with David, Ezekiel 34:23-24 offered the exiles reassurance of these promises. For them, this was a message of continued hope, the allusion to this covenant telling them that their exile and removal from the physical kingdom had not meant the end of those covenants. Coming at the end of the passage, it bolstered confidence in the depiction of the Lord’s faithfulness and love throughout.

¹⁵ These final two verses could be connected to this passage or the following due to the ideas they introduce; however, as the connection between the Davidic covenant and the idea of a shepherd remains relevant to the passage, they are included here.

¹⁶ Block, 297.

¹⁷ The use of “my servant David” does not mean the return of the historical David, but rather signifies a single ruler occupying the throne of David who, more than merely being a political figure, represents God’s presence among his people. For a more complete breakdown of this concept, see Block, 297-301.

Looking back at this passage, we have a more complete perspective on these final verses, and particularly of the promised shepherd. We are able to view them in light of the coming of Jesus, who was granted “the throne of his father David” (Lk. 1:32), and in light of his teachings. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he made it clear that he did not come merely to rule but also to provide reconciliation. Notable among his descriptions of his identity is his sermon in John 10:1-18, in which he twice identifies himself as “the good shepherd” (Jn. 10:11, 14). Andreas Köstenberger relates this self-identification back to David, stating: “David, who was a shepherd before he became king, became a prototype of God’s shepherd. Jesus saw himself as embodying the characteristics and expectations attached to this salvation-historical biblical figure.”¹⁸ This identification, then, is not a throw-away analogy but an assumption of a role heavily connected to history—one piece of which being the shepherd-prince of Ezekiel 34:23-24.

Throughout the sermon, Jesus details his fulfillment of this role through an expression of care for the sheep, even to the extent of ensuring their safety at the expense of his own. This act of radical love aligns Jesus’ role as shepherd with the Lord’s by demonstrating the alignment of their central missions: to help the sheep who are in need. As Iain Duguid points out, Jesus’ assumption of the role of shepherd serves to “replace the bad shepherds with a good shepherd.”¹⁹ The closing image of the passage is thus a reversal of the situation at the chapter’s beginning: the leaders of Israel are removed, the sheep cared for, and a new shepherd—one who leads in the way of the Lord rather than in the corruption of man—instated by the Lord God. It is an image of hope.

¹⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger, “John,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 462.

¹⁹ Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 396.

Application

When viewed in light of Jesus' teachings, Ezekiel 34:11-24 is cast in a new light, and we can see many aspects of it which have come to fruition in the ministry of Christ. Speaking to the disciples of John the Baptist, Jesus described his ministry, in which "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them" (Lk. 7:22). In their goal to care for those in need and unable to help themselves, these marks of Jesus' ministry bear a striking resemblance to the Lord's work as the Shepherd of Israel. This parallel is strengthened by Jesus' parable of the lost sheep, which depicts a shepherd leaving behind his flock in order to seek one who has been lost and rejoicing greatly upon finding it (cf. Lk. 15:4-5),²⁰ a commitment to seeking the lost akin to that of the Lord's work in drawing the exiles back to himself.

The idea of purposeful pursuit and a community marked by the care of its leader thus carries into the New Testament. As we look back at this passage and see the promises which have been fulfilled in Christ, we can gain confidence in the fact of God's continued faithfulness to and love for his people.

Ezekiel 34:11-24 was a message of hope to a people in exile, a depiction of a perfectly just, perfectly loving ruler and of a peace that is to come. It is a reassurance of the Lord's provision in times of need and a warning of his judgment on those who seek their own gain at the expense of the wellbeing of others. We, too, can cling to these assurances—of the blessings and judgments—and can trust it all the more since we have seen some of these promises already fulfilled in Christ. And as we look ahead to what has not yet come to pass, we can rest in the knowledge that we are called to have faith in a faithful God.

²⁰ See Matthew 18:10-14 for another depiction of this parable.

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