Yahweh as Shepherd-King in Ezekiel 34: A Linguistic-Literary Analysis of Metaphors of Shepherding

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Yahweh as shepherd-king is a central metaphor in Ezekiel 34, but little work has been done in developing a linguistic and literary analysis of the blending of metaphors surrounding Yahweh as shepherd-king in this passage and the implications of this blending for understanding the purpose of this passage and its relationship to the rest of the biblical corpus. As one examines the metaphor of ‘Shepherd’ within the Old Testament, one can trace a common theme that weaves shepherding with kingship and uses the metaphor of shepherd as king with metaphors of human kingship and divine kingship.1 This theme asserts Yahweh’s role as shepherd king in light of the failing human shepherds. In many cases, this theme merges pastoral metaphors with military metaphors or with covenantal metaphors of repentance, judgment, and justice. These metaphors demonstrate the tension between human shepherd figures and the Divine shepherd Yahweh. In Ezekiel 34, these metaphors focus on the right judgment of Yahweh, the liberation of the people, and the re-establishment of Yahweh’s position as shepherd king and his restoration of his kingdom through a Davidic figure.

This article will trace the repeated blending of these metaphors in Ezekiel 34 by applying a linguistic-literary approach to metaphor that incorporates elements of the Conceptual Metaphor theory of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner with elements of the Systemic Functional Linguistics of M.A.K. Halliday. This approach allows for the analysis of the metaphors in Ezekiel 34 at both the conceptual level and the pragmatic level within the larger discourse. It uses the analysis produced by these linguistic approaches

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to evaluate the literary and theological implications of these metaphors and their interrelationship. Based on these findings, this chapter will assert that the metaphor of ‘God as shepherd-king’ must be understood in light of the failing shepherds. Thus, the metaphor of ‘God as shepherd’ is part of our understanding of the metaphor of ‘God as king’ and of ‘shepherd as king’ in the Hebrew Bible and it can only fully be understood by developing an understanding of the metaphor of ‘the people of Israel as sheep.’

Past Scholarship

My discussion of past scholarship will encompass two main fields: the study of metaphor in the Old Testament generally and the study of the shepherd metaphor in Ezekiel 34 specifically. First, metaphor is a common area of study in the Old Testament. There have been several studies that have focused on the metaphor of Yahweh as king and others on Yahweh as shepherd.2 The strength of these studies has been an awareness of the need for overarching analysis of metaphor within the Old Testament, yet a weakness has often been the lack of interaction with the broad range of metaphor study. Only recently has the study of biblical metaphor in general incorporated modern metaphor theories developed in literary, philosophical, and linguistic fields. One such study is the work of D.H. Aaron who points to the importance of ambiguity in the function of metaphor, particularly within biblical metaphor.3


3 David H. Aaron, Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics, and Divine Imagery (Leiden: Brill, 2001). Among others working on the use of modern metaphor theory in interpreting the Bible, other scholars include Hyukki Kim, “Daughter Zion: A Metaphor of Israel’s Ego” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Boston,