

**The Lord's Parable of the Shepherd and the Sheep:**

**An Exegesis of John 10:1-5**

**Joel Sullivan**

**Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology**

One among the many figures that the Lord uses to reveal His identity and ministry in the Gospel of John is that of the sheep, the gate, and the shepherd. Jesus sets this image before a group of Pharisees in John 10:1-5 and continues his discourse in 10:7-18, a passage which casts some light on the imagery in 10:1-5. This passage occurs within a larger section that has a theme of shepherding. Chapter 9 brings this theme to the fore through the contrast between Jesus' care for the blind man and the Pharisees' self-serving decision to expel the man from their community. Chapter 10 develops this theme further through a series of dialogs and through a reference to the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah). The central reading in this feast, Ezekiel 34, juxtaposes a lament of Israel's unfaithful shepherds with messianic prophecies of a time when God will deliver and raise up his people and they shall know that He is with them. Thus Jesus' figure of the good shepherd in Chapter 10 occurs against a background of messianic prophecy to which His words have many connections.

Chapter 10 begins with the words “ἀμήν ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν”. The double Amen is unique to John, occurring 25 times.<sup>1</sup> Amen, from a Hebrew root meaning “to confirm, make sure, support,” was used by Jews as an affirming response to prayers.<sup>2</sup> Jesus speaks from the Father and with absolute authority (John 5:31-32, 8:27-29) and thus has no need for another to say Amen to His words.

The Lord continues with a *παροιμία* or “parable” (cf. John 16:25,29): a saying or figure of speech with a hidden meaning<sup>3</sup>. To understand the meaning Lord's figure, we must first understand the cultural context to which it refers: the nightly guarding of sheep in an *αὐλή* or “sheepfold”. An *αὐλή* is a stone enclosure, without a roof, that could be

---

1 Brown, p. 84.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Haenchen, p. 47.

used as a courtyard or a fold for sheep.<sup>4</sup> The sheep would be collected at night in the sheepfold. A gatekeeper would guard the entry to the sheepfold while the shepherd was away. In some cases the flocks of multiple shepherds might be guarded in the same sheepfold; in the morning, a shepherd would need to gather his own sheep from among those in the sheepfold.<sup>5</sup> This picture which our Lord presents from the life of an oriental shepherd is an entirely realistic one.<sup>6</sup>

Before examining the elements of the *παροιμία* one by one, let us address an initial difficulty. In the Lord's comments following the parable, He calls Himself both “the door of the sheep” and “the good shepherd”. How are we to understand this? Does Christ, as the shepherd, somehow enter through Himself? St. Chrysostom resolves this difficulty, explaining that the Lord uses different aspects of the parable to illustrate different truths about Himself. When the Lord shows us that He brings us to the Father, He calls Himself the door; when He shows us how He takes care of us, He calls Himself the shepherd.<sup>7</sup> We need not simultaneously picture Christ as the door and the shepherd, but rather should understand the figure in different ways according to the truths that Christ is using it to convey.

### **The Door of the Sheepfold**

The parable begins with a reference to the *θύρα* (door) of the sheepfold. It is clear that the sheepfold has only one door. However, our Lord uses the door in two separate allegorical senses to illustrate two separate realities. Within the text of the parable itself, the significance of the door is limited to one fact: the shepherd enters

---

4 Haenchen, p. 46.

5 Beasley-Murray, p. 168.

6 Haenchen, p. 46.

7 Chrysostom, Homily 59.

through the door (which the doorkeeper opens to him), while the thief and robber climb in by some other way. Let us call the door in this symbolic role the *the door of the shepherd*. Further on, in His discourse following the παραοιμία, the Lord describes himself as the sole passageway through which the sheep have access to salvation, food, and life (cf. verse 9). However, since the παραοιμία does not directly refer to the sheep passing through the door, this topic is beyond the scope of our exegesis of John 10:1-5.

What is the significance of the fact that shepherd enters through the door, while others climb the wall? Let us consider three strands of interpretation.

In the first strand of interpretation, the expression “ἡ θύρα τῶν προβάτων” in verse 7 is interpreted as the door *to* the sheep, that is, the door which limits the access of humans to the sheepfold.<sup>8</sup> If Christ is the door to the sheep, it is assumed that the shepherd must have an additional symbolic meaning besides being Christ Himself. According to this strand of interpretation, 10:2 means that it is only through Christ that leaders can be true and valid shepherds of His sheep. This interpretation has a key weakness in the fact that Christ consistently refers to a single shepherd, which He identifies with Himself; thus it is not a convincing primary exegesis of 10:2.

In the second strand of interpretation, the door represents Scripture. Chrysostom aptly presents this interpretation in Homily 59, showing many ways in which Scripture serves as a door, and using this to shed light on the possible meaning of different parts of the parable. Accordingly, 10:2 would mean that a distinctive mark of Christ's ministry, which differentiates Him from those who have no rightful authority of the sheep, is His faithfulness to scripture. The Lord came in accordance with the Prophecies, fulfilled

---

<sup>8</sup> Barrett, p. 308-309.

them, illumined them, and taught men to obey them.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, false messiahs had been patently unfaithful to Scripture, and other false religious leaders had disobeyed scripture and misled others, teaching human traditions in their place. A weakness of this interpretation is the absence of any clear reference to Christ's fulfillment of scripture in John 9 or John 10.

According to the third strand of interpretation, the reference to the door in 10:2 is not allegorical, but merely a description of how a shepherd would typically approach his flock in a sheepfold. The door does not symbolize anything; the verse merely conveys that the shepherd alone has valid access to the sheepfold. This interpretation is preferred by Barrett, Beasley-Murray, and Haenchen. A weakness of this interpretation is the degree of stress that this short parable places on the fact that the shepherd alone enters *through the door*, in spite of the fact that other parts of the parable suffice to show that the shepherd alone has valid authority.

Considering the weaknesses mentioned above, the second and third strands of interpretation seem to have roughly equal merit. It is hard to imagine that a more fitting and illuminating interpretation of the door than Chrysostom's could be set forth, but it is not completely clear that the door was intended to have an allegorical meaning.

### **The Thieves and Robbers**

In the *παροιμία* and the following discourse, the Lord refers to thieves and robbers.<sup>10</sup> The distinction between the two Greek terms is that a robber is involved in

---

9 Although Chrysostom refers to the possibility of understanding Moses to be the gatekeeper in the parable, his choice of words indicates that he neither thinks that this is a true exegesis (“leading out” of the original intended meaning) nor considers the identity of the gatekeeper important to the meaning of the parable.

10 The initial reference to “a thief and a robber” need not be understood to refer to a specific person; the Greek underlying “he who does not enter... is a thief and a robber” can also be read “anyone who does not enter... is a thief or a robber,” which would be more consistent with the rest of Chapter 10.

violence such as murder or armed revolt, whereas a thief might be guilty only of pilfering.<sup>11</sup> The Lord repeatedly contrasts the thieves and robbers with the figure of the shepherd and directly with Himself. The image of the thief or robber is used primarily as a counterpart or background against which the Lord discloses truths about Himself. This usage is not uncommon in Jewish literature of the time.<sup>12</sup>

In His *παροιμία* and following comments, the Lord draws the following contrasts between Himself and the thieves and robbers: **(1) The means of entry.** The shepherd enters through the door and the doorkeeper opens to him. The thief or robber does not enter through the door, but climbs in by some other way. **(2) The reaction of the sheep.** The sheep follow the shepherd, because they know his voice. “All whoever came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.” **(3) The motive and the outcome.** “The thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it more fully.”

Who, then, are the thieves and robbers? Various interpretations have been proposed. St. Chrysostom notes that heretics had latched on to the sentence “All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them” to support their position that the Old Testament prophets were not authentic witnesses to God. Chrysostom goes on to point out two crucial flaws with this argument. First, the initial followers of Christ were those who heard the Prophets and saw Him as the fulfillment of prophecy. Second, Christ speaks strongly elsewhere against those who refused to hear the Prophets.<sup>13</sup>

---

11 Barrett, p. 305.

12 Haenchen, p. 46.

13 Chrysostom, Homily 59.

Chrysostom interprets “all who came before me” as a reference to all those who came before the Lord *in his place*, that is, false Christs such as Theudas and Judas. He demonstrates that these perfectly match all three criteria by which the Lord distinguishes the thieves and robbers from himself. Firstly, they neither led their followers with accordance with Scripture nor fulfilled the messianic prophecies—two ways in which they did not enter through the door but climbed in another way. Secondly, the sheep heard Christ's voice during and after his earthly life but the followings of the false Christs quickly died out (cf. Gamaliel's advice in Acts 5:36-37). Thirdly, in contrast to Christ who gave eternal life by his voluntary death, the false Christs deprived men even of this present life by their unsuccessful revolts.<sup>14</sup>

Based on the context of this passage, we could also understand the thieves and robbers in a more general sense to be the unfaithful leaders of God's people, against whom the prophecy in Ezekiel 34 is directed. This interpretation is suggested by the fact that the parable immediately follows the Pharisee's expulsion of the blind man and the Lord's condemnation of the Pharisees as blind men who claim to see. Like the false Christs, the unfaithful leaders fit the criteria by which the Lord distinguishes the thieves from Himself. They are unfaithful to scripture, teaching as commandments the traditions of men; Christ's true sheep do not follow them; their motives are selfish and they deprive the sheep of life by leading them astray. However, when we interpret the thieves and robbers to be unfaithful leaders in general, the Lord's words “all who came before me are thieves and robbers” are harder to explain, since many leaders of Israel were faithful to God.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

It seems entirely possible that the thieves and robbers were intended to represent both the false Christs and, more generally, unfaithful leaders in general. In any case, as we noted before, the principal significance of the thieves and robbers in Christ's discussion is their contrast with the Lord Himself; that is, the Lord uses them as part of the image to lead us into a fuller understanding of His dispensation.

### **The Shepherd and His Relationship With His Sheep**

The remainder of John 10:1-5 is devoted to topic of the shepherd's relationship with the sheep. As Christ makes clear in His following comments, He is the Good Shepherd, and the parable's description of the shepherd's relationship with the sheep conveys truths about Christ's relationship with those who follow Him. While much could be said about the general meaning of Christ calling Himself the Good Shepherd (for example, in the light of many Old Testament passages and of John Chapter 9), our central exegetical concern at present is what the *παρομιμία* itself tells us about Christ as the shepherd. Accordingly, let us carefully examine the statements which Christ uses to describe the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep.

#### ***and the sheep hear (or listen to) his voice; (v. 3)***

Jesus expands on this theme in 10:26-27: “But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” Christ uses the image of hearing the shepherd's voice to show that some are open to His words while others are deaf to it—just as the Pharisees are blind, as we see in the passage immediately preceding John 10. The reference to hearing Christ's voice parallels statements elsewhere in John. For example, “He who is of God hears God's words” (8:47) and 5:36-40 in which Jesus says that who do not believe in Him have not

heard (or *listened to*) the Father's voice, and do not benefit from searching the scriptures, but deny themselves eternal life through their unwillingness to come to Jesus. The Gospel of John also presents Christ's voice as a means through which He bestows eternal life. Consider 5:29: “the hour is coming... when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.”

***and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (v. 3)***

The fact that the shepherd calls his sheep by name and leads them out shows the intimate connection between Christ and His sheep. In a large flock, each sheep would not have its own name.<sup>15</sup> This verse shows that however large Christ's flock may be, He knows each one of us fully—each of us stands in a direct relationship to Him. The phrase “his own sheep” in this verse is an additional sign of the closeness of the relationship.

The image of gathering sheep and leading them echoes the redemptive prophecy in Ezekiel 34, the central reading of Hanukkah. Consider for instance Ezekiel 34:13, “And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land...” Compare this with John 10:16, “other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring... and there will be one flock and one shepherd.” Within Jewish culture, both Ezekiel 34 and John 10 would likely be seen in the light of the first Exodus, which is a *type* of the second Exodus: the redemptive work that the Lord describes in John 10.

***And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him (v.4)***

St. Chrysostom comments that it is usual for shepherds to follow their flocks, and this verse shows a way in which Christ's relationship with His sheep is unique.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Haenchen, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> Chrysostom, Homily 59.

However, Barrett and Beasley-Murray point out that in shepherds in Palestine go before their flocks and so we need not see the phrase “he goes before them” as unusual.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless the parable places emphasis on the fact that the sheep follow the shepherd. This image has within it both the idea of seeking (the sheep have their eyes on the shepherd and are in constant motion toward Him) and imitation (the sheep follow in the shepherd's footsteps). Christ teaches us elsewhere in John both to follow Him and to imitate Him. The Farewell Discourses (John 13-17) particularly emphasize the latter, drawing close connections between Christ's mission of love and sacrifice and the life to which He calls all His followers.

Christ's comments following the *παροιμία* illuminate John 10:4 by telling us where He leads us when He brings us out: to pasture (feeding), unity, eternal life, and perfect safety in the hands of Christ and His Father (verses 9-10, 16, and 27-30). All of these aspects of our “destination” in Christ are discussed more fully in the Farewell Discourses.

***... the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” (v. 4-5)***

This passage builds on the theme of the shepherd's voice, which was introduced earlier. Here the focus is on the response of the sheep. The sheep hear and are obedient to the shepherd, which shows that they trust the shepherd. The reference to strangers emphasizes this trust by means of contrast.<sup>18</sup> This passage also shows that the sheep do not blindly trust anyone who comes in the place of the shepherd: “I know my own and my own know me” (10:14).

<sup>17</sup> Beasley-Murray, p. 169.

<sup>18</sup> There is no reason to assume that “stranger” has any allegorical meaning other than possibly referring to the aforementioned thieves and robbers: the terms seem to be used interchangeably.

## **Conclusion**

Some parts of this parable are more complex (for example, the significance of the door) and others are more clear. Fortunately, it is the clearer parts that convey the most important aspects of the parable's message. The παροίμια is not an allegory about a sheepfold, a door, and thieves and robbers (although these elements may have some allegorical significance). It is a description of Christ's relationship with those who believe in Him. It leads us to a deeper understanding of what Christ means when he tells us, "I am the Good Shepherd," and what it means to be His sheep.

### References

- Barrett, C. K. (1956). *The Gospel According to St. John*. London: S.P.C.K.
- Beasley-Murray, George R. (1987). *John. (Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 36.)*  
Waco, Texas: Word Books.
- Brown, Raymond E. (1966). *The Gospel According to John*. New York: Doubleday &  
Co.
- Haenchen, Ernst (1984). *A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Volume 2: Chapters 7-  
21*. Translated and edited by Robert W. Funk. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- St. John Chrysostom (1889). *Homilies on the Gospel of John. (Nicene and Post-Nicene  
Fathers, Volume XIV.)* Translated and edited by Philip Schaff. Edinburgh: T & T  
Clark.