

Chapter 7: Watering the Sheep

In Chapter 1 we examined the coded relationship between a story about Jacob and the ministry of Jesus. In the last chapter we referred to evidence outside the story itself showing that Jacob or Israel serves as a type for the Messiah. Isaiah 49:3-6, for example, says that God's Servant, Israel, will gather back the tribes of Jacob. "Gathering" in verse five of this passage is rendered in the Septuagint by the Greek word *sunago*, the same word from which "synagogue" is derived. According to the Gospels, Jesus, like the messianic servant of Isaiah, began a gathering work. "He who does not gather [*sunago*] with me scatters," he tells his disciples.¹ "The fields," he says, "are white for harvesting. Already the reaper is receiving wages and gathering [*sunago*] fruit for everlasting life."²

It is understood in the Gospels that the faithful would carry on the "harvest" or gathering of followers even after Jesus' death. The process began among the Jews but was to widen out to Gentiles in order to create a spiritual nation, what Paul calls the "Israel of God."³ Another gathering is described in the New Testament as well, the assembling of believers at the end of the age. In Matthew Jesus says that when he returns with power and glory his angels "will gather [*episunago*] his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other."⁴ 2 Thessalonians 2:1 advises Christians not to be misled by sensational predictions about the imminence of "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered [*episunagoge*] to him."

Both of these gatherings are alluded to in the first chapter of Acts, where Jesus speaks to the apostles immediately before his ascension. The apostles expect to be fellow rulers with Jesus in his kingdom, so they ask him if he is going to assume power over the world immediately.⁵ Jesus replies that they will not to be given a timetable, but that a worldwide mission must be completed before the kingdom is ushered in. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you," he says, "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁶ Effectively the disciples get a "no" to their question. They had hoped for an early arrival of the apocalyptic gathering and were told to carry forward with the evangelistic gathering instead.

Jesus says that the first gathering will begin in "Jerusalem and in all Judea," the homeland of the Jews. It will extend afterward to

Samaria, home of the mixed-race remnant of the northern kingdom of Israel, and finally to the vast Gentile population that stretches out to the “ends of the earth.” These instructions mark a departure from Jesus’ own ministry, which with few exceptions was directed toward Jews, and from the restriction he had placed on the early work of his apostles. In Matthew Jesus tells the twelve that they should not preach to Gentiles or Samaritans but only to “the lost sheep of Israel,” meaning Jews.⁷ This command, which contrasts with the later injunction to preach to the world, nevertheless identifies the same ethnic-spiritual divisions of mankind as does the first chapter of Acts, namely, Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles.

Besides dividing humanity into the same three categories we find in Acts, the passage from Matthew 10 incorporates the metaphor of sheep. The sheep image occurs again in a similar context in John’s Gospel, where Jesus says that he has “other sheep” than those to whom he is presently ministering. “They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”⁸ With these words Jesus predicts the transition from a Jewish ministry to worldwide evangelism. The sheep from different ethnic groups or sheepfolds, once divided, will unite. If we blend Matthew 10:5-6 with John 10:16, we see three divisions of mankind represented as three pens or flocks of sheep prior to their being gathered into a single church body.

Gathering the Sheep to be Watered

In Acts 1:8 Jesus says that this gathering of symbolic sheep is to begin “when the Holy Spirit comes on you,” the Spirit being “the gift my Father promised” (v. 4). Acts goes on to describe the receipt of the “gift” at a worship service in Jerusalem when the apostles and a few dozen other disciples experience a miraculous manifestation of divine power, including the ability to converse with Jewish pilgrims in languages from the far corners of the Roman empire.⁹ Peter, acting as the apostles’ spokesman, addresses the Pentecost festival crowd and argues that Jesus was executed unjustly but in accord with God’s plan for salvation, and that the miracle the crowd beholds among the small group of disciples is only possible because Jesus has been raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God. Peter also invokes Old Testament prophecy that God would one day “pour out” his

divine Spirit:

“Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

‘In the last days,’ God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.’ ”

—Acts 2:14-18

Joel 2:28-29, the passage quoted by Peter, is not the only one where the pouring out of the Spirit is mentioned. “I will pour out water on the thirsty land,” God promises at Isaiah 44:3, “and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring.” Based on the “pouring” terminology in Acts and Joel, we are justified in concluding that in these passages, as in Isaiah 44, the Spirit implicitly is being compared to water, and we could add that metaphor to those of the gathering of Jewish, Samaritan and Gentile “sheep.”

We considered the use of water as a symbol for God’s Spirit earlier, in Chapter 2. Quoted there is a passage from John’s Gospel that seems especially significant in connection with the metaphor of a shepherd caring for sheep. The setting is a visit by Jesus to Jerusalem during the Festival of Booths, a time of general celebration during which the people constructed temporary shelters out of leafy branches and fronds.¹⁰ The “booths” were a reminder of God having led the nation through the desert “like a flock” after the exodus.¹¹ To commemorate the miraculous provision of water “from the rock,”¹² the priest would draw water from the spring-fed Pool of Siloam and carry it to the temple, where he poured it into a receptacle leading to the base of the altar.

On the final day of this festival, according to John 7:37-38, Jesus stood up and called out that anyone who was thirsty could come to him for water, and that streams of living water would in turn flow from anyone who believed in him. In verse 39, John explains that Jesus’ invitation had to do with the Spirit the disciples would later receive. “Up to that time the Spirit had not been given,” John adds,

“because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

The passage in John not only confirms the Spirit/water symbolism seen elsewhere in the Scriptures, it compares receiving the Spirit to drinking in order to relieve thirst. The setting is a festival that reminded Israel of the way God, like a compassionate shepherd, had provided water for his flock. John further says that the Spirit will not be present, at least not in the manner needed to spur the growth of the church, until Jesus has been “glorified.” We saw in Chapter 2 that water cannot flow from the rock until it is struck, that is, until Jesus has been killed. But Jesus’ death is only the initial stage of a process that includes his lying in the grave and then being resurrected on the third day. When later in John’s Gospel Jesus tells his disciples that the coming of the Spirit must follow upon his departure, he must be referring not merely to death but to death followed by resurrection.¹³

John 7:39, in speaking about Jesus being glorified, is using resurrection language like that of Paul when he says, “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory.”¹⁴ The connection between the resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Spirit brings us back once again to Acts 2. Peter says of himself and the small group of believers with him that “we are all witnesses of the fact” that God raised Jesus to immortal life. “Exalted to the right hand of God,” Peter continues, “he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.”¹⁵

Aligning the Symbols with a Hebrew Narrative

We now have the ingredients for a coded narrative. Through his resurrection Jesus, the good Shepherd, makes the “water” of the Spirit available to quench the spiritual thirst of Jewish, Samaritan and Gentile “sheep” gathered through evangelism. Peter invites his Jewish listeners to repent, be baptized and “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,” which he says is not intended for them alone but also for “all those who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”¹⁶ Acts later describes the conversion of Samaritans and their receipt of the Spirit upon being visited by a delegation of apostles, followed by the admission of Gentile believers into the church beginning with the Roman centurion Cornelius.¹⁷

The only item lacking from this motif of the gathering and watering of sheep is an appropriate symbol for Jesus' resurrection. In Christian tradition the resurrection is closely associated with the "empty tomb" that once held Jesus' body. Some scholars doubt the authenticity of the tomb story because it is not mentioned in Paul's letters, which are widely considered to be the earliest Christian documents. But neither does Paul mention specific episodes from Jesus' ministry or for that matter that Jesus even engaged in a ministry, though Paul cannot have been ignorant on that score. In favor of the story is the prominence it is given in the Gospels, all of which relate it in similar terms. At the least, we know the belief that Jesus' tomb was found to be empty occurs early and emphatically in Christian history.

As a concrete object, the tomb cannot be identified as a symbol in the sense of its being a metaphor, but it does function as an emblem of Jesus' resurrection. To be precise, however, the first indication that Jesus had been raised was not the unoccupied slab where his body had been laid but the displacement of the stone that sealed the entrance to the sepulcher. The "rolling away" (according to some scholars, "sliding away") of the stone was the first hint of something extraordinary having occurred and is noted in all four Gospels.¹⁸ Mark, which gives the most graphic description, says that the women who come to the tomb ask themselves who will "roll away," in Greek *apokulindo*, the "stone," *lithos*, which is "large in the extreme," *megas sphodra*.

Given its importance in the resurrection story we would hardly be surprised to find the rolling away of the stone used to represent Jesus' rising from the dead. We might be surprised, however, to see it so used in the prophetic narrative we have been progressing toward, which is from Genesis:

Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples. There he saw a well in the field, with three flocks of sheep lying near it because the flocks were watered from that well. The stone over the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the well's mouth and water the sheep. Then they would return the stone to its place over the mouth of the well. Jacob asked the shepherds, "My brothers, where are you from?" "We're

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from Haran,” they replied. He said to them, “Do you know Laban, Nahor’s grandson?” “Yes, we know him,” they answered. Then Jacob asked them, “Is he well?” “Yes, he is,” they said, “and here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep.” “Look,” he said, “the sun is still high; it is not time for the flocks to be gathered. Water the sheep and take them back to pasture.” “We can’t,” they replied, “until all the flocks are gathered and the stone has been rolled away from the mouth of the well. Then we will water the sheep.” While he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she was a shepherdess. When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of Laban, his mother’s brother, and Laban’s sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle’s sheep. —Genesis 29:1-10

Here we see the symbolic elements we have been discussing: a gathering of sheep, their need for water and the provision of water by means of the rolling away of a large stone. Before we explore the parallels further, note that the passage contains what appears to be superfluous dialog about what should be done with the sheep given the time of day.

The biography of Jacob calls at this juncture for Jacob to find his uncle and encounter his cousin Rachel, whom he will fall in love with and marry. Genesis need only say that Jacob finds shepherds at a well, questions them about Laban and then helps Rachel water her sheep. Editing out verses seven and eight, from “Look” through “Then we will water the sheep” would improve the story’s focus and eliminate an unnecessary discussion in which the verb “gather” is used in confusingly different ways. Jacob says that it is too soon to “gather” the sheep, meaning to bring them to a place of shelter for the night, and says that they should be watered instead. The shepherds respond that to water the flocks they must “gather” them. The awkwardness over the word “gather” is present in the original text, since in both cases it translates the Hebrew *asaph*.

Verses seven and eight of Genesis 29 might be taken as an insignificant snippet of patriarchal lore if not for the critical part these verses play in the coding of the episode. The question of what kind of gathering of the sheep should take place at midday corresponds to the subject of Jesus’ exchange with the apostles in Acts 1. Jesus indicates that the Gospel Age, which at 2 Corinthians 6:2 is called the “day” during which salvation is freely offered, is not yet far enough along

for the supernatural gathering of the church to occur. Instead, Jesus says, people to the ends of the earth, the sheep of three ethnic-spiritual flocks, must have the opportunity to hear the gospel message and be “watered” with God’s energizing Spirit. Until the coming of Jesus, the flocks of mankind had been waiting for spiritual water that became available only through the “rolling away of the stone,” just as in Genesis 29.

In Acts the small group of apostles and disciples who meet together in Jerusalem are the first to experience the outpouring of the Spirit. It is only after the “little flock” of original believers are “watered” that the Spirit is made available publicly to anyone within the category first of Jews and later of Samaritans and Gentiles.¹⁹ This corresponds in Genesis with the watering of Rachel’s sheep. As a young shepherdess, unmarried and probably no older than her early teens, Rachel would have had charge of a relatively small number of sheep, which nevertheless were the first to receive water as the well was uncovered. The story implies that the three larger flocks received water afterward.

Jacob not only provides water but says that after they are watered the flocks should be pastured. Jesus takes up this metaphor too with respect to the early church. “Feed my sheep” is Jesus’ post-resurrection command to Peter.²⁰ After receiving the Spirit, the first congregations needed continuing education in the word.²¹

Still more evidence of a coded alignment between Genesis 29:1-10 and the birth of the church as described in Acts is provided by original language terms. The Septuagint text of Genesis, which predates the New Testament by more than three centuries, uses the verb *apokulindo* for the rolling away of the stone just as do the synoptic Gospels. The stone, *lithos*, is large, *meGas*, as in Mark’s Gospel. The “watering” of the sheep is translated with a form of *potizo*, the same verb Paul uses at 1 Corinthians 12:13 to say that believers “drink” the holy Spirit. And as we would expect, “gathering” is rendered as *sunago*.

Confirming Jacob as a Messianic Type

We have repeatedly mentioned that the scriptures provide a basis for believing that Jacob would prefigure the coming Messiah.

According to Genesis, the man Jacob was given the alternate name “Israel” as a sign of God’s blessing. Jacob eventually fathered and led a clan consisting of his twelve sons and their families.

The names “Jacob” and “Israel” therefore are used in the Bible both for the man Jacob and for the nation consisting of his descendants, with context determining whether the individual or collective sense is intended. The book of Isaiah calls Israel “the servant of Yahweh” and introduces a third sense in which any of these three terms—“Jacob,” “Israel” and “Yahweh’s servant”—may be understood. Besides referring to the patriarch Jacob and the nation he fathered, they may designate a future leader who would perform works appropriate to the coming Jewish king, the Messiah. This leader or shepherd would gather back the tribes of the nation from their dispersion, atone for Israel’s sins and teach justice to the nations of the earth.²²

Some commentators see all of Isaiah’s “servant” passages as referring to Israel collectively rather than to a promised Messiah. And in certain verses it is not easy to tell whether the “servant” language is being used of the nation, of the Messiah as the nation’s representative or in a dual sense. Still, several of these passages make no sense if applied to Israel collectively. Isaiah 11:10 and 53:2 both call this messianic figure a “root,” *sore*, but 11:10 is more specific in saying a “root of Jesse.” Jesse was the father of David, the founder of the nation’s dynasty, and therefore the “root” must be an offshoot or descendant of royal lineage, not the nation as a whole.

This royal heir would be given the assignment of regathering the nation from its places of exile, something that could not be done by the nation itself. Nor could the nation atone for its own sins, considering that the sinners who need the servant’s intercession, the “we” of Isaiah 53:4-6, are in the immediate context the people of Israel.²³ The Messiah as distinct from the Israelite people does, therefore, bear the name of Jacob/Israel, pointing toward a prophetic resemblance between the ancestral founder of the nation and its Regatherer.

It is a measure of the neglect of typological study that casual readers and seasoned scholars alike routinely overlook the exquisite example of foreshadowing from Genesis 29. Concealed only by its unpretentious setting, in retrospect the clues to its significance appear

too obvious to be missed. Scanning the entries in a Bible concordance under the word “roll” reveals that occurrences of the unusual phrase “roll away the stone” hint at a possible link between Genesis 29 and the Gospels. Anyone who doubts that the story is intended prophetically should attempt to create a coded episode of his own, couched within a larger story, in which so many symbolic elements are arranged so masterfully.

The stock explanations of skeptics become so self-evidently inadequate in the face of this caliber of evidence that we need not review them again. Those objections that have not yet been mentioned for the most part take the form of diversions. I have been told, for example, that no conclusions may be drawn about the typological significance of given narratives without looking at what related literature has to say. What is the spiritual significance of Genesis 29:1-10, if any, according to the Talmud? What are the comments of church fathers and other commentators from the second century onward?

Ancient commentary is of historical interest but it cannot tell us whether or not the text is prophetically coded. That determination, in the present instance as in others we have examined, must be based on the Scriptures under discussion. Whatever speculation the Talmud or other ancient Jewish sources contain regarding Genesis, we can be confident that they do not interpret the stories about Jacob as prophetic of New Testament events. What, exactly, does that have to do with our study here? It is no more important than the absence of information in the Talmud regarding the discovery of penicillin or of the planet Neptune.

Humans have the ability to uncover truth and accumulate knowledge, a capacity the Bible says is God-given.²⁴ It would make little sense for God to provide a book as challenging as the Bible unless he intended prayerful study of it to yield new insights with the passing of time. That is not to say that the meaning of the Scriptures is buried deep beneath the surface and reserved for the sophisticated few; one of the functions of typological prophecy is to confirm the divine character of a message that is open to all.

We have seen how episodes in the life of Jacob encode Jesus’ ministry, his resurrection and the bestowal of the Spirit. Jacob is far from being the only Old Testament character who prefigures the

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Messiah, however. He is not even the foremost of these—that distinction belongs to David, to whom we turn our attention next.

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- 1 Matt 12:30.
- 2 John 4:35-36
- 3 Gal 6:16.
- 4 Matt 24:31.
- 5 Cf. Matt 19:28.
- 6 Acts 1:8.
- 7 Matt 10:5-6.
- 8 John 10:16.
- 9 Acts 2:1-11.
- 10 Lev 23:41-43.
- 11 Ps 78:52.
- 12 Ps 78:20.
- 13 John 16:7.
- 14 1 Cor 15:42-43.
- 15 Acts 2:32-33.
- 16 Acts 2:38-39.
- 17 Acts 8:14-17; 10:1-48.
- 18 Matt 28:2; Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1.
- 19 Luke 12:32.
- 20 John 21:15-17.
- 21 Acts 9:31; 15:32-35.
- 22 Isa 11:4, 10-12; 42:1; 49:5-6; 52:13-53:12; 55:4.
- 23 Isa 53:8 says that the servant dies “for the transgression of my people,” which indicates that Israel’s transgressions are immediately in view, and those of Gentiles only by extension.
- 24 Prov 2:3-6.

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