

John 10:1–10

¹ “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate but climbs over elsewhere is a thief and a robber. ² But whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has driven out all his own, he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. ⁵ But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.” ⁶ Although Jesus used this figure of speech, they did not realize what he was trying to tell them. ⁷ So Jesus said again, “Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came (before me) are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.

Only verses 1-10 are part of the Sunday gospel, however, vv.11-21 are normally included as part of bible study

¹¹ I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. ¹³ This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father.” ¹⁹ Again there was a division among the Jews because of these words. ²⁰ Many of them said, “He is possessed and out of his mind; why listen to him?” ²¹ Others said, “These are not the words of one possessed; surely a demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?”

Context

The gospel text has sheep, shepherds but rather than describing a bucolic scene, the passage seems to be with a harsh, accusatory tone. It is almost as if we have picked up an on-going conversation. And we have. There are many commentators who set the boundaries of this gospel pericope as John 9:39-10:21 in order that the reader understand the scene that is unfolding.

Chapter 9 is essentially the narrative of the “man born blind” whom Jesus heals on the Sabbath – much to the exasperation of the religious authorities who cannot see the glory of God revealed in this sign. Instead the authorities are more concerned with the “who, what, when and where” of the miracle and why it was done on the Sabbath. One of their agenda was to discredit the notion that Jesus was the promised Messiah (cf. 9:22). At the end of the narrative, the now-sighted man has been thrown out of the Temple and Jesus comes to him. While the man comes to believe in Jesus as Messiah, the religious authorities are, at best, divided – and in fact are plotting to do away with Jesus.

³⁹ Then Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind.” ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not also blind, are we?” ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, ‘We see,’ so your sin remains. (John 9:39-41)

The accusation hangs in the air and colors the verse that follows: *Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate but climbs over elsewhere is a thief and a robber.*

Jesus is rebuking the religious authorities because they had become irresponsible and thieving shepherds, feeding themselves rather than their flock. The condemnation of the shepherds would have been a theme well understood from the OT narrative. Crucial to the identification of the author's purpose at this point is the necessary realization that he is writing about Jesus with the text of Ezekiel 34 in clear view. (*Note: it would be good to pause at this point and read Ezekiel 34*) In that passage, Ezekiel, speaking God's word, rebukes and condemns the authorities of his own time. They too had fed themselves rather than their flock. Thus God would take away their position and authority and become the shepherd himself. Finally he would appoint another shepherd after the figure of David. John sees all of this coming true and fulfilled in Jesus, God become shepherd. Thus John makes clear that the glory of God is being revealed in the pastoral metaphor of shepherd in that Jesus' fidelity to his sheep, his sacrifice for them, will stand in contrast to the failure of the blinded, bullying authorities of John 9.

The metaphors come fast and often in John 10. There are the sheep — easily identified as the flock that Jesus intends to lead into good pasture (v. 9), those whom he knows by name and who recognize his voice (vv. 3–4, 14), those whom he intends to defend against thieves and robbers (vv. 1, 8, 10) and whom he wishes to join together with all others who, listening to his voice, will come into the one fold (v. 16). Jesus will effect all this because he is the Good Shepherd (vv. 11, 14), loved by the Father because he will lay down his life for the sheep. It is this act of total, loving self-sacrifice that is mentioned again and again as the central motif. Appearing first in v.11 as the good shepherd title is introduced, it occurs again in verses 15, 17, and twice in verse 18. Though the shepherd-sheep metaphor was well known in the OT, this laying down of the shepherd's life is something new. It is the characteristic function of Jesus. He is the good shepherd especially because of his willing self-sacrifice.

Commentary

Moloney [301] outlines this narrative by the following schema:

- 9:39-41: Introduction. Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees (among whom there is a division) and he condemns them for their blind ignorance
- 10:1-6: Jesus tells a parable about entering the sheepfold and the Pharisees cannot understand. This section is marked with the unique, "*Amen, Amen...*"
- 10:7-13: Jesus contrasts himself, the door and the Good Shepherd, with others who are thieves, robbers and hirelings. This section is also introduced with "*Amen, Amen...*"
- 10:14-18: Jesus the Good Shepherd, out of union with the Father, lays down his life for the sheep
- 10:19-21: Conclusion: A division among "the Jews."

Some Background

To appreciate this parable it is important to understand its setting in a small first century Palestinian village. It would be quite the norm for a family to own but a few sheep. The sheep were sources of income (wool) and clothing, and so the animals were protected usually within small walled courtyards next to or connected to the house. If each family had only a few sheep, a shepherd for each household was not justified, so several households would have one shepherd to look after their sheep. Often the shepherding was done by a child from one of these families. If no child was available a hireling was employed. Early each morning the sheep would be taken out to graze in the open country. The shepherd moved from house to house, and because he was known to the doorkeepers they opened their

courtyard doors to allow him to call out the sheep. The sheep knew his voice and eagerly followed him into the open country to feed. The walls of the courtyards would be substantially high, this anyone who was not the shepherd, who had ulterior motives, would have to climb over the walls because the doorkeeper would not admit him and, of course, the sheep would not recognize his call and would flee from him. While this practice was not uniform, it was typical according to scripture scholars. Interestingly, a similar system of community “shepherding” was used by the Maasai, Samburu and Kuria people of Kenya in their cattle herding.

The Long Awaited Shepherd

The open verses (vv.1-2) are actually one sentence in the Greek and form a carefully balanced antithetical parallelism that establishes the identity of the shepherd (v.2) by first establishing who he is not (v.1). While scholars have debated for ages is this is a simile, parable or metaphor, what seems clear is that Jesus is drawing a distinction between those who are (a) the one(s) expected and known by gatekeeper and sheep alike, and (b) those who are pretenders to that responsibility and authority. It is for the one sent and charged with pastoral care to call out all his sheep, to lead them, going on ahead of them. This part of the parable is reminiscent of Moses’ prayer for a successor: ¹⁶ “*May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, set over the community a man* ¹⁷ *who shall act as their leader in all things, to guide them in all their actions; that the LORD’S community may not be like sheep without a shepherd.*” (Numbers 27:16–17)

Thieves and Robbers

Who are the thieves and robbers? Does the phrase in v. 1 refer to the same group as the phrase in v.8 (or “thief” in v. 10) or not? It is likely that they may refer to different groups. Whoever they are in v.8, they came before Jesus. The ones in v.1 are contemporaries with the shepherd. They also seem similar to the “thief” in v. 10, who also has malevolent intentions against the sheep. It would be very Johannine if there are different layers of meaning to this phrase, e.g.:

- Jesus is continuing his attack against the blind Pharisees from 9:41. So the “thieves and robbers” could refer to them.
- They are disruptive people within the community; people who have entered the flock -- but not through the proper entrance -- not through Jesus, who is later pictured as the gate. For example, Judas Iscariot, one of the “insiders,” is called a “thief” in 12:6. Acts 20:28-29 uses some of the same language: “*Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the holy Spirit has appointed you overseers, in which you tend the church of God that he acquired with his own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock.*”
- It also may be a polemic against the agenda laden leaders within the Fourth Evangelist’s own church.
- In a general sense the phrase may refer to any deceptive leaders or people – people with hidden agendas.

Verse 6 makes it clear that the opening verse have more that figurative meaning.

The Sheep

The latter part of v.3 (*the sheep hear his voice*) literally translates as “the sheep the sounds (*phōnēs*) his hear.” While voice might be part of the range of calls the shepherd might use, perhaps when one considers the use of whistles, “sounds” is the better translation. In any case, the key is the link between recognition of the proper *phōnēs* and the resulting movement: lead-follow. The movement is also twinned: call-answer, lead-follow, stranger-run away. In one, the movement it towards intimacy (v.4); in the other, the movement is towards separation (v.5).

It would seem clear that Jesus' "figure of speech" (v.6) should be read with the larger context of the tradition OT image of God as the shepherd and God's people as the sheep (e.g., Pss 23:1; 74:1; 79:31; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3 – and Ezekiel 34:1-10). God is the Good Shepherd who will rescue the sheep.

The Pharisee's conduct towards the man-born-blind (cf. 9:34) has demonstrated that they do not have the flock's best interest at heart. This stands in contrast to Jesus who has cared for the man and as we see at the end of John 9, the man responds to Jesus.

So Jesus said again...

It is evident to Jesus that the disciples do not understand, so Jesus offers another explanation. Commentaries have long asked how we are to understand the relationship between vv.1-6 and vv.7-18. Are the latter verses making an allegorical explanation to the already presented parable? The problem with such a view is that characters and imagery has changed. In any case, few people seem to believe that if vv.7-18 are a clarifying or additional explanation, it likely was not any more effective.

But some see that a change of scene/place is implied (from "*driven out...walks ahead...follow*"). Whereas the opening verses were within the village: the courtyards and narrow streets on to which they opened. Now the setting is the open country into which the shepherd led the sheep for grazing, and where in the summer months shepherd and sheep might spend the night. Overnight the sheep were placed in roughly constructed round stone-walled enclosures. The top of the dry-stone wall was covered with thorns to keep out wild animals. Inside the enclosure the sheep were safe so long as the entrance was secured by the shepherd. He slept across the entrance as there was no door and no doorkeeper.

While this explanation (possible, but not definitive) gives a good reason for the change of symbols, it seems also clear that the unusual statement "*I am the gate*" makes clear that now it is only via Jesus that one can enter the "flock" and be considered part of the people of God. It is the intimate relationship with Jesus that defines that association. It is also key that Jesus' self-identification as the gate is primarily oriented to the life of the sheep – something made clear in vv.9-10 where Jesus explicitly identifies himself as the means for salvation: *I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly* (v.10b). This restates one of the central affirmations of the Fourth Gospel: Jesus comes to bring life (e.g., 3:16; 5:24; 6:40, 51; 11:25; 20:31)

This is the third of seven 'I am' sayings with predicates in the Fourth Gospel (6:35, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). It is introduced with the solemn formula "*Amen, Amen I say to you*" (*amēn amēn legō hymin*) to emphasize the importance of what is said.

All who came before me

There cannot be a sweeping rejection of all OT figures – especially given that Jesus has already made references to Abraham and Moses as positive witnesses to him (5:45-46; 8:56). This statement is more akin to OT passages like Jeremiah 23:1-8 and Ezekiel 34, in which the prophets pronounced judgment upon the shepherds of Israel for their failure to care for the people. Jesus may have had in mind messianic pretenders (cf. Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22), or more likely 'the Jews', who treated the man born blind so badly. Of such leaders, Jesus says, *the sheep did not listen to them*. The man born blind certainly did not listen to them. Those who belong to Jesus, the true shepherd, do not resonate with voices such as theirs.

The Good Shepherd

At v.11, the focus shifts to Jesus' self-revelation as the good shepherd. The identification of Jesus as the shepherd was implicit in the figure of speech in vv.1-5, but it is made explicit for the first time here. As before, the positive image of the good shepherd (vv.11, 14-16) is contrasted with a negative image, that of the hired hand (vv.12-13).

The “I am” saying of v.11a is explained exclusively in metaphorical language in vv.11b-13. That is, after the initial use of a first-person singular pronoun, Jesus never refers to himself directly again. Instead, he draws on images derived from the OT to explain what he means by “good shepherd.” The adjective “good” (*kalos*) also has the meaning “model” or “true,” and the reference point for what constitutes a model shepherd is set by the image of God as the good shepherd in Ezekiel 34. According to Ezek 34:11-16, God the good shepherd cares for the sheep, rescuing them from the places to which they have been scattered, feeding them, and tending to the weak, the injured, and the lost. By identifying himself as the good shepherd of Ezekiel 34, Jesus thus identifies himself as fulfilling God’s promises and doing God’s work (cf. 4:34; 17:4).

A Willingness to Lay down his life. Verse 11b pushes beyond the imagery of Ezekiel 34 in its reference to the shepherd’s willingness to lay down his life for the sheep. A possible OT antecedent may lie in the messianic oracle of Zech 13:7-9, in which the death of the shepherd is required so that the flock can be purified. Verse 11b may also have points of contact with Palestinian shepherding practices; a good shepherd may indeed have to give up his life to prevent the decimation of his flock by wild animals. Yet the reference to the shepherd’s laying down his life is cast in a distinctive Johannine idiom (10:15, 17-18; 13:37-38; 15:13; 1 John 3:16), so that the reader of the Gospel cannot help hearing in Jesus’ words an allusion to his own death. Verses 15 and 17-18 will make those associations with the death of Jesus explicit, but at this point Jesus stays within the metaphor of shepherding. He works to build the interpretive frame of reference before he turns more directly to his own life and death.

The image of the hired hand in vv.12-13 has many echoes of the image of the bad shepherd in Ezek 34:5-6, 8-10. It also recalls descriptions of the bad shepherd in Jer 23:1-3 and Zech 11:15, 17. The common denominator in these OT portraits of the bad shepherd and the picture of the hired hand is the shepherd’s primary concern for his own well-being at the expense of the flock’s well-being. In each of these portraits, the flock is scattered and devoured by animals as a result of the shepherd’s neglect. This picture of the hired shepherd’s lack of concern for the sheep (v.13) stands in marked contrast to the picture of the good shepherd, who cares for the sheep to the point of laying down his life for them.

In Relationship with God. Jesus’ self-revelation in vv.14-16 weaves back and forth seamlessly between figurative and nonfigurative speech. Jesus begins by once again identifying himself with the image of the good shepherd (v.14), but explains that image primarily by making reference to his ministry and relationship to God, rather than by staying within the images of sheep and shepherd as he did in vv.11-13. This move between figurative and non-figurative speech results in some ambiguity in interpreting Jesus’ words. This ambiguity is immediately evident in v.14b. When Jesus speaks of his relationship with his own, he may be speaking within the shepherding figure (cf. vv.3-4), but the expressions “my own” (*to ema*) and “his own” (*hoi idioi*) also describe Jesus’ relationship to his followers in John (e.g., 1:11; 13:1; 17:9-10). Verse 14b suggests that the line between metaphorical and direct speech is very thin in this section of the discourse.

This is especially evident in the use of the verb for “know” (*ginōskō*) in vv.14b-15a. Jesus’ words in v.14b may be read as an elaboration of the shepherd imagery of vv.4-5, but v.15a explicitly moves outside of the shepherd imagery by pointing to Jesus’ relationship to the Father. Verse 15a provides a working definition of knowledge in John: knowledge is not a cognitive category, but is a category of relationship. The true measure and model of knowledge is God’s and Jesus’ mutual knowledge. Jesus is thus the good shepherd not simply because of his relationship to the sheep, but also because of his relationship to God.

Verse 15b makes the connection of Jesus’ death and the shepherd’s death (cf. v.11) explicit. The juxtaposition of vv.15a and 15b suggests again that Jesus lays down his life not simply because of his relationship to the sheep (as in the image of the shepherd in v.11) but because of his relationship with

God. The reference in v.16 to other sheep has particular relevance in the setting of Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees. Jesus is suggesting here that his flock is not limited to the sheep of Israel and that the community created by his death will include people from outside of Israel (cf. 12:32). The mark of this expanded flock will be that "they will listen to my voice," a trait that distinguishes the flock from the Jewish leaders who neither listen to nor know Jesus' voice (cf. 8:43; 10:6). To hear Jesus' voice is the mark of faithfulness to Jesus and his word (cf. 5:24; 10:27; 12:47).

The final image of v.16 returns fully to the sheep metaphor. The vision of a united flock recalls the final promise of Ezek 34:31: "*You, my sheep, you are the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God.*" Jesus once again positions himself as the fulfillment of promises traditionally associated with God. Jesus the good shepherd will bring about unity in the flock through his relationship with God and his death (v.15).

A Theological Summary

Verses 17-18 form the conclusion to the discourse. In these verses, the shepherd metaphor is abandoned completely and Jesus speaks directly about his death and relationship with God. These verses focus on three theological themes that are essential to understanding the death of Jesus in John.

First, these verses place Jesus' death fully in the context of his relationship with God. Verse 17 contains the first linkage of "love" (*agapaō*) with Jesus' death in the Fourth Gospel. God's love for the world (3:16) and for Jesus (3:35) are already known to the reader, and this verse adds a new dimension to that love. God loves Jesus because Jesus lives out God's commandment fully (v.18). In the Fourth Gospel, the core commandment that Jesus gives his disciples is that they love one another *just as he has loved them* (13:34). The sign of Jesus' love for them is that he is willing to lay down his life for them (cf. 13:1; 15:13). Jesus thus obeys the same commandment from God that he passes on to his disciples, to live fully in love. It is wrong to read these verses as saying that Jesus wins the Father's love through his death; rather, his death is the ultimate expression of the love relationship that already exists and defines who he is and how he enacts God's will for the world.

Second, our verses make clear that Jesus' laying down his life is an act he freely chooses as an expression of his obedience to God. Jesus is not a victim in death nor a martyr against his will, but is in control of his own death (v.18b; see 19:11, 17). The Gospel story has already demonstrated this in the authorities' inability to arrest Jesus (7:30, 44) and his control of the hour (2:4; 7:30; 8:20).

Third, the summary verses point to the inseparability of Jesus' death and resurrection in John. Jesus' enactment of God's work is incomplete until he returns to the Father through his resurrection and ascension (13:1; 17:1, 4-5). Jesus reveals God's will for the world not only in his death, but also in his victory over death through his return to God. When Jesus lays down his life, therefore, it is to the end of taking it up again. In this summary, Jesus speaks of himself as the agent of both his death and his resurrection (cf. 2:19-21). That is, whereas elsewhere in the NT God raises Jesus (e.g., Acts 2:24; 10:40; 1 Cor 15:15; Gal 1:1), here Jesus speaks of taking up his own life again. The "power" (*exousia*) that Jesus has to lay down his life and to take it up again is given to him by God (see 17:2 and Jesus' statement about Pilate's "power" at 19:11). These verses point to the complete union of God and Jesus in their work (cf. 4:34), a union that receives explicit expression at 10:30.

More Division

The schism among the "Jews" in response to Jesus' words (v.19) recalls the schism among them in response to his healing of the blind man (9:16). In 9:16a, some attempted to discredit Jesus by calling him a sinner; here the charge is demon possession (v.20; cf. 7:20; 8:48). Others are willing to trust the evidence of the miracle itself (9:16 v.21). Verses 19-21 make clear that the Fourth Evangelist intends the healing and the discourse to be assessed in the light of each other. A decision about Jesus' identity must hold together both his words and his works.

Notes

John 10:1 sheepfold: a low stone wall open to the sky. **gate:** The word translated ‘gate’ is *thyra*, which means ‘door’, and the word translated ‘sheepfold’ is *aulē*, which means ‘court’ or ‘courtyard’. When translated correctly it is clear that the parable is set in the village, not the open country. **thief and a robber:** the expression robber (*lēstēs*) is sometimes used to describe revolutionaries; in Jesus’ day this term was sometimes used of the Zealot movement. Given v.12, it is a possibility that *lēstēs* is referring to those who would use messianic hopes for their own nationalistic ventures and aspirations.

John 10:3 gatekeeper: Allegorical readings of this passage attempt to identify the gatekeeper with some figure in the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities.

John 10:4 driven out: the word (*ekballein*) normally means “to cast out” – seemingly lending the sense that the sheep are reluctant to leave the confines of the sheepfold. **recognize his voice:** the Pharisees do not recognize Jesus, but the people of God, symbolized by the blind man, do. Where John 9 relied on the sense of sight to fuel the narrative, John 10 adds the sense of hearing to make the parallel distinction.

John 10:5 not follow a stranger: Some commentaries suggest that several flocks are kept within a single sheepfold, thus the separation occurs when a single shepherd calls out his sheep and those sheep respond, while the remaining sheep do not because they do not recognize the shepherd’s voice. This interpretation is far from certain and there is no clear reference to a multiplicity of flocks elsewhere in the immediate text.

John 10:6 figure of speech: John uses a different word for illustrative speech than the “parable” of the synoptic gospels, but the idea is similar.

John 10:7 I am the gate for the sheep: There are several ancient manuscripts which read “shepherd for the sheep.” Thus some scholars speculate “gate” may be a scribal error associated with an underlying Aramaic expression. Perhaps, but given that v.9 repeats the image of the gate in a context that would make “shepherd” a strange usage, most scholars agree that “gate” is appropriate for v.7’s usage. There are others who note that in some instances the shepherd slept across the opening of the sheepfold thus acting as a gate for all practical purposes. Perhaps relevant, in Islam, one of the monikers for a religious leader is *Bāb* (gate) of knowledge. In John 10:7-8, the figure is of a gate for the shepherd to come to the sheep; in John 10:9-10, the figure is of a gate for the sheep to come in and go out.

John 10:8 all who come (before me): The phrase “before me” is omitted in many good early manuscripts and versions. The larger phrase is perhaps a reference to the long history of God’s people and its leadership. This is difficult in that it implies criticism of patriarchs, prophets and righteous of the OT era. Brown (286) considers this too drastic an interpretation.

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