

This chapter marks a significant transition. The aged patriarch Jacob, realising his life is at an end, blesses his son Joseph and his two sons and looks to a new future beyond Egypt. The blessing is all the more poignant, of course, because Jacob had for many years assumed his son was dead. In the course of this blessing Jacob looks back over his extraordinary life of success and failure and praises God as **‘the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day’**. Jacob was himself a shepherd for many years. It is the first time in the Scriptures God is referred to as Shepherd. This is a theme we are going to explore in the early weeks of this New Year. The term was known and used as a formal title in the Ancient Near East but what is striking is how, in the Hebrew Scriptures (particularly the Psalms and the exilic prophets), it is used in warm terms to describe the lived experience of God’s people. That was certainly true for Jacob.

1. God as shepherd - his dependable presence.

In the Middle East there were and are two sorts of flocks. First, there are the semi-nomadic sheep herders who often have large flocks and spend many months away from their home area. Second, there are the settled village families, each with a few sheep, and one person looks after the sheep of a number of families. But what is clear is that in the unfenced and unpredictable terrain of the Middle East a Shepherd is always on hand. Jacob has failed many times but God promised him at Bethel (Genesis 28:15) ‘I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go....I will not leave you until I have done what I promised.’ This is our great confidence as we enter this New Year.

2. God as shepherd – his constant protection.

Jacob goes on to speak of God as ‘the Angel who has delivered me from all harm’ (48:16). Sheep are particularly defenceless creatures (no claws, sharp teeth or speed) and lived in dangerous terrain. Jacob assures his son he has nothing to fear (Genesis 49:24) because of the ‘Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel’. God will be our protector.

3. God as shepherd – his sovereign guidance.

At the heart of this story is a remarkable surprise – Jacob defiantly crosses his hands and gives a particular blessing to Ephraim, not Manasseh the firstborn. (It is all uncomfortably reminiscent for Jacob of his own blessing through deceiving his father Isaac.) God as shepherd speaks of his unrivalled sovereignty over his flock. He guides us in ways beyond our rational understanding.

This God has become incarnate in Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd. Jesus promises never to leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5); he protects us as the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls’ (1 Peter 2:25); and will guide us as we discern his voice (John 10:3).

Read Genesis 48:1-22.

1. Jacob’s testimony, looking back over his long life, is the beautiful words of v.15 **‘God has been my shepherd all my life until this day’**. Plot together, as you remember them, the key moments of Jacob’s life, both highs and the lows. What do you think was Jacob’s outstanding experience of God in it all?

2. For many years Jacob was himself a shepherd, and a skilled one at that. (Genesis 30:29-30). How is a Middle Eastern shepherd different to ones we know here in Scotland and how does this make the image of God as a ‘Shepherd-God’ more vivid?

3. Jacob experienced God as the perfect shepherd - a faithful presence, a constant protector and a sure guide. Read God’s promise to Jacob at Bethel Genesis 28:13-15. Share together ways God has been a shepherd to you over 2016.

4. What is the significance of Jacob crossing over his hands? How does Joseph react? How do we hold together both a thoughtful planning of our future and being open to God’s sovereign surprises?

5. The use of the image of God as Shepherd is very uneven in the O.T. It is concentrated in the Psalms and in the exilic prophets. Why do you think that is?

6. Jesus takes up the image of the Good Shepherd, itself an assertion of his divinity. It was a very common image of Jesus in early Christian art (the catacombs for example) but then became less popular. Do you think it is an image of Jesus we have lost sight of today?

7. What do you think is the challenge for us of the image of God as Shepherd?