

# The Need for a Nomadic Theology (Part Two)

*God has revealed his redemptive purpose to the world by creating a traveling people sustained by pastoralism, which in fact continued to be important throughout Israel's history. This method gave a measure of separation (holiness) from others and dependence on God, and for these reasons pastoral images are prominent throughout the Bible. These pastoral images give Israel her distinctive identity.*

by David J. Phillips

**P**astoral images are prominent throughout the entire Bible because the pastoral relationship of God with his traveling people lies implicit beneath the other biblical concepts. One of those is the fundamental covenant relationship.

## The Pastoral Relationship in the Covenant

The traveler and pastoralist relationship predated the covenant, because it developed over 24 years with Abraham that included God justifying him, before it was given the form of a covenant (Gen. 17). This relationship of faith, without the structuring and fulfilling of the covenant, is fundamental as Paul shows (Rom. 4:9-12). Faith in the transcendent, yet immanent, Pastoral Guide of a traveling people gave Israel her distinctive identity. This continued through out the formative experience of nomadism in the wilderness and was not replaced, but was expanded upon when becoming a nation (Ex. 19:5-6; Dt. 5:3).

Many times the covenant God is described as a pastoralist in a way that unites his roles of Creator and covenant God, so that the fundamental personal relationship of man with his Creator is realized as the content of the covenant. The Creator-God fulfills his covenant with Israel like a shepherd because he made and possesses everything, including the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10; 95:7; 100:3; Ezek. 34:26-27).

*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.*

From before Israel's time, kings and other leaders were likened to shepherds (Gen. 49:24; Num. 27:17; 1 Kings 22 :17; Is. 40:11, Jer. 31: 10), so that the biblical image of shepherd has much to do with the authority to provide, protect and to judge. God has command of both human history and the cosmic ecosystem.

The counting of the sheep and cattle grazing in the mountain pasture are signs of God-given prosperity (Lev. 27:32; Jer. 33:13), especially in contrast to his judgment (Ezek. 20:37, Jer. 9:10). As God has helped men to defend the flock against preda-

tors, so he also defends Israel against her enemies (1 Sam. 17:34-36). God can provide for, protect and lead the individual as well as the whole people (Gen. 49:24 cf. 48:15; Ps. 23; 77:20; 78:52; 80:1; Jer. 25:34-36).

Understanding God as shepherd expresses most appropriately the covenant grace or steadfast love ('*hesid*'), which is the outworking of the relationship. This

grace is the undeserved favour of God who continues faithful to fulfill his covenant even with his disobedient people. He has amazing ability to find good pasture and water in the same place; in real life they are often one or more day's journey apart (Ps. 23:2). Gathering the sheep, leading them to good pasture in all conditions and weathers, seeking the lost, binding up the injured, establishing folds and places of rest are all mundane duties of the shepherd—but they are used to cover the whole range of God's relationship with his people.

This basic understanding and experience of God was augmented by the concepts of covenant, law, temple with its ritual,



ethnic separatism, prophecy, kingdom and the monarchy. The new institutions as they developed reinforced Israel's distinctiveness that was already explicit as they traveled as pastoralists; they gave Israel a moral unity as a nation to be God's witness to other nations (Ex. 19:6). Israel had to become a 'showcase society' by fulfilling God's instruction or *torah* (Ex. 19:6; Dt. 4:6), and show the moral character derived from the knowledge of God (Dt. 4:7). Therefore the view and experience of God as gracious and pastorally caring was vital to being his people.

Even if pastoralism may have receded somewhat as a major economic activity during Israel's history, it continued to be given prominence in the Scriptures as expressive of Israel's relationship with God. Nomadic pastoralism was essential to integrate the trials of faith and obedience with the great revelation given. God's word always requires a practical response and Israel had to learn that God was their Headman leading the migration, in a situation frequently close to survive death.

### Walking in the Ways of the Lord

Righteousness exalts a nation and this is expressed in traveler terms. The 'way' of the earthly migration and God's

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guidance in the wilderness makes an easy continual transition to use the same term for God's conduct and the responding conduct of his people, to 'walk in the ways of the Lord.' To 'walk' implied to journey, to arrive or depart on travel, such as the Patriarchs' journeys or the wilderness journey for Israel. To walk was to progress purposefully, just as nomads travel with a systematic purpose according to the seasons obeying their sense of calling within the conditions of the environment. This is what it means to 'walk in God's ways (Ex. 16:4; 18:20; Lev. 18:3; 20:23) even long after literal traveling was finished (1.Ki. 2:3f; 3:14; 6:12; Neh 5:9; Is. 2:3,5; 30:21; Ezek. 11:20; Zech. 3:7).

Deuteronomy especially links walking in the wilderness (Dt. 2:7) with walking in the Lord's ways—that is obeying his commands (Dt. 5:33, 8:6, 10:12, etc.). One can trace linkages in the narrative (Ex. 13:18,21 with 18:20; Dt. 8:2 with v6; 17:16 with 19:9; 25:17,18 with 26:17; t8:7). Others include Israel's disobedience as departing from the way of the Lord (The episode of the golden calf: Ex. 32:8 with 33:13; Dt. 9:12,16 with 10:12; and generally Dt. 1:22,25 with 1:33; 3:26 and 5:32-33). Many of the Psalms also connect the earthly way with walking in God's ways (Ps. 1:1,6; Ps. 18:21,30; Ps 119). This faith was expressed by trustworthiness and love toward God, with imperfect law keeping accompanied by the sacrifices in order to be reconciled to God.

The Exodus was a redemption from the consequences of sin and social oppression. Yet Israel was disobedient and unbelieving in the wilderness, and later practised social oppression herself like the Egyptians. Redemption from the guilt and power of sin was to come later, although in anticipation of this any Israelite could receive justification by God (Gen. 15:6; Ps. 32:1-5; 1K. 8:30). In the Old Testament forgiveness is sought (Ps. 25:18; Num. 14:19a; 1Kg. 8:30, etc.; 2 Ch. 6:21, etc.) and received (Ps. 32:5; 78:38; 85:2; 99:8; 103:3; Num. 14:19b; in Ex 32:32 forgiveness is refused) and promised (Jer. 18:23, 31:34). A whole generation were forgiven but also were refused entry into the land (Num. 14:20-22). The pastoral migration experience affected their attitude to worship, to subsistence and land, and to others.

God's concern for justice in society is shown in pastoral terms. The refusal of hospitality and celebration at sheep shearing time is implicitly condemned (1 Sam. 25:2-8, 36; 2 Sam. 13:24-39). The custom of allowing a poor pastoralist, who has lost his own flock, to rear orphaned lambs and so start again is still done today. This is the probable background to Nathan's parable that condemned David's adultery against Uriah, that speaks of the poor man's only little ewe lamb reared among his children and stolen by the rich man who had many flocks (2 Sam. 12:1-6). This is a poignant image to modern nomads like the Fulbe who lend or share livestock in difficult times. God is as concerned with justice in pastoralism as he is with adultery. Ezekiel describes God judging Israel like a shepherd dividing his sheep. Sheep that grow fat by butting others away from the fodder and trampling down the pasture are a picture of injustice and inequality in society (Ezek. 34:17-21). The covenant relationship needed to be completed by its fulfillment in the relationship of Jesus to God as Father, for godly and spiritual leadership was a crucial weakness in Israel.

### Israel's Concept of Land

Israel shared the nomad's concept of land being accessible to all and allocated according to use and produce rather than outright ownership (Num. 34). The Promised



*God requires a relationship of trust and obedience to Him as our Creator which shapes our life and society according to His character. Israel became an ethnic minority, shaped by a divinely led migratory journey, having to maintain her distinct identity by her internal spiritual and moral resources. In this she was like a nomadic people!*

*The Turkish designs on pages 35, 37, and 39 are designs, chiefly using the rock-and-wave motif, from the "Damascus" and "Rhodian" period circa 1575.*

Land was God's gift or inheritance because of Israel's sonship (Ex. 4:22; Dt. 32:5ff). However God retained overall ownership of the land even when he had 'given' it to Israel as he owns the land everywhere (Ex. 19:5; Dt. 10:14).<sup>1</sup> We are distinctly told that the Israelites were God's aliens in the land (Lev. 25:23; 1 Ch. 29:15). This guaranteed the inheritance to each tribe, clan down to each household in contrast to having a fickle human landlord (Lev. 25:23).<sup>2</sup> They could not be forcibly removed except he should so decide.<sup>3</sup>

Yet being God's aliens also meant that they themselves were accountable to him as the allocating power and not free to dispose of it as human landowners could by right of purchase. Their residence was conditional on their faithfulness to God and they saw this as a continuation of the patriarchs' experience; (1 Ch. 29:15; Heb. 11:13). The land too must have its sabbath year as an independent entity (Lev. 25:1ff). Israel's security was only in God's allocation and disposal, which she could forfeit at any time through disobedience.

Benefit from the land was to be shared. Israel's experience as 'outsiders' in both Canaan and Egypt also meant that they knew how insecure an alien can feel, and their society was intended to be open to all with a similar faith and willing to make their home among them, just as many nomads gradually accept others of a similar life style and experience. They were told to make the alien welcome among them, even to participate in their worship (Ex. 12:19, 48-49, 22:21, 23:9; Lev. 19:33; Dt. 1:16; Jer. 7:6, 22:33; Ezek. 22:29, and many other references). God's promise was to bless each ethnic group with his revelation, and this holds true for nomadic peoples who often are a minority in the modern nation state. Right from the beginning the nomadic life is not marginal, but central in God's revelation.

The land was not to be subject to commercial or political transactions (Gen. 17:8, 48:4, Lev. 25). The sale of land was not a transfer of ownership but of its temporary use for a number of harvests (Lev. 25:14-16). The jubilee law allowed land to revert back to the original family to whom God had allocated it, thereby undoing any subsequent commercial transactions (Lev. 25:13). On the other hand, 'mere' town houses could be bought and sold permanently, as of lesser consequence (Lev. 25:29f). All this was true for the agricultural land around the towns, and presumably similar concepts regulated the common or open pastures beyond the fields, and on which Israel would depend in the sabbatical year, and which must have been of considerable extent.

This contrasted with Israel's contemporaries, who believed that land was owned by the monarch, or by private landlords to use as they wished. Israel's God-given concept maintained the dynamic relationship of her nomadic past even after being settled as a non-nomadic people for centuries. As with nomads, permanence in the form of residence in one place did not depend on ownership of land so much as maintaining a right relationship with the right people or person.

Every seventh year, Israel abandoned agriculture to return to a hunter-gathering life-style and pastoralism to survive. God provided a bumper harvest in the sixth year (Lev. 25:21), but other wise wild produce in the extensive common lands and not from cultivated fields (v.4) had to sustain them (Lev. 25:6-7, 12,19). This sabbatical year was inadequate as a fallow period, and it appears to be a token return to the pastoral situation (Lev. 25:5-7), and possibly implies that agriculture is necessary toil for the land as a result of sin (Gen. 3:17-19), from which the land must rest like man. The sabbath year was a measure of self-sustained natural renewal of the environment and the exile was seen also as a renewal for the land (Lev. 26: 34-35, 43). The fact that debtors were released at the end of this year implies that it symbolized a returning to their first way of life.

Israel's relationship with God and the land was dynamic in the tension between its permanent giving and it being conditioned by the people's response to God. Israel was aware the previous occupants were judged and lost the land. God's purpose included the land as Israel's resting place (Dt. 12:9-11) for them to live demonstrating his character by obeying his laws, and so be a witness to the surrounding unbelieving nations (Is. 11:10; 66:1). This involved God finding a resting place with his people (1 Ki. 8:56; Ps. 132:8,14) and entry without God was unthinkable (Ex. 32:13). The temple fulfilled this, with Solomon praising God for giving rest to the people (1 Ch. 28:2). But their subsequent history demonstrated a tenuous hold on the land, as the dynamic of the divine relationship turned against them.

Faith was further developed due to the land being a fragile environment, such as that of many modern nomads. Agriculture depended on the limited rain and dew in the right quantities at the right seasons, by using terraced fields, run-off cultivation and cisterns. The top soil was soon washed away with-

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out terracing. The development of cisterns was essential to settle any significant population in the Judean hill country.<sup>4</sup> The rains during the month of October was the season most looked forward to after the heat of summer (see Is. 41:17-20). Barley was more important than wheat, because of the semi-arid conditions, as it is in Tibet. In time of drought Israel's survival often depended on this pastoralism that could move around the land to the pasture.

The threat of drought was connected directly to Israel's unfaithfulness. The temptation to rely on the Baals of the Canaanite fertility religion based on agriculture, often undermined their faith. Israel's continued residence in the land depended on her loyalty to God who had proved himself in the pastoral situation of the wilderness (Dt. 28: 12, 23; 33:28; 1 Kg. 18:17ff). With time the environment became ruined as the forest cover was destroyed and the soil eroded due to over population and war.<sup>5</sup> Also this was due to the large commercial estates replacing the stewardship of the local households that had been originally allocated the land.

The covenant highlights the conditional nature of this gift, that the land was not merited in any way, but a lack of grateful, worshipping obedience made it conditional (Lev. 25:18; Dt. 1:35; 4:1; 6:3, 24; 8:5-7; 9:28; 11:17; 26:9ff; 27:1-68; Josh. 1:8; Is. 7:20; Jer. 11; Ezek. 20:10-15, 23). Israel failed to do this as did the wilderness generation (Ps. 95:11; Micah 2:10; Heb. 3:11). The threat of expulsion hung over them (Lev. 18:28; 26:14-25; Dt. 4:26-27; 11:17; 28:15-68; 29:18-29; Josh. 23:13). Land ownership was more a stewardship for God rather than outright possession (Lev. 18:28; Dt. 24:4).

While Israel was in no way a nomadic people at this stage of her history, one thing is sure, her relationship to God and the land was more akin to the allocation of resources practised by nomads, than modern notions of land ownership and national territory.

### **Pastoralism in the Land with God**

After arrival in the land God and Israel did not abandon pastoralism. The land was known as a land for shepherds from before biblical times, and being a shepherd was the most common occupation there.<sup>6</sup> As a land of 'milk and honey' it was a pastoralist paradise, being suitable for both sheep and cattle raising and the gathering of natural produce (Ex. 3:8, 17, 13:13:5, 33:3; Num. 13:27, 14:8, 16:13; Dt. 6:3, 11:9, 26:9,15, 27:3, 31:20; Josh. 5:6, etc.). We have already referred to the seventh year sabbath for the land and a return to a hunter-gatherer and pastoral economy. The agricultural and urban features were a bonus, that contrasted with the harsh wilderness, and secondary to the God-given natural abundance (Dt. 8:7-9,15).

Immediately after the conquest, the Israelites' limited agricultural production would only have supplemented their pastoralism. Although Israel took over terraced fields that were already constructed and vineyards that were already planted, the livestock grazing the pastures around the settlements must have continued to be a major means of subsistence. The Israelites must have had some experience as cultivators in Egypt, just as many pastoral peoples today engage in seasonal agriculture, without undermining their essential pastoralism in any way.

Every village of the Israelites continued to have its flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cattle. Most families had members working as herders pasturing near the village, or going considerable distances within Israel's territory to open pastures, beyond the large areas then covered in forest, thus practising 'enclosed nomadism' ('common lands' Lev. 25:34; Nu. 35:2,3,4, etc. Josh 21:2; 1 Ch. 6:55). The shepherds passed on their skill and knowledge within their families, and if working for others, received remuneration by a share of the young animals they had reared. Although no longer nomads themselves, the Israelites were in constant contact with tent dwelling nomads who lived permanently on the steppe with small livestock.<sup>7</sup> Foreign shepherds also passed through Israelite territory, grazing their flocks on the stubble of the fields in return for fertilizing the fields with the dung. They also provided their skills as shepherds to the Israelites or alternately posed a threat as tricksters, raiders or spics.<sup>8</sup>

The nomads who appear in the Bible, such as the Amalekites and Midianites, are usually presented as hostile and most references to them are negative (Ex. 17:8ff; Num. 14:43ff; Dt. 25:17ff; Jg. 3:13). The Midianites launched what were considered to be the first recorded rapid camel-mounted attacks in war, but were related to Abraham and Moses (Gen. 25:6; Ex. 2:21). Gideon's led the victory of agriculturists against the 'legitimate' raiding of desert-dwelling pastoralists (Judges 6-8). It would not be difficult for the nomad to draw hostile implications from the Bible.

Changes came when the monarchies of Judah and Northern Israel created a centralized court with wealthy retainers who became the absentee landlords of large estates. But in spite of the abuses created by a powerful court the decentralized pattern of society, based on the village or the small town, with its attached pastoralism would have continued as the way of life for most of the population. When Israelites 'went home' to their houses, the expression is often literally they went to their tents (1. Kg. 8:66; 12: 16, etc.), but on other occasions 'house' is used (e.g. Jdg. 20:8). Other metaphors refer to tents and their ropes in contexts where tents had passed out of use (Is. 33:20; 54:2; Jer. 10:20).<sup>9</sup>

Israel's cities were tiny and very crowded, and most of the population lived outside in the country. Even the inhabitants of the cities took to the countryside to live with their relatives and to help with the harvests or livestock for the summer months. Cities in Israel's thinking, did not have the connotation of citizenship, culture and human achievement that they had for the Greeks. Cities were considered as serving the rural population around them for administration, trade and defence, not for living in them. Jerusalem was a special case as the religious centre of the whole country, for pilgrimage but not the place to live in, for God's influence spread out far beyond the city.<sup>10</sup>

Israel's highly developed pastoralism was vital to provide the animals which only were acceptable for atoning sacrifices (Lev. 1,3-6). These were offerings from the best of the pastoralist's assets. Accordingly, being a pastoralist and being able to sacrifice defined the 'poverty-line' (Lev. 1:14f; 12:8; Lk. 2:24). The system recognized its own limitations and could have required something other than livestock. But the offerings represented not only human sin, but also the moral sacrifice God made in redeeming a disobedient people to himself (Ex. 32-33; Dt. 1:34, 43; 9:5-21), and pointed to a greater sacrifice he would make in Jesus (Lev. 17:11).



Throughout the time in the land the threat of exile hung over Israel and only about 40% of the time between giving the promise and the coming of Christ is recorded as an increasingly precarious fulfillment. At least in the early part of this period these considerations imply that in spite of having become agriculturists, at heart the Israelites had the self image of being a semi-nomadic pastoral people. In this way they should have learnt continual dependence on God's provision, as they had in the wilderness. So pastoralism continued to be an integral part of Israel's experience and history.

The promise of the land was a means to maintain the dynamic relationship with God already established in the wilderness journey, and conditional on their putting into practice God's pattern for society. It was not to be mere national territory.

### Pastoral Leadership for God's People

God's shepherding was an exacting model for human leaders. God delighted to use leaders who were pastoralists such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and the founders of the Twelve Tribes, Job, Moses, David and Amos (Amos 1:1-2, 7:14-15). David as king had a covenant to be God's shepherd over his people (2 Sam. 5: 2-3), and Jeremiah used so many pastoral images that it would not be surprising if he had worked as a shepherd himself.

Israel's human leaders who broke God's law were likened to irresponsible shepherds who had failed in their duties (Jer. 2:8; 10:21; 11:3f; 12:10; 22:22, 24; 23:1-4; 25:35ff, etc.). When this happened God himself must step in to shepherd the people (Jer. 23:1-2; Ezek. 34:1-16).<sup>11</sup> God judged them as a shepherd dealing with under-shepherds. As a shepherd has to give account for sheep lost to predators by saving part of the carcass, so God will give account for his judgment of Israel (Amos 3:12). The shepherds or leaders of Israel will not be able to stop the judgment any more than shepherds can frighten a lion (Is. 31:4).

Invaders will occupy Judah like alien shepherds stealing others' pasture with their flocks (Jer. 6:2) and they do it casually like a shepherd who flicks grass from his cloak (Jer. 43:12). The effect of God's judgment will be like trying to put up a tent single-handed, or like a pasture withering in the heat, or like sheep that are lost, or going to slaughter, or like a well going dry (Jer. 10:20; 12:2-4; 14:2-6; 50:8). The camp guard dogs will fail to keep watch and enemies, no better than dogs themselves, will triumph (Is. 56:9-11; Job 30:1). God's judgment is completed by the exile, but it will not last (Ps. 74:1).

God will enable Judah to lead the captives of other nations to liberty like a billy-goat leading the flock (Jer. 50:8; Ezek. 34:1-17). The two prophetic oracles of Zechariah 9-11 and 12-14 describe God's shepherd who would destroy the evil shepherds and was struck down and the sheep scattered. Jesus related this to himself and the cross. God will finally dwell with his people using terms for being in a camp of tents, and paradoxically this implies security and permanence (Ezek. 37:27; Zech 2:10-11).

Israel's future spiritual pilgrimage was constantly expressed in pastoral images, whatever the life style of most of the Israelites and the later Jews. Isaiah, the urbanite prophet of the Jerusalem court, uses images that are relevant to pastoralists. Describing the future like a new exodus, he mentions in just one chapter the improvement of migration routes across the mountains (Is. 40:3-4). He goes on to mention the withering of pastures (vv. 6-8), the careful shepherding of young animals (vv. 10-11), the wisdom of the heavenly Herdsman in understanding the ecosystem (vv. 13-14), the pastoralist's disdain for princes and kings (vv. 18-20), the destructive effect of the wind on vegetation (v. 24), the observing the stars and birds of prey (vv. 25-26, 31) and the earth made the habitation of man with the sky being spread like a tent and curtain (v. 22). God gives strength to what is usually a very hard life (v.29-30). All this is part of Isaiah's picture of a greater exodus, beyond the judgment of Assyria and the other world powers of the day, that will fulfill God's promises to Israel.

God requires a relationship of trust and obedience to him as the free and faithful Creator and to shape our life and society according to his character. Israel became a sort of ethnic minority, with her ethos shaped by a divinely led migratory journey and having to maintain her distinct identity by her internal spiritual and moral resources. In this she was like many nomadic peoples. Her existence and space among the settled, well-established territorial nations with their territorial deities was dependent on her loyalty to the non-territorial, transcendent God.

Israel was to be God's witness to the world by being a community shaped by fellowship with him. Their pastoral experience demonstrated God's provision and protection, and revealed God's character of grace, faithfulness and righteousness, that establish the foundation of the gospel. Israel's history provides an authoritative model of revelation and redemption that challenges all peoples to travel with the 'timeless God', who intervenes in our lives to develop our trust and obedience. What was required to complete this relationship was an act of transcendent, 'nomadic grace' embodied in the redemption available in Jesus.

## End Notes

1. C. H. J. Wright: *Living as the People*, p. 59.
2. Christopher J. H. Wright: *God's People in God's Land*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990, p. 63f.
3. E. A. Martens: *God's Design*, p. 111.
4. J. Bright: ob. cit. p. 109; John Paterson: "Resources. Conservation and Christian Responsibility", *Christian Graduate*, March 1971, pp. 11-14.
5. John Paterson: ob. cit.
6. W. White: *roeh*, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, L. Harris, G. Archer, B. Walke eds., Chicago: Moody Press, 1980, p. 852.
7. K.R. Veenhof "History of the Ancient Near East" in *The World of the Bible*, Volume 1 pp. 237f.
8. V. H. Matthews & Don Benjamin *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE*, Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1993, pp 52-66.
9. T. C. Mitchell: "Nomads", *The New Bible Dictionary*, Leicester: IVP, 1962 and *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, IVP & Hodder 1980. See the article by W. W. Wessel: "Arabia".

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