PLASU Journal of Religion, Cultural and Humanities
Vol: 1 No. 1. December, 2025

THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND ITS INTERPRETIVE SIGNIFICANCE FOR EZEKIEL 34:1–16

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Abstract

This paper explores the sociocultural context of the Ancient Near East (ANE) and its interpretive significance for Ezekiel 34:1–16, a passage that issues a strong prophetic critique of Israel's corrupt leadership. Central to this section is the metaphor of the shepherd; a symbol deeply rooted in ANE political and religious thought, commonly used to depict kingship, leadership, and divine responsibility. Across Mesopotamian and Israelite cultures, the shepherd image was not merely pastoral but carried powerful connotations of administrative duty, care, and covenantal accountability. By employing a socio-historical and literary-contextual method, this study examines how Ezekiel appropriates and transforms this motif to challenge exploitative rulers who have failed to protect and nurture their people. The analysis demonstrates that while Ezekiel draws from shared ANE paradigms, he reconfigures them to portray Yahweh as the ideal shepherd, committed to justice, restoration, and faithful covenant relationship. This paper contends that failing to interpret this passage through the lens of its ANE background risks a reductionist reading; one that overlooks the richness of its ethical and theological message. By recovering the cultural codes embedded in the text, readers can better appreciate its rhetorical force and enduring relevance. Ultimately, this study concludes that Ezekiel 34:1–16 offers more than historical critique; it provides a timeless vision of leadership rooted in responsibility, justice, and divine compassion which are principles essential for guiding both religious and political leaders in contemporary society.

Key Words: Sociocultural Ancient near East, Prophetic Critique, Exegetical Analysis, Contemporary interpretation

Introduction

Biblical texts are deeply rooted in the historical and cultural worlds in which they emerged. They were not written in a vacuum but reflect the prevailing sociopolitical realities, symbolic systems, and worldview of their times. The Book of Ezekiel, particularly chapter 34:1–16, stands as a powerful prophetic passage that critiques the failures of Israel's leaders and presents Yahweh as the true and faithful shepherd of His people. This chapter offers more than spiritual encouragement; it functions as a rhetorical indictment of corrupt leadership, one that resounds with profound theological and ethical dimensions. However, to understand the full force of this message, it is essential to go beyond a purely theological reading. It necessitates an informed awareness of the sociocultural milieu of the Ancient Near East (ANE), where such metaphors of leadership and divine care were deeply embedded and widely understood.

In ANE societies, the shepherd metaphor was not merely poetic; it was a political and religious symbol that pervaded royal ideology and governance. Kings across Sumerian, Babylonian, and Egyptian civilizations were routinely portrayed as shepherds appointed to care, guide, and protect their people (Walton 56). This cultural backdrop is indispensable to grasping the full implications of Ezekiel's critique. Ezekiel's use of the shepherd motif is not a theological invention in isolation but a deliberate adaptation of a shared cultural symbol to expose leadership failure and proclaim divine justice and restoration. The purpose of this study is to explore how the sociocultural context of the ANE enhances the interpretive depth of Ezekiel 34:1–16. Ignoring the ANE background risks superficial readings that miss the rhetorical and ethical weight of the prophet's message. Peterson opines that critics who interpret Ezekiel 34 without engaging ANE metaphorical systems such as the widespread image of kings as shepherds, miss the force of Ezekiel's rhetorical reconfiguration. By failing to situate Ezekiel within treaty-making and covenantal expectations common in Near Eastern treaties, they flatten the prophetic critique into a generic spiritual admonition (16). Smith also emphasizes that the biblical text of Ezekiel 34:1–16 is "embedded within the cultural assumptions of its world," and thus must be interpreted within that frame (24). This paper adopts a Socio-Historical and Literary-Contextual methodology, combining cultural reconstruction with close textual analysis to illuminate the significance of leadership imagery in Ezekiel. It argues that Ezekiel 34:1–16, when read in light of its ANE context, reveals a profound critique of failed leadership and a radical reimagining of just governance under divine authority.

Defining the Ancient Near East

The term **Ancient Near East (ANE)** is generally referred to a region and period encompassing the earliest known civilizations of the world, including Sumer, Akkad, Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, Canaan, and Israel. Spanning roughly from 3000 BCE to 500 BCE, the ANE constitutes the historical, cultural, and religious backdrop to much of the Hebrew Bible and the ancient world of the biblical writers. This area, stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the western parts of Iran, witnessed the rise of complex societies characterized by monumental architecture, codified laws, developed writing systems, and centralized political structures. This provides the sociocultural framework within which the biblical texts as we have it were composed (Walton 23–25).

Methodology

The method adopted for this study is the Socio-Historical and Literary-Contextual Approach. This approach is a critical method in biblical interpretation that emphasizes understanding the text within its original cultural, political, and literary setting. It assumes that biblical texts emerged from specific historical circumstances and were shaped by the social realities, traditions, and literary conventions of the Ancient Near East (ANE). As Walton explains, without a grasp of the conceptual world in which the Bible was written, modern readers risk misinterpreting or overlooking the theological and ethical depth of its message (25). For Ezekiel 34:1–16, this approach involves analyzing Israel's leadership crisis during the Babylonian exile and comparing it with ANE views of kingship and governance.

At the same time, the literary-contextual element pays close attention to the structure, genre,

metaphors, and rhetorical features of the passage. According to Collins, examining a text's internal literary cues alongside its historical background allows interpreters to uncover how biblical authors addressed pressing communal and theological concerns through vivid imagery and prophetic critique (9). Thus, when applied to Ezekiel 34, this dual approach highlights both the historical failure of Israel's leaders and the literary strategy through which the prophet reimagines divine leadership. Together, these methods enrich our understanding of the passage's relevance and theological vision.

An Overview of the Socio-Cultural World of the ANE in Relation to Ezekiel 34: 1-16

To accurately interpret Ezekiel 34:1–16, it is essential to understand the sociocultural world of the Ancient Near East (ANE), particularly the leadership paradigms that shaped political, religious, and moral life in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel. These ancient civilizations shared overlapping views on kingship, divine authority, and the ethical responsibilities of rulers. In this context, leadership was not simply administrative; it was theological, moral, and deeply symbolic, intertwining human governance with divine expectations and cosmic order.

In Mesopotamia, for instance, kings were often seen as chosen representatives or even partial embodiments of the gods. Their role extended beyond rule and warfare to include the moral and cosmic maintenance of the land. Kings were expected to uphold justice and truth (*kittum and mīšarum*), maintain order (*šar kibrāti*, ―king of the world‖), and care for the weak and disenfranchised in society (Walton 238). This concept is vividly illustrated in the Code of Hammurabi, where the monarch is described as a shepherd chosen by the gods to ―pasture‖ and protect his people. Thus, the metaphor of the shepherd was not merely pastoral; it symbolized divine authorization and moral obligation.

Similarly, in Egypt, the Pharaoh was regarded as a divine figure responsible for ensuring *ma'at*, the foundational principle of justice, order, and harmony. Egyptian literature and iconography regularly depict Pharaohs as shepherds of their people, emphasizing their role as both guardians and judges of the social and cosmic order (Snell 92). The shepherd imagery underscored the duty of the king to ensure societal balance and to care for the vulnerable.

Israelite leadership ideals, while sharing symbolic affinities with surrounding cultures, diverged significantly in their theological foundations. In Israel, kings and priests were not divine but served under the authority of Yahweh, bound by a covenantal relationship with God and the people. Their legitimacy derived from obedience to God's laws, and their failure to execute justice was grounds for divine rebuke. The Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly emphasize the ethical responsibilities of leaders to uphold justice and defend the marginalized. The metaphor of the shepherd becomes a theological and ethical standard by which Israel's leaders are judged (Wright 200). Ezekiel 34 reflects this prophetic tradition by denouncing Israel's leaders for their failure to fulfill these sacred duties. Unlike the exalted kings of Mesopotamia or Egypt, the shepherds in Ezekiel's prophecy are portrayed as corrupt and self-serving; feeding themselves, neglecting the weak, and abandoning the lost (Block 279). Ezekiel appropriates and subverts the ANE royal ideology to highlight a radical critique: leadership without justice is a betrayal of divine trust. Throughout the ANE, social justice was more than an abstract ideal; it was a divine mandate. Rulers were evaluated based on their commitment to uphold equity and protect the vulnerable. As Snell affirms, safeguarding

widows, orphans, and the poor was a central moral obligation, reflecting the will of the gods (118). Against this backdrop, Ezekiel's message becomes clearer: his critique of failed leadership is not only political but deeply theological. By reclaiming the shepherd metaphor for Yahweh, the prophet reasserts that true leadership is rooted in divine justice, compassion, and restorative care.

Literary and Historical Context of Ezekiel 34:1–16

The Book of Ezekiel is a theologically rich and literarily intricate prophetic text that reflects the socio-political and spiritual turmoil of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE. Ezekiel, both a priest and prophet, was among the Judean exiles taken to Babylon during the first deportation in 597 BCE. He ministered primarily to this exiled community after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BCE. His prophetic mission sought to interpret the catastrophe that had befallen Judah, emphasizing the people's covenant unfaithfulness and, more specifically, the moral and spiritual collapse of their leaders (Block 3–5). In this context, Ezekiel 34:1–16 functions as a focused prophetic denunciation of Israel's shepherds represented by its kings, princes, priests, and possibly elders who had failed in their divinely mandated roles as caretakers of the people.

The chapter begins with a clear indictment of these leaders for their exploitation, negligence, and self-interest (vv. 1–6). It moves to pronounce divine judgment against them (vv. 7–10) and culminates in a hope-filled promise that Yahweh Himself will assume the role of shepherd, seeking the lost, healing the wounded, and restoring justice to the flock (vv. 11–16). The passage uses the pastoral shepherd metaphor well known in the ANE as both a tool of condemnation and a symbol of divine restoration. As Joyce observes, Ezekiel adopts and transforms familiar ANE royal imagery, turning it into a potent critique of earthly rulers while simultaneously casting Yahweh as the model of righteous leadership grounded in justice and compassion (168–69).

Exegetical Analysis in Light of the Ancient Near Eastern Context

Ezekiel 34:1–16 offers a potent theological and rhetorical critique of Israel's leadership, deeply embedded in the sociopolitical symbolism of the Ancient Near East (ANE). The passage employs key Hebrew terms and motifs particularly the shepherd metaphor to expose failed governance and affirm divine commitment to justice and restoration. By reading this section in light of ANE cultural expectations and using exegetical tools, the prophet's message becomes clearer and more compelling.

The central term in the passage רֹעֶה (*ro͗eh*, ―shepherd‖) is critical to understanding the passage's theological trajectory. In both biblical and ANE literature, the shepherd metaphor frequently symbolized royal leadership (Walton 237). According to *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, רֹעֶה encompasses both literal pastoral care and figurative

governance, often denoting a king or ruler entrusted with the welfare of his people (BDB 944). Ezekiel's usage subverts the familiar ANE royal ideology by condemning leaders who exploit their flock. Instead of guiding, protecting, and nurturing, the shepherds in Israel have consumed the fat, clothed themselves with wool, and failed to strengthen the weak. **Verse 3** builds on verse 2 by elaborating on the indictment against Israel's leaders, specifying how they exploit the flock for personal gain; feeding themselves rather than tending to the needs of the

people. The Qal imperfect second masculine plural תֹּאכֵלוּ (***to'khelu***.) conveys the action of "you eat" or "you consume," referring to the oppressive shepherds who exploit the flock for their own gain (Wright, *Ezekiel* para. 5). The phrase אֶת־הַחֵלֶב (*et-haḥeleb*) "the fat" symbolizes the exploitation and self-indulgence of Israel's leaders, who unjustly consume the best resources for themselves while neglecting their duty to care for the people, reinforcing the chapter's critique of corrupt leadership and its call for just and compassionate governance. The Hebrew word אֵת (*'et*) is a direct object marker. It specifies that **"the fat"** (הַחֵלֶב) is the object of the action, emphasizing that the corrupt leaders are consuming or misusing the best portions for themselves rather than caring for their people. According to BDB, the Hebrew word הַחֵלֶב (***haḥēleb***) means **"the fat"** and often refers to the choicest or richest portions, particularly in the context of sacrifices (e.g., Leviticus 3:16) or symbolic wealth (316). The shepherds not only eat the fats, but cloth themselves with the wool. The verb תִּלְבָּשׁוּ (***tilbashu***) in the **Qal imperfect second person masculine plural "you clothe yourselves"** implies that the corrupt leaders selfishly use הַצֶּמֶר (***haṣṣemer***) translated ―the wool‖ and refers to the fleece of sheep, often symbolizing wealth and provision for their own benefit, highlighting their exploitation and failure to fulfill their responsibility of caring for the people (851).The verb תִּזְבָּחוּ (***tiẓbaḥu***) in the **Qal imperfect second-person masculine plural** form, meaning **"you slaughter** ―comes from the root זבח (*zābaḥ*), which means to "slaughter for sacrifice, offer sacrifice, kill" (256). This implies that the corrupt leaders were not only exploiting the flock for personal gain but are also unjustly sacrificing them for their own benefit symbolizing their betrayal and misuse of power for personal benefit rather than nurturing and caring for their flock. Still it is the best ones they slaughter.

The Hebrew word הַבְּרִיאָה (*habberī'āh*) comes from the root ברא (*bārī'*), which means "fat, healthy, well-fed" in the sense of physical well-being (135). Unfortunately, while they benefit from the fat ones, they failed to feed them. The phrase הַצֹּאן לֹא תִרְעוּ (*haṣṣōn lo' tir'u*), ―you do not feed the flock‖ underscores the leaders' failure to fulfill their divine mandate, emphasizing their negligence and self-serving exploitation, which contrasts sharply with the biblical ideal of just and compassionate leadership. The negative particle לֹא (***lo'***) emphasizes the absolute and deliberate failure of Israel's leaders to fulfill their duty, reinforcing their negligence and moral corruption by categorically denying their role as true shepherds of the people (Ezek. 34:3–4).

The clause לֹא תִרְעוּ (*lo tir_u*, ―you do not shepherd‖) expresses a direct dereliction of duty. This imperfect verb form, as Owens notes, conveys ongoing or habitual failure, emphasizing the leaders' persistent negligence (Owens 851). Other phrases such as לֹא חִזַּקְתֶּם (*lo ḥizzaktem*, ―you did not strengthen‖) and לֹא בִקַּשְׁתֶּם (*lo biqqashtem*, ―you did not seek‖) used in the *piel* stem intensify the moral indictment. These terms, when analyzed through *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, reveal ethical responsibilities rooted in covenantal care and social solidarity (Harris et al. 2:841). All this when contrasted with human failure is Yahweh's model of ideal shepherding. Verses 11–16 depict God's intervention to seek the lost, bind the

injured, and feed the flock with justice. The verbs used such as אֲבַקֵּשׁ (*'avaqqesh*, —I will seek‖), אֲחַזֵּק (***achazzek*** —I will strengthen‖) and אֶחְבֹּשׁ (*'eḥevosh* —I will bind up‖) mirror those previously attributed to failed human leaders, emphasizing divine reversal and restoration. As Chisholm notes, this literary structure creates a stark ethical contrast and redefines kingship not in terms of power but pastoral care (310). In the broader Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) context, kings and rulers were idealized as guardians of order and justice, often mandated to establish *mīšarum* (justice and equity), particularly by protecting the marginalized the widows, orphans, and the poor. These royal expectations were inscribed in law codes and royal inscriptions throughout Mesopotamia and Egypt. However, this ideal often remained aspirational rather than fully practiced, as rulers frequently abused their authority and exploited their subjects for personal gain. Ezekiel appropriates this cultural ideal of the just king but reinterprets it through the lens of Yahweh's covenantal standards. Unlike the general ANE notion where royal legitimacy could be derived from divine appointment regardless of moral character, Ezekiel insists that leadership is fundamentally a theological vocation. The failure of Israel's leaders, therefore, is not merely a political or administrative lapse; it is a breach of divine trust and social responsibility.

Furthermore, Block observe that, Ezekiel 34 functions as —a theological manifesto,‖ where the metaphor of the shepherd is strategically deployed to deconstruct corrupt human authority and to reimagine leadership under Yahweh's sovereign and ethical standards (Block 284). The prophet not only indicts the present leadership but casts a hopeful vision of restorative justice through divine intervention. Within this prophetic framework, *justice*, *accountability*, and *compassion* emerge as core principles of Yahweh's reign. Ezekiel 34:1–16 thus challenges the notion of leadership as a privilege or entitlement and reframes it as a divine responsibility centered on the welfare of the people. Through evocative ANE imagery, prophetic irony, and precise lexical formulation, Ezekiel calls for a radical transformation of governance rooted not in domination or self-interest, but in covenantal fidelity, restorative justice, and genuine care for the community.

Implications for Contemporary Interpretation

Ezekiel 34:1–16, when read through the lens of its Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) sociocultural background, reveals a deeply theological critique of failed leadership and a redemptive vision for restorative justice. This passage, though rooted in sixth-century BCE Israel, speaks prophetically into today's leadership crises, especially within ecclesial, political, and communal spheres. The use of the shepherd metaphor, widespread in ANE literature, becomes a powerful ethical and theological device in Ezekiel's hands, exposing exploitative leaders and calling for integrity, justice, and accountability which are values essential for contemporary leadership in any society.

In modern political and ecclesial contexts, leaders are similarly entrusted with care, oversight, and the well-being of their constituents; roles that parallel the shepherding duties of Ezekiel's day. The prophet's indictment of Israel's leaders, particularly their neglect of the weak, exploitation of the vulnerable, and abuse of authority for selfish ends (vv. 2–4), resonates deeply in societies today where public office is often used for personal enrichment. Owens rightly observes that the repeated negations such as לֹא־תִרְעוּ (*lo tir_u*, —you did not shepherd‖) and לֹא־חִזַּקְתֶּם (*lo ḥizzaktem*, —you did not strengthen‖) reveal a systemic disregard for ethical

responsibility and covenantal accountability (1197). This insight has profound implications for theological ethics that leadership is not merely a functional task but a moral and spiritual trust.

The implications for the church are equally significant. As Block argues, the church like ancient Israel is called to reflect God's own shepherding model, one marked by compassion, justice, and faithful protection of the marginalized (284). Especially in contexts such as Nigeria, where both church and state often face crises of corruption, nepotism, and neglect of the vulnerable, Ezekiel 34 serves as a prophetic benchmark for reform. The divine response, where Yahweh declares, —I Myself will search for My sheep‖ (v. 11), offers a vision of leadership as redemptive stewardship rather than hierarchical dominance. God's actions; seeking, healing, and restoring (vv. 11–16) embody the servant leadership to which all leaders, secular or sacred, are called.

Furthermore, exegetical tools reinforce this ethical vision. For instance, according to the *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, the term רֹעִי (*ro͏̱eh*) carries the connotations of tending, guiding, and protecting which is a holistic, pastoral obligation (944). This broad semantic field challenges contemporary leaders to adopt a model of leadership rooted not in power but in covenantal responsibility. Clines, in *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, emphasizes the ethical dimensions of verbs like לֹא־בִקַּשְׁתֶּם (*lo biqqashtem*, —you did not seek [the lost]‖), indicating the importance of relational care and restorative justice in leadership (1179). Public theology which integrates theological insight with societal engagement finds in Ezekiel 34 a foundational text for developing leadership ethics. Gentry and Wellum underscore that the vision of restoration in Ezekiel is covenantal and comprehensive: God reclaims leadership to reestablish justice, peace, and wholeness (237). For leaders today, especially those shaped by biblical faith, this passage challenges them to model their governance after God's own standard; one characterized by justice, mercy, and faithful care for all people.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that understanding the sociocultural context of the Ancient Near East (ANE) significantly enhances the interpretation of Ezekiel 34:1–16. By analyzing the leadership structures, the shepherd metaphor, and the ethical expectations embedded in Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Israelite societies, the passage's exegetical and theological depth becomes more vivid and compelling. In these cultures, the image of the shepherd was a familiar and esteemed metaphor for kingship, symbolizing the ruler's duty to ensure justice, provide protection, and promote the welfare of the people. Against this backdrop, Ezekiel's prophetic critique of Israel's leaders gains sharper clarity. The prophet deliberately inverts the positive associations of the shepherd image to expose the deep moral failure and neglect of those who were meant to care for God's people. Ezekiel redefines leadership by grounding it not in power or privilege but in divine justice, restorative concern, and covenantal responsibility.

This paper reaffirms the indispensable value of sociocultural context in biblical interpretation. Neglecting the ANE background risks flattening the text's message and overlooking the rhetorical force behind its imagery. However, proper contextual engagement opens new dimensions of meaning and reveals the theological vision embedded in Ezekiel's message.

Ezekiel 34:1–16, far from being a relic of ancient prophecy, stands as a timeless call to accountable, compassionate, and God-centered leadership. Its relevance endures in contemporary ecclesial, political, and community contexts where the quality of leadership continues to affect the lives and well-being of people. Ultimately, the passage offers Yahweh's shepherding model as the enduring standard; one marked by justice, mercy, and faithful stewardship.

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