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Bleat, then I Shall Find You: The Interpretation of Sheep as the Summit of Humanity in the Text of John 10:11-18

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Abstract:

This article interprets the term sheep in John 10:11-18 based on three points that found from animal husbandry research. First, sheep are a communal animal. This trait will be elaborated with L. Roger Owens' idea of participation to construct a "cosmic encounter space" in an effort to provide an inclusive message from the text. Secondly, the tameness of the sheep makes it easier for the shepherd to take care of it. This fact will be confronted with H. Richard Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility to emphasize that humans are in Christ not by instinct or divine coercion. Finally, shepherds have a role to ensure and improve the quality of life of the sheep. I will use the findings to emphasize the significance of the figure of Christ in the soteriological and ethical dimensions.

Keywords:

Cosmic Encounter Space;
Ethic; Responsibility;
Sheep; Shepherd

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INTRODUCTION

Sheep, with the scientific name *Ovis Aries*, are commonly used as livestock and have high marketability. In the first half of 2023, the estimated production of sheep meat in Indonesia is around 53 tons.¹ Based on the research conducted by Andry Ramdani et. al, there are four reasons that people are interested in buying sheep: (1) affordable price, (2) body weight, (3) gender, and (4) thickness of meat around the loin area.² In fact, fermented feed technology has been developed to increase sheep fattening and gain higher profits.³

Sheep not only benefit from being a food commodity, but they are also beneficial in the social scope of society. One of the socially beneficial sheep breeds is the Garut sheep; raising social status and other prestige through the exterior performance of the domesticated sheep.⁴ Various efforts will be made to beautify the exterior or outer appearance of the sheep's body. One of the efforts that can be done to improve the beauty value of the sheep's body is the balancing of grass and concentrates feed.⁵ Thus, the sheep becomes an image of the dignity of the owner who cares for it with patience and affection.

The advantage of sheep as farm animals is their adaptive nature to the environment, hence being able to survive.⁶ Based on the research of Achmad Firman et. al, there are several reasons for this adaptive nature: (1) Ability to optimally utilize greenery with very low nutrient levels, (2) high resistance to parasites and diseases, (3) quickly reach mating age, and

¹ Direktorat Jenderal Peternakan dan Kesehatan Hewan, *Statistik Peternakan Dan Kesehatan Hewan 2023* (Jakarta: Kementerian Pertanian RI, 2023), 122.

² Andry Ramdani, Sondi Kuswaryan, and Sri Rahayu, "Atribut Yang Memengaruhi Preferensi Konsumen Domba Di Pasar Hewan Kabupaten Cianjur," *Universitas Padjajaran: Students e-Journal* 4, no. 2 (2015): 1–15.

³ See the research done by Afrizal Malik and Muryanto on the use of MOL (Micro Local Organism) fermented feed with MOL concentrations of 0.3%, 0.5%, and 0.7%. The object of sheep used in this study is batur sheep which is a cross of thin-tailed sheep with Merino sheep. Afrizal Malik and Muryanto, "Kelayakan Teknologi Pakan Fermentasi Pada Penggemukkan Domba Batur," *Jurnal Pengkajian Dan Pengembangan Teknologi Pertanian* 22, no. 2 (2019): 143–150.

⁴ Achmad Firman et al., "Penentuan Kawasan Unggulan Argibisnis Ternak Domba Di Jawa Barat," *Jurnal Pemikiran Masyarakat Ilmiah Berwawasan Agribisnis* 4, no. 1 (2018), 112.

⁵ See the research conducted by Ahmad Maulana, Ibrahim Hadist, and Budi Ayuningsih, "Pengaruh Imbangan Rumput Dan Konsentrat Terhadap Ukuran Tubuh Domba Garut Jantan Umur Lima Sampai Delapan Bulan," *JANHUS: Journal of Animal Husbandry Science* 5, no. 1 (2020): 106–16.

⁶ To find out the adaptive nature of sheep and the significance of the environment for their growth, see research conducted by Audisi et. al. Dwicki Octarianda Audisi, Denie Heriyadi, and Siti Nurrachma, "Sifat-Sifat Kuantitatif Domba Ekor Tipis Jantan Yearling Pada Manajemen Pemeliharaan Secara Tradisional Di Pesisir Pantai Selatan Kabupaten Garut," *Universitas Padjajaran: Students e-Journal* 5, no. 4 (2016): 1–12.

(4) can mate at any time.⁷ It can be concluded that sheep are farm animals that tend to be easy to care for:

The Indonesian method of taking care of sheep is quite unique as it is generally based on the cut and curry system, so the work of shepherds is not popular:⁸ The job has a relation to the behavior of sheep, such as: (1) gregarious, so that when separated from the group, the animal will vocalize or bleat loudly; (2) animals with high vigilance; (3) like to communicate through voice and eyes, and (4) a very strong mother-son bond.⁹ It can be seen that shepherds have the task of herding flocks of sheep in search of greenery and maintaining the integrity of the flock; the herding nature of sheep makes it easier for shepherds when grazing them.¹⁰ In addition, it can be inferred that sheep are tame or obedient animals, thereby making it easier for the shepherd to carry out his work. This shepherding system was elaborated with a cage system (cut and curry) by I. Munandar et. al. to be semi-intensive to be carried out in Indonesia, especially in areas with little green forage.¹¹

Through the description of sheep that has been done with a farming perspective, I found three points: (1) sheep are communal animals, (2) the tameness makes it easier for owners or shepherds to care for the sheep, and (3) shepherds ensure the survival of these animals. These three points will be used as the basis for interpreting the text of John 10:11-18, especially to construct the symbol of the sheep as an ideal human image. The method used is qualitative by elaborating the three points from the lens of animal husbandry with the themes of participation, ethics of responsibility, and soteriology. In each discussion, this article will present an interpretation of the text to emphasize the biblical dimension. Therefore, this article offers an argument that the sheep is an image of the ideal human being who exerts his entire being to be fully connected to Christ and with other creation.

⁷ Firman et al., "Penentuan Kawasan Unggulan Argibisnis Ternak Domba Di Jawa Barat," 114.

⁸ I. Munandar et al., "Tingkah Laku Sosial Domba Lokal Pada Sistem Pemeliharaan Semi Intensif," *Journal of Tropical Animal Science and Technology* 4, no. 2 (2022), 111.

⁹ Andrew Fisher and Lindsay Matthews, "The Social Behaviour of Sheep," in *Social Behaviour in Farm Animals*, ed. L. J. Keeling and H. W. Gonyou (New York: CABI Publishing, 2001), 211; Munandar et al., "Tingkah Laku Sosial Domba," 111; W. H. Southcott, R. Roe, and H. N. Turner, "Grazing Management of Native Pastures in the New England Region of the New South Wales.," *J Agri Res* 13 (2010): 881-882.

¹⁰ Mistar Arifin, *Mempercepat Penggemukan Domba* (Jakarta: Agromedia, 2015), 11.

¹¹ Munandar et al., "Tingkah Laku Sosial Domba," 111.

METHODS

This article elaborates the findings in the field of sheep husbandry with the idea of participatory ethics and the biblical interpretation of John 10:11-18. The research is conducted to emphasize that sheep are an ideal image that should be fulfilled by humans who are not only connected to Christ, but also other humans and even the rest of creation. The first step was to explore the relationship between the “good shepherd,” “my sheep” (my own), and “other sheep.” The basis used is the idea of participation theology promoted by L. Roger Owens and elaborated with the literature about *koinonia*. Furthermore, the obedience of man to God will be examined through the lens of H. Richard Niebuhr’s catechetical ethics. This step will also discuss the ethical dilemma of seeking a “pure” ethical foundation through the opposition of the figure of the “good shepherd” and the “hireling.” The final step is to emphasize the figure of Christ as the soteriological and ethical center, through an examination of verses 11, 15 and 16. Through the image of the sheep, the faithful person has an ethical demand to not only abide in Christ, but also bind himself to the rest of creation, so that the cosmic encounter space can be realized.

DISCUSSION

Cosmic Encounter Space

The previous section has shown that sheep are adaptive and communal animals. These two characteristics are intertwined and support each other’s existence. In other words, sheep can fit into the others, as long as all four animal behaviors are fulfilled. This section will attempt to interpret the use of the figure of the shepherd, the sheep belonging to the shepherd, and the other sheep. The results of the interpretation will be discussed with the participatory framework to emphasize the connection between the three.

The term “good shepherd” according to David B. Gowler is an image of a “ram-bearer” which is an attempt to represent the parable in Luke 15:3-7 of the lost sheep being brought back.¹² The figure of a shepherd is shown to be very caring about his sheep. This means that the identification of Jesus as a good shepherd is an attempt to emphasize the reciprocal

¹² David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Reception across Two Millennia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 51.

relationship with the flock.¹³ Not only do the sheep receive direction and nurture, they give a “response” to obey the actions of the Shepherd. Moreover, the sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd (verse 16).

The shepherd is shown as a fully caring figure. It is true that sheep are adaptive animals and can optimize greenery that has very low nutrition. Flocks of sheep can survive without the role of a shepherd. However, based on Afrizal Malik and Muryanto’s research on the use of MOL (Micro Local Organism) fermented feed and the development of semi-intensive systems by I. Munandar et.al., shepherds or farmers have a role to maximize the lives of sheep; however, this research was conducted in an effort to increase the quantity and quality of meat production.

The adaptive nature of sheep confirms that humans can actually survive without the “direction” of God, who is depicted as a shepherd figure. Therefore, an interpretation that overemphasizes “absolute dependence” on the figure of God in the theological framework gives the nuance of “divine coercion” in the relationship with God and human freedom has no role.¹⁴ Furthermore, excessive exclusivity as Christ’s sheep will result in social separation from other sheep. Therefore, this section will focus on providing a message of inclusivity in the text of John 10:11-18 with Christ as the main axis.

The mention of “other sheep” (verse 16) is fundamental to inclusivity. Jesus makes the designation to transcend social distinctions or the supremacy of “Israel as the chosen people,” and this resonates with the text of John 4:21. For Hakola, this idea seeks to provide an autonomous space for the act of self-identification to be connected with Christ.¹⁵ In other words, the sheep’s act of “listening” to the Shepherd’s voice is a tangible form of self-consciousness as belonging to the Shepherd.

The connection between the Shepherd, the sheep that belong to him, and the other sheep is an image of a “cosmic encounter space” that transcends the differences in background and emphasizes equality as creatures who take reference to the “image of God.” This idea takes up the principle of the “reciprocal circle of fellowship” that is constructed by

¹³ Donald C. McIntyre, “Shepherds and Hirelings in John 10: An Intertestamental Correction,” *Eleutheria* 6, no. 2 (2022), 106-107.

¹⁴ This idea will be developed in the next section.

¹⁵ Raimo Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews, and Jewishness* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 232-234.

Anthony Kelly and Francis Moloney with eschatological nuances. According to them, the Father, the sacrificial Son, and His “sheep” in the eschatological embrace through the Holy Spirit move towards a complete cosmic union, in which the “other sheep” are also part of this communion.¹⁶ This idea can transcend the dichotomy of personal and communal in the communion of faith—and certainly in the space of cosmic encounter—as a result of being united in a one flock shepherded by Christ in participatory nuances; partaking into Christ’s.¹⁷

The message of inclusivity that is contained in the text of John 10:11-18 affirms the intimacy of relationships in the space of cosmic encounter, so that the theological view of the relationship with God as a subject-object relationship does not apply. Since the sheep or person takes part in Christ to be in the cosmic encounter space, he or she imitates God’s relational mode of being and is understood as ecclesial being. Thus, according to John D. Zizioulas, there are two states that the sheep experience: (1) full existence only occurs in relatedness or unity, and (2) the “unity” of the sheep in Christ gives space to the personal aspect, so that the cosmic encounter space is not understood as the “fusion” of the sheep into a single entity.¹⁸

The idea of a cosmic encounter space in John 10:11-18 needs to be juxtaposed with a participatory framework to affirm the recognition of the authenticity of the sheep in a relational cosmic encounter space.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the sheep’s act of listening to the shepherd (verse 16) is not understood as an endeavor that falls within the scope of the metaphysical. Instead, the sheep manifests its attachment—which can then be understood as faith—with the good shepherd through tangible actions.

L. Roger Owens makes his idea of participatory through the question of attempting to articulate participation in God rooted in the dialectic of ecclesial practice and the activity of God. For him, since the existence of the church is rooted in the existence of God, any ecclesial

¹⁶ Anthony Kelly and Francis Moloney, *Experiencing God in the Gospel of John* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2003), 126.

¹⁷ Alyee M. McKenzie, *Jesus the Good Shepherd: Reflections on John 10:1-18* (London: SCM Press, 2014), 141.

¹⁸ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 15 & 18.

¹⁹ To understand the authenticity of human existence, see Yohannes Ali Sandro Sitorus, “Partisipasi Sebagai Pemenuhan Tanggung Jawab Gambar Kristus,” *Jurnal Teologi Gracia Deo* 5, no. 2 (2023): 288–303.

practice is a measurable participation in God.²⁰ Not only does Owens synthesize, but he provides a space for recognizing the authenticity between creation-acts and divine-acts without distorting the existence of both in a reciprocal relationship. Through the idea of ecclesiology-modernity, he asserts that even though the church is rooted in the existence of God, there is a “human” or profane element in its formation, which is the interaction within and between persons.²¹

Connectedness is the foundation of Owens’ participatory theology. Therefore, in the church there is a reciprocal relationship between every subject that exists with Christ as the figure who mediates this relationship. Thus, church service can be understood to be a personal endeavor as a partner in God’s mission.²² The connectedness between God and man in Christ is not understood as a subject-object relationship, but rather relational in this lens of participation.

The relational bond is the message of John 10:11-18. Based on the ideas of Anthony T. Flood, unity as a cosmic encounter space is the primary purpose of human existence.²³ This entanglement is best understood in terms of the perichoretic movement of love, which exists between the Creator and creation through Christ.²⁴ According to Andrew Davison, Christ can be a mediating figure because all of creation has its being through Him who is the image of God (*imago Dei*).²⁵

It can be summarized that the message of inclusivity is the promise of complete connectedness that will one day take place in the Shepherd’s person. Each person is a creation that takes reference from the *imago Dei* (Genesis 1:26-27). The listening sheep means that human beings participate in the cosmic encounter space, and is only possible through the Shepherd’s guidance. The other sheep has the responsibility to understand his or her self-existence according to Christ, and to respond to live bound in Him. This attempt at

²⁰ L. Roger Owens, *A Theology of Church Practices: The Shape of Participation* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 16.

²¹ Owens, 28.

²² Owens, 60.

²³ Anthony T. Flood, *The Metaphysical Foundation of Love* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 44.

²⁴ Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 116.

²⁵ Andrew Davison, *Participating in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 205.

meaning is a capacity or ability that each person possesses. Humans have freedom and use it to make a choice between living as a representation of Christ or ignoring it.²⁶

Autonomous Obedience

John 10 features the culmination of the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders (the Pharisees and scribes).²⁷ According to Andreas J. Köstenberger, the conflict that occurred due to the ethical arbitrariness of the religious leaders.²⁸ They do not lead people to the truthful path to the cosmic encounter space. Based on Adhika Tri Subowo's interpretation, it can be seen that the use of the term "good shepherd" carries relational principles and does not focus on profit.²⁹

The use of the term "shepherd" was a popular figure with the Israelites in terms of leadership. In other words, Jesus wanted to construct a pattern of leadership that leads to God the Creator.³⁰ Not only does the shepherd lead his sheep to the path of righteousness, but he also has the duty to care for them with equal concern. The implication is that leaders cannot make social differentiations within the community of faith.³¹ They must share the "love" that is given by the Lord to his sheep.³²

The culmination of the conflict between the good shepherd and the hireling is the method in which they care for the sheep. The good shepherd exerts His entire being to guard the life of the flock (verse 11), whereas the hireling will prioritize his own safety when there is a threat (verse 12). Nevertheless, the act of submission by the good shepherd is not understood to be a "satisfaction" of the sheep's desires. Instead, He will give them "the best"

²⁶ Yohannes Ali Sandro Sitorus, "Partisipasi Sebagai Pemenuhan Tanggung Jawab Gambar Kristus," *Jurnal Teologi Gracia Deo* 5, no. 2 (2023), 301.

²⁷ Donald C. McIntyre, "Shepherds and Hirelings in John 10: An Intertestamental Correction," *Eleutheria* 6, no. 2 (2022), 94.

²⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John: Injil Dalam Perspektif Sejarah, Sastra, Dan Teologis.*, trans. Timotius (Malang: Literatur SAAT, 2015), 135.

²⁹ Adhika Tri Subowo, "Gembala Bagi Semua Domba: Memaknai Domba Dari Kandang Yang Lain Dalam Yohanes 10:16 Sebagai Upaya Merangkul 'Sang Liyan,'" *Aradha* 1, no. 2 (2021), 169.

³⁰ Manuel Marto Pasau, Doni Heryanto, and Daud Manno, "Kajian Teologis Yohanes 10:1-18 Membentuk Ulang Konsep Gembala Sebagai Teladan," *Phronesis: Jurnal Teologi Dan Misi* 6, no. 2 (2023), 249.

³¹ Arozatulo Telaumbanua, "Peran Gembala Sidang Sebagai Pendidik Dalam Pertumbuhan Rohani Jemaat," *Fidei: Jurnal Teologi Sistematis Dan Praktika* 2, no. 2 (2019), 363.

³² Kejar Hidup Laia, *Prinsip Kedatangan Tuhan Yesus Kedua Kali* (Nias Barat: STTAM, 2019), 134.

according to the Ultimate Truth rather than leading them to the utopian satisfaction. In other words, the good shepherd embraces the suffering that the sheep would otherwise have to experience.

The sacrifice of the Shepherd is not to be understood as an attempt to eliminate suffering and create a pseudo world. Rather, it is an open invitation for all humanity to come and dwell in Him.³³ In other words, humans are invited to participate in the cosmic encounter space through the person of Christ. So, is human presence in the cosmic encounter space a divine imposition on creation?

Through the research on sheep that are tame and easily led, it presents a picture of an ideal human being who is bound to the Creator through the person of Christ. However, the sheep “obeying” their shepherd is not based on self-consciousness, but instinct. If humanity’s connection with the Creator in the cosmic encounter space occurs due to this ontological imposition, the authenticity of the existence of the participating person will be distorted by the existence of the Creator. On the other hand, a gap will be created in the theme of “man doing evil” which harms the idea of creation as *imago Christi*. An attempt to go beyond this problem is to provide space for the recognition of human freedom in the ethical dimension, through the idea of “the responsible self” promoted by H. Richard Niebuhr:

Niebuhr’s idea of ethics is based on the reciprocal relationship between human beings as creation and God as the Creator. Therefore, every action that man makes and also his existence is “bound” to the existence of God.³⁴ This idea is in line with the narrative of the creation of human beings with reference to the image of God, which is Christ. For Niebuhr, human beings as creation are supposed to determine their existence that is connected to the Creator, and work from this realization to provide a suitable ethical response to divine works and worldly events.³⁵ These acts are rooted in the freedom that is an attribute of human existence as creation. As such, Niebuhr’s ethical idea of responsibility is synonymous with the concept of “free will.”

³³ Jonar Situmorang, “Kajian Biblika Tentang Yesus Sebagai Pintu Dan Gembala Menurut Yohanes 10:1-18,” *Jurnal Teologi Kristen* 1, no. 2 (2019), 265-267.

³⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publisher, 1963), 44.

³⁵ Niebuhr, 32-33 & 40.

The empowerment of human “free will” is explored by Niebuhr through the term man-the-maker. For him, humans must endeavor to make predictions about the consequences of their ethical actions.³⁶ Through this prediction, humans as ethical actors will be engaged to bear or take responsibility for the consequences that will occur. In other words, man-the-maker is synonymous with self-consciousness. He asserts that it is impossible for an ethical actor to make an ethical response, if he himself does not have the interpretation of ethical decision-making.³⁷ The ethical decisions made will represent the existence of the ethical actor; not only about his/her own identity, but also display the ethical benchmarks he/she uses.

Niebuhr’s emphasis on the empowerment of human free will should not be interpreted as the supremacy of subjectivity and lead to arbitrariness. Rather, when he insists that ethical actors make a prediction, the interconnectedness of human beings also becomes the primary object of ethical life.³⁸ In other words, the presumed consequences are not limited to those experienced by the ethical-actor, but also those that will be experienced by other persons.

The fitting ethic constructed by Niebuhr does not only discuss the relationship between mankind, but also the relationship with God. Generally, when people sin, they are categorized as breaking God’s commandments. However, obedience to God and His laws is not understood as absolute submission. Through the term man-under-law, Niebuhr constructs obedience to God as loyalty and self-confidence.³⁹ In other words, man obeys as an expression of respect for God. Man as an ethical-actor has the imperative to realize “created in the image of God” through the ethical actions oneself has made.⁴⁰

The sheep led by the Shepherd do not recognize His voice out of compulsion. Instead, the sheep must interpret their existence to connect fully with the Shepherd. The act of ethical interpretation has its origin in the “sensitivity” to fulfill one’s responsibilities.⁴¹ Self-realization is the momentum of the ethical actor to assess an event that occurs around him,

³⁶ Niebuhr, 90.

³⁷ Niebuhr, 48-49.

³⁸ Niebuhr, 45.

³⁹ Niebuhr, 136.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, 133.

⁴¹ William Schweiker, *Responsibility & Christian Ethics: New Studies in Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11 & 14.

including the connection with God.⁴² Thus, obeying the Shepherd is a responsibility that must be fulfilled by the sheep.

The sheep's obedience to the Shepherd displays an intimate connection between the two. Through this connection, Robert C. Mortimer argues that human beings will attain or partake of the "real truth."⁴³ Obedience to the Shepherd is seen as the reverence of the ethical-actor who sets aside his subjective judgment to avoid being arbitrary.⁴⁴

Dependence on the Shepherd can be understood as human dependence to transcend their limitations in interpreting the Truth. The Shepherd's guidance is needed in the context of human transformation to fulfill the image of the sheep, namely his entire being in Christ and living away from sin.⁴⁵ Through the Shepherd's guidance, the sheep can be in the cosmic encounter space with the Creator. Christ becomes the primary ethical reference used by human beings.⁴⁶

Salvation from Christ Alone

The cosmic encounter space and the placement of Christ as the ethical benchmark boil down to the theme of salvation. This idea is seen in Jesus' words about the shepherd who takes the initiative to sacrifice his entire being (verses 11 & 18). Every life threat that the sheep experience—understandable as sin—is embraced by the Shepherd and "paid for it."⁴⁷ But what did Christ pay for sacrificing his very being for the sheep? This passage does not understand Christ's saving work as deliverance from "death" or hell, but rather as reconciliation into the cosmic encounter space. In other words, "sin" is understood as the attempt to live outside of the Shepherd's guidance.

The consequence of not having Christ as the Shepherd of life is the failure or inability to interpret human existence as identical to the Creator. This idea is rooted in the theological

⁴² Schweiker, 13.

⁴³ Robert C. Mortimer, *Christian Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1950), 8.

⁴⁴ Merold Westphal, *In Praise of Heteronomy: Making Room for Revelation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 6-7.

⁴⁵ Yohannes Ali Sandro Sitorus, "Kristonomi Sebagai Hukum Yang Hidup: Partisipasi, Ketaatan, Dan Kebebasan," *Immanuel: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen* 4, no. 1 (April 2023). 9.

⁴⁶ Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publisher, 1987), 9-10.

⁴⁷ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, trans. Rahmiati Tanudjaja (Malang: Literatur SAAT, 2010), 285.

understanding of creation from emptiness (*creatio ex nihilo*). The emptiness is not understood as an absolute nothingness that has a place outside of God. Through the term self-construction, Jürgen Moltmann interprets the emptiness as God's act of limiting himself to provide an empty space so that the potential for being can be ignited.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the provision of empty space can be understood as an attempt to distinguish the substance of the Creator from that which He created. In other words, creation is a "work" and not an emanation of the Creator's substance.⁴⁹

Creation from emptiness was a preparation and promise of salvation that the Creator declared, namely to save mankind from the state of *annihilatio nihili* so that creation could attain "eternal life."⁵⁰ In other words, the Shepherd gives up His very being so that His sheep do not return to their original state of emptiness. The Shepherd guarantees the survival of His sheep.

The demand to interpret the relationship with God through Christ is a reflection on the work of creation as well as salvation. Nothingness can only be defined when juxtaposed with existence, so when humans choose not to obey the Shepherd, they are denying this attachment. Human freedom, which was once intended to live in the guidance of the Shepherd, turns into freedom to move away from God and reject reciprocal relationships with fellow sheep.

Christ as the Shepherd wants to gather all human beings into the cosmic encounter space. Man who chooses to stay away from God will separate himself from the fellowship. "Hireling" is indeed applied to religious leaders who give false guidance. However, the term can also be applied to sheep who choose to dwell in false guidance and deny their connection with their fellow sheep (verse 12).

Obedying the Shepherd means that man experiences the promise of salvation that has existed since the work of creation. Human beings participating in the cosmic encounter space does not happen through their own efforts, but through the submission of their entire being to Christ. It is the Shepherd's guidance that brings the flock into communion. Rooted in the

⁴⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 87.

⁴⁹ Alan J. Torrance, "A Response to Professor Moltmann," *Theology* 114, no. 6 (November 2011), 417-418.

⁵⁰ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 89-90.

love to participate in the cosmic encounter space, man does not hesitate to experience the Shepherd's embrace.⁵¹ Being in the cosmic encounter space is not about obeying religious laws, but rather a matter of having love and sharing the divine love displayed by the Shepherd.

CONCLUSION

Sheep are an image of the ideal human being, that is, fully connected to the Creator through the person of Christ the Good Shepherd. This is rooted in the research from the husbandry sphere on the social behavior of sheep and the role of researchers in improving the quality of life of sheep as one of the popular food commodities. In addition, sheep are also an animal that can raise the social status of the farmer or owner through the method of caring. In other words, sheep represent the loving care of their owners. Therefore, humans who are described as sheep in the text of John 10:11-18 display the ethical responsibility that humans have as belonging to Christ the Shepherd, which is to imitate Him in concrete action and exert their entire being to be led into the cosmic encounter space.

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⁵¹ Bruce Barton et al., *Life Application: New Testament Commentary* (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 99.

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