

Zechariah 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Zechariah chapter 11. Open your doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour your cedars. Wail, O Cyprus, for the cedar has fallen, for the glorious trees are ruined.

Wail, Oaks of Bashan, for the thick forest has been felled. The sound of the wail of the shepherds, for their glory is ruined. The sound of the roar of the lions, for the thicket of the Jordan is ruined. Thus says the Lord my God, become shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter. Those who buy them slaughter them and go unpunished, and those who sell them say, Blessed be the Lord, I have become rich, and their own shepherds have no pity on them.

For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of this land, declares the Lord. Behold, I will cause each of them to fall into the hand of his neighbour, and each into the hand of his king, and they shall crush the land, and I will deliver none from their hand.

So I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slaughtered by the sheep traders. And I took two staffs, one I named Favour, the other I named Union, and I tended the sheep.

[1 : 04] In one month I destroyed the three shepherds, but I became impatient with them, and they also detested me. So I said, I will not be your shepherd. What is to die, let it die.

What is to be destroyed, let it be destroyed. And let those who are left devour the flesh of one another. And I took my staff favour, and I broke it, annulling the covenant that I had made with all the peoples.

So it was annulled on that day, and the sheep traders who were watching me knew that it was the word of the Lord. Then I said to them, If it seems good to you, give me my wages, but if not, keep them.

And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. Then the Lord said to me, Throw it to the potter, the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver, and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter.

Then I broke my second staff union, annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel. Then the Lord said to me, Take once more the equipment of a foolish shepherd. For behold, I am raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for those being destroyed, or seek the young, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hooves.

[2 : 21] Woe to my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be wholly withered, his right eye utterly blinded!

Zechariah chapter 11 seems to continue the oracle that began in chapter 9. The preceding two chapters, I argued, dealt primarily with the context of the Greek period. It spoke of the Jews under the Seleucids, and then of the Maccabean revolt and the conflict with the Hellenized Jews.

These concluding chapters of Zechariah are some of the hardest to understand in the entire Bible, and in the minds of many commentators, this is the hardest of all. Within the chapter, Zechariah seems to perform some sort of prophetic drama, representing the Lord being rejected as the shepherd of his people.

The question of when to relate this to is a difficult one. In light of the ways that this chapter is used within the Gospel of Matthew particularly, many have seen this as looking forward to the story of Christ.

Peter Lighthouse, considering the context of the preceding chapters, argues that this should be seen to relate to the Maccabean period, and perhaps leading up to the time of the Herods. That period is also dealt with within Daniel chapters 11 and 12.

[3 : 30] Thinking about it in terms of a theological pattern, he compares this to the wilderness period under Moses, and the rejection of Moses, the shepherd of his people, by the people. This also continues the themes of Passover and Exodus that have been at play in the preceding

chapters.

Anthony Petterson, using people like Michael Stead, argues that this chapter should be read as retrospective, casting a theological judgment upon Israel's history that had led up to the removal of Israel and Judah from the land, and their current position under foreign rule.

Of the positions on offer, I find this perhaps the most compelling. Within his Gospel, Matthew uses Zechariah, but his use of Zechariah, as in his use of other Old Testament prophecy, is subtle, and his approach to fulfillment is not as straightforward as many readers would presume.

This is particularly important in his use of Zechariah chapter 11, which he seems to attribute to the prophet Jeremiah. This has caused commentators all sorts of headaches. Did the evangelist make some mistake?

Was some error made in copying the Gospel? Far more likely and more interesting is the possibility, and indeed likelihood, I would argue, that Matthew was engaged in a very elaborate intertextual play, bringing the prophecy of Zechariah into correspondence with a number of prophecies within the book of Jeremiah.

[4 : 46] As we begin looking at this chapter, we immediately face the question of where verses 1 to 3 fit into the larger context. Do they relate primarily to the preceding chapter, or do they relate primarily to what follows?

The verses seem to be a lament concerning a disaster that has, or will, befall Israel. This would seem to be out of keeping with the themes of victory with which chapter 10 ended.

Consequently, it seemed more likely to me that this should be read in association with the material of chapter 11. The imagery of these verses is an imagery of a great forest fire, and of trees being felled.

Such imagery is familiar from other prophets, perhaps especially the prophet Isaiah. Trees symbolize rulers and prominent people. We see this in places like Isaiah chapter 2 verses 12 to 13. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low, against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up, and against all the oaks of Bashan.

[5 : 46] Again in Isaiah chapter 10 verses 17 to 19. The light of Israel will become a fire, and his holy one a flame, and it will burn and devour his thorns and briars in one day.

The glory of his forest and of his fruitful land the Lord will destroy, both soul and body, and it will be as when a sick man wastes away. The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few that a child can write them down.

Imagery of cedars can also be connected with great buildings, such as the temple, and also with the buildings of the rulers of the people. Within the temple complex in Jerusalem prior to the exile, for instance, the temple building was built with cedars, but also some of the king's buildings.

There was the house of the forest of Lebanon, for instance. The dynastic house of the king could also be referred to in such a manner, in Jeremiah chapter 22 verses 6 to 9.

For thus says the Lord concerning the house of the king of Judah, You are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon. Yet surely I will make you a desert, an uninhabited city.

[6 : 49] I will prepare destroyers against you, each with his weapons, and they shall cut down your choicest cedars and cast them into the fire. And many nations will pass by this city, and every man will say to his neighbour, Why has the Lord dealt thus with this great city?

And they will answer, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God, and worshipped other gods and served them. This, it seems to me, is the best way to understand what this lament is referring to.

It's referring to the house of the rulers of Judah and Israel. The cedar is the greatest of the trees, and perhaps it's being spoken of in the singular here, because it represents the king. But the cedar is not alone.

There are also the glorious trees that are ruined. The frame of the prophecy may be expanding at this point, to include the whole ruling class. The oaks of Bashan and the thick forest, These are other great ruling trees that have been removed.

The imagery of a felling of a great tree in scripture is of course used in the second dream of Nebuchadnezzar, where he sees himself as a great tree that is cut down. The destruction of the thicket of the Jordan might refer to the removal of some of the defence of the nation.

[7 : 55] Its removal has led to the emergence of predatory lions who used to dwell there, and they will prey upon the flock. These lions seem to be another way of speaking about the false shepherds that will be discussed later on in the passage.

This lament, I believe, describes the situation to which the nation had been brought as a result of its sins. Even after the return from exile, they still languished in this position. In the more difficult part of the passage that follows, Zachariah is commissioned to perform a number of symbolic actions. It is possible that these were enacted as a sort of prophetic drama, but others wonder whether they were primarily delivered in an oral or written form, as some of them would be difficult to play out. The meaning of the initial charge given to Zachariah is debated. What does it mean to become shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter? Is the shepherd here being presented as an evil figure who is going to kill the sheep?

Alternatively, should we see the picture as one of the shepherd coming in to protect the flock from being slaughtered? Verses 5 and 7 might give support to this. Another possibility, and one that I lean towards, is that the slaughter refers to the destiny of the people on account of their unfaithfulness and the unfaithfulness of their rulers.

[9 : 03] The Lord becomes shepherd of the flock, but the behaviour of the undershepherds dooms the flock to destruction. Their actions, described in verse 5, involved the selling of the sheep to those who would slaughter them.

This most likely refers to the actions of the kings of Judah and Israel, who entered into imprudent and idolatrous alliances with other kings, selling the flock of the Lord to those who would destroy them.

As a result of the behaviour of the people and their rulers, the Lord determined to deliver them into the hands of their neighbours, other nations and their kings. He wouldn't deliver his people from their hands.

In the symbolic sign act of becoming the shepherd of this flock, Zachariah had taken two staffs, one that was called favour and the other called union. The reference to destroying three shepherds in one month in verse 8 has puzzled commentators.

Lighthart, for instance, argues that this might refer to the fall of the Hasmoneans and the rise of Herod. Perhaps the three shepherds are three high priests, or Gentile rulers such as the Seleucids, or perhaps three kings of Israel or Judah.

[10 : 05] Advocates of that last position, for instance, can argue that it refers to Jehoiakim, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah being removed from the throne in short succession. The one month symbolically refers to that brief span of time.

Zed observes the way that this passage draws upon imagery and language from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah chapter 12 verse 3 But you, O Lord, know me, you see me, and test my heart toward you.

Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and set them apart for the day of slaughter. Zed remarks upon the connection between verse 9 and Jeremiah chapter 19 verse 9 He also references Jeremiah chapter 23 verse 2, connecting it with the final verses of the chapter concerning the foolish shepherd.

Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people, You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord. Petterson summarizes Stead's argument. In the account of the fall of Jerusalem in Jeremiah chapter 52, on the ninth day of the fourth month, in verse 6, the city wall is breached and the army scattered.

[11 : 26] Significantly, King Zedekiah is captured and his sons perish. Jeremiah chapter 52 notes that one month later, on the tenth day of the fifth month, verse 12, Nebuchadnezzar's commander Nebuchadnezzar arrived and burned the temple, palace, and houses of the city, broke down the city wall, and carried many into exile.

In this month in which Jerusalem fell, its leadership is exiled or killed. Against this background, Stead proposes that the three shepherds are the three types of leadership that perish when Jerusalem fell, the king, the prophets, and the priests.

Even if we differ with certain aspects of this reading, it has a long pedigree. In some form, it goes all of the way back to the Jewish targum of the book of Zechariah. This occurred as the people rebelled against the Lord and detested him, and the Lord would no longer bear with them in their

rejection of him.

He ceased to act as their shepherd, surrendering the flock to its fate. The reference to those who are left devouring the flesh of one another might refer to predatory leadership. It might also refer to the great curse of the covenant, where those who are left in the siege would end up eating the flesh of their children.

The breaking of the staff favour is an annulling of the covenant. Zechariah seems to perform this action in some context in public. He is witnessed by sheep traders, which within the drama represent either the foreign kings, or the kings of Israel and Judah that sold the people to them.

[12:48] Alternatively, we might translate the expression not as sheep traders, but as the afflicted of the flock. Verses 12 to 14 seem to describe a symbolic action by which the good shepherd was more firmly rejected.

Pettison suggests that we should see this as an ultimatum. The prophet is suggesting that either they pay up and relieve him of his duties, or cease to detest him, as they are described as doing in verse 8.

They decide merely to give him his wages, letting him go from his position. Thirty pieces of silver are weighed out for him. In verse 13, the Lord instructs him to throw this money to the potter, as it is rendered in most translations, or perhaps the moulder, as Pettison suggests.

Charles Torrey argues that what is in view here is the foundry within the temple that melted down gold and silver gifts that were given to the temple to be stored in the treasury. Pettison observes the development of this theory, with the recognition that much of this melted down silver would have been sent to the Persians in the form of taxes.

This, of course, is significant, because the money with which the shepherding of the Lord was rejected is now being given to pagan nations. Perhaps there is another dimension to this. In Exodus chapter 21 verse 32, we read of the restitution that has to be paid if an ox scores a slave.

[14:04] If the ox scores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned. Judah and Israel have become like goring oxen, goring the servants of the Lord, the prophets.

The Lord argues that in the rejection of Zechariah's symbolic shepherding, he was being rejected. They were putting a measly price upon the Lord as their shepherd. The money being thrown into the house of the Lord is money being paid to the Lord, to pay him off for the fact that they had been goring his servants, the prophets.

We might here think back to 1 Samuel chapter 8 verse 7, as the Lord said to Samuel, Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.

Zechariah then breaks the second staff, called Union, annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel. This might look back to the breaking of the bond between the northern and the southern kingdoms, during the days of Rehoboam and Jeroboam.

It might also have in view the removal of the northern kingdom from the land. Ezekiel chapter 37 speaks of the joining of two sticks together, the stick of Joseph and the stick of Judah.

[15:12] This refers to the period after the restoration. This is one of the reasons why, for me, it seems most likely that this prophecy refers back to the period prior to the exile. It is explaining how the flock of Israel ended up in the position that it is currently in.

As he has twice been rejected as the good shepherd, the Lord gives Zechariah one further instruction. He must now take up the equipment of a foolish shepherd. The Lord will no longer deliver, as he had formerly done, the people from their wicked shepherds.

He would hand them over into the hand of foolish shepherds, foreign nations who would not care for the flock. As they had tolerated such behavior from their own shepherds, now they would suffer such treatment from foreign shepherds.

The condemnation of the final verses might remind us of Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 1 to 6. The word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.

Prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds. Thus says the Lord God, Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep.

[16:21] The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered. They wandered over all the mountains, and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. A question to consider. Can you think of the key moments within the history of Israel and Judah in which they most definitively rejected the shepherding of the Lord over them?

