

Ezekiel 34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Ezekiel chapter 34 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. Therefore you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord. As I live, declares the Lord God, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves and have not fed my sheep, therefore you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord.
- Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves, I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.
- For thus says the Lord God, Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered, on a day of clouds and thick darkness.
- [1 : 5 6] And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country.
- I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.
- I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.
- As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God, Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture, and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet?
- And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet? Therefore thus says the Lord God to them, Behold, I, I myself, will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.
- [3 : 1 4] Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock. They shall no longer be a prey, and I will judge between sheep and sheep, and I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them, he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

And I, the Lord, will be their guard, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord, I have spoken. I will make with them a covenant of peace, and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods.

And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season. They shall be showers of blessing, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land.

And they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslave them. They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them.

They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid. And I will provide for them renowned plantations, so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations.

[4 : 33] And they shall know that I am the Lord their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord God. And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord God.

The connection between Israel and a flock, and its leaders and shepherds, is one that is found throughout the scriptures, in both Old and New Testaments. The patriarchs were shepherds, and already in Genesis we see parallels being drawn between Jacob's flocks and his family.

In Exodus, Moses the shepherd leads Israel out of Egypt, and through the wilderness with a shepherd's rod. In Numbers chapter 27 verse 17, before appointing Joshua as his successor, Moses speaks of the danger of the children of Israel becoming a sheep without a shepherd.

David, the first of the great royal dynasty, was called from the sheep to be the shepherd of the Lord's flock. David himself spoke of the Lord as his own shepherd in the 23rd Psalm.

In Psalm 100 verse 3, the Lord's relationship to his people is described in similar terms. Know that the Lord, he is God, it is he who made us, and we are his.

[5 : 42] We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Shepherd and flock imagery, and lots of associated images around those, repeatedly surface in the prophets. There the imagery is used of the leaders of Israel and Judah, and of the Lord himself in passages like Isaiah chapter 40 verses 10 to 11.

Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him. Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd.

He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. In the New Testament, Christ speaks of himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, and the guardians of his flock are referred to as shepherds under him as the chief shepherd.

The shepherd is the one who guides the flock, provides it with good pasture and water, and protects it from the many dangers of wild beasts, robbers, and the wilderness. One of the fullest developments of shepherd and flock imagery is found in Ezekiel chapter 34, where the Lord condemns the unfaithful shepherds of Israel.

It is quite likely that this passage in Ezekiel was, as Daniel Bloch suggests, working with and elaborating the relatively recent prophecy of Jeremiah chapter 23 verses 1 to 8, which had explored the same imagery.

[7 : 01] Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord. 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. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all of the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king, and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely, and this is the name by which he will be called. The Lord is our righteousness. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer say, As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but, As the Lord lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country, and out of all the countries where he had driven them, then they shall dwell in their own land.

Ezekiel's prophecy in this passage confirms the earlier message of Jeremiah, and addresses it more directly to the exiles of Judah with him in Babylon. Verses 2-6 present an indictment of the shepherds of Israel.

[8 : 33] They've been feeding themselves instead of the sheep. A good authority ministers to the needs of those under their care, and doesn't merely act for their own profit, advancement, or aggrandizement. Yet the shepherds of Israel weren't protecting the flock of the Lord their master.

Rather, they were exploiting it for themselves, in the illustration using it for their milk, meat, and wool, without any care for the well-being of the sheep themselves and the flock. Their lack of concern was especially apparent in their attitude towards the needs of the weakest and most vulnerable members of the flock.

The result was the scattering and wandering of the flock in places where they were easy prey for wild beasts. The sin of the unfaithful shepherds is most aggravated by the fact that they are not merely abusing their own flocks, or even some flock of the people, but the Lord's own flock, which he had brought out of Egypt, and through the wilderness and planted in the good pasture of his land.

Now, however, due to the actions of these false shepherds, the flock was scattered. Much like the watchman who was responsible to sound the alarm, the shepherd was responsible for the protection of the flock entrusted to his care.

After the indictment of verses 2-6, the false shepherds are sentenced in verses 7-10. The Lord would hold them culpable for the ravaged and scattered flock, and for their exploitative behaviour.

[9 : 52] The flock would be rescued from the mouths of their predatory shepherds. The shocking image of the shepherd as predator is an important one to consider. The impression given by this passage is that the flock of the Lord would not have become the prey of foreign enemies had they not been preyed upon by their own wicked rulers first, in a gross perversion of the legacy of David, the shepherd king.

In addition to holding the false shepherds responsible, the Lord would deliver the scattered sheep of his flock like a good shepherd. Bloch notes the shift of the meaning of the key verb from verse 6 to verse 10 to verse 11, from seek or look for, to demand or hold accountable, to pursue or even to seek the welfare of.

He suggests that the second verb of the Lord's statement in verse 11 denotes a close examination of the condition of the sheep. Having examined their condition, the Lord will rescue the flock from the places where they have been scattered, will bring them out, gather them to their own land, and feed them through the pasture lands of Israel once more.

They would enjoy the bounty of his rich land once again, and more importantly, his presence as their good shepherd in their midst, watching over and protecting them, seeking those who were lost, returning the strayed sheep, binding up the injured sheep, and strengthening the weak.

The fat and strong sheep mentioned in verse 16 seem to be a different set of oppressors, alongside the oppressive shepherds. Presumably these are the oppressive rich of the land.

[11 : 20] They would be destroyed, while the vulnerable would be rescued and established. Rulers of the people were often associated with rams and male goats. For instance, in Ezekiel chapter 39 verse 18, You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth, of rams, of lambs, and of he-goats, of bulls, all of them fat beasts of Bashan.

An association between rulers of the people and male goats is also seen in the fact that sin offerings for rulers of Israel were male goats. While the shepherds were the kings, the rams and male goats were presumably the prominent officials and elders among the people, the leading members of the flock itself.

The greed of the powerful men among the people was a cause of oppression for the other members of the flock. They were destroying the pasture land and polluting the water, denying the rest of the flock enjoyment of what should have been the common possession of all of the members of the flock.

The Lord would intervene in this dysfunctional situation and establish justice. He would rescue the flock from their predators, whether their own cruel shepherds or the external enemies to which they had been scattered.

He would also establish healthy internal relationships within the flock. The prophet Jeremiah had promised the house of Israel that the Lord would raise up a faithful son of David to rule over them in righteousness.

[12 : 39] In Jeremiah chapter 30 verses 8 to 10, And it shall come to pass in that day, declares the Lord of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off your neck, and I will burst your bonds, and foreigners shall no more make a servant of him.

But they shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up for them. Then fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the Lord, nor be dismayed, O Israel.

For behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return, and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid.

The Lord promises the same thing here. He would establish a faithful ruler, a new David, in the place of the wicked shepherds. As in the case of the first David, this new David would be directly chosen by the Lord himself.

He would be a single shepherd, a man uniting a divided, and later scattered people, as one people once again. At this point in history, after the fall of the kingdom, and the capture of Zedekiah, with Jehoiachin already being in exile, it might look as though the Davidic dynasty was finally extinguished, but it would be re-established, and the fortunes of the nation with it.

[13 : 49] In the Davidic covenant, the Davidic king was described as the son of the Lord, and the re-establishment of the Davidic dynasty would be a sign of the Lord's own presence with, and renewed relationship with Israel as his people.

With the establishment of the Davidic king, the Lord would establish conditions of peace and well-being in the land, security, rest, blessing, plenty, freedom, and deliverance from predators and enemies.

Covenant of peace language is also used in Numbers chapter 25 verse 12, in reference to the reward given to zealous Phinehas, and also in Isaiah chapter 54 verse 10, again talking about the restoration of the people.

We might see similar covenant language used at the end of Jeremiah chapter 33. Blanc notes the parallels between the lists of blessings in verses 25 to 30, and those of Leviticus chapter 26 verses 4 to 13, which lists the blessings of the covenant.

He also notes that the blessings go through the same pattern twice, peace with the animals, blessing with the vegetation, deliverance from oppression. In verse 30, we find another recognition formula.

[14 : 58] All of this would be another proof of the Lord's identity, but also of Israel's identity as his people. The prophecy ends by returning to the controlling metaphor of the flock and the shepherd, as the Lord affirms his relationship with the house of Israel once more in those terms.

A question to consider. Why do you think that the metaphor of sheep and shepherd is such a popular and pervasive one in scripture?

What can we learn from it? Why do you think that the