

As noted previously, the eleventh chapter of Zechariah's prophecy comprises the third of three hinge passages. It not only brings the first burden to its climax, it is the central hinge in the two-burden section that forms the second half of Zechariah's prophecy. As such, it also balances and completes the three-hinge structure:

- Again, the prophecy's main hinge is found in the 6:9-15. It conjoins the priestly and regal themes central to messianic revelation and shows how they converge in the Davidic Branch and function together in relation to the Branch's covenantal role as builder of Yahweh's sanctuary.
- In turn, the first secondary hinge passage spotlights the priestly theme (3:1-10) while the second one – the present context (11:1-17) – highlights the regal (kingly) theme. With respect to the central hinge, then, these two outer hinge passages flow into it and find their ultimate meaning in their conjunction there.

The Branch of David is the covenant son promised to him – the son ordained by the Lord to build His house and establish David's house, throne and kingdom forever (ref. again 2 Samuel 7). And this covenant son was going to accomplish this work as an enthroned high priest – a royal priest in the order of Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18; Psalm 110). This individual is highlighted in both Zechariah's first and central hinges (3:1-10, 6:9-15), *but He is also the central figure in the third hinge, though not as explicitly as in the other two*. And so chapter eleven must be read and interpreted both as the conclusion to Zechariah's first burden and as the third of the three hinge passages in his overall prophecy. It thus serves three purposes: It brings the first burden to its climax and, as the third hinge, it binds together the two burdens and draws them up into the prophecy's central hinge (just as the first hinge passage does with the night visions).

- b. Both of the previous hinge passages involved Zechariah as a personal participant in the unfolding of their prophetic content (ref. 3:1-5 and 6:9-13) and the same is true here: The prophecy began with the Lord's charge to Zechariah to "*tend as a shepherd the flock of the slaughter*" (11:4). The prophet was to assume the role of a shepherd with respect to a particular flock marked out for slaughter. As with his coronation of Joshua (6:9ff), this was apparently to be a *physical prophecy*: a point of divine communication conveyed to an audience by means of an action performed in their sight.

The Lord's intent was that Zechariah's actions would instruct the Israelites with him. But just how he "pastured a flock" isn't entirely clear. Zechariah recorded a couple of acts he performed (vv. 7-8), but in themselves they don't amount to the work of a shepherd. Evidently the *how* isn't relevant to the Lord's purpose; rather, the text focuses on the *significance* of the prophet's actions: *Zechariah's shepherding activity symbolized Yahweh's own interaction with His flock, namely the whole house of Israel*. However he may have interpreted his actions to his Israelite audience, Zechariah obviously made sure they understood that he was playing the role of a shepherd tending to a condemned flock. And in this role he represented Yahweh Himself – the Shepherd of the "slaughter-flock" of Israel.

- c. The Lord followed his charge to His prophet with a series of assertions that provide insight into its meaning and purpose (11:5-6). Zechariah's symbolic shepherding of the slaughter-flock was intended to speak to Israel's experience as a sheepfold under its various shepherds: Yahweh as the nation's true Shepherd and the corrupt human shepherds who had led the people astray and thereby secured their destruction. This entire prophetic episode presents a potentially confusing scenario that only becomes clear in the light of the salvation history (that is, Israel's history and the Lord's activities and purposes in it). The Jews with Zechariah knew this history and so his words and actions needed no further clarification or interpretation (hence none was provided or recorded); this is not the case with most modern readers who have no real knowledge of the salvation history as it unfolds in the Old Testament scriptures.

The first thing to consider, then, is the meaning of the phrase, "flock of slaughter." It designates *Israel* as a flock marked out for slaughter, but in what sense and through whose determination? The context indicates that *men* were the agents of this slaughter (v. 5), but, at the same time, their actions carried out the *Lord's* determination against this flock (vv. 6-11).

It is also necessary to determine the referents in verse 5. Who are the *sellors*, *buyers* and *shepherds* and how exactly do they relate to the flock of Israel?

- First of all, the Lord referred to them as men who benefit themselves at the expense of the flock. Not only were they profiting from their self-serving actions, they ascribed their good fortune to the *Lord's favor* ("blessed be *Yahweh* – the God of Israel; I have become rich"). Suffering no ill consequence for their treatment of Yahweh's flock, the text indicates that these men were actually congratulating themselves that they were faithful shepherds on the Lord's behalf and that He was rewarding them accordingly; their prosperity in their activities told them that the Lord was pleased with them. This depiction of their attitudes and actions – abusing, exploiting and having no pity on the sheep entrusted to them while ascribing to themselves God's blessing (v. 5b) – indicates that these individuals were Israelite rulers and leaders.
- Israelite shepherds had been "selling" the flock for profit, but they sold them to men who *slaughtered* them, also without pity or consequence. In this sense, first, this flock was a "flock of slaughter" (though, again, the Lord's determination and purpose lay behind this destruction). Given the symbolic nature of this language, it's not necessary to conclude that these "buyers" were literally killing these "sheep" under their authority; rather, they were "slaughtering" them in the sense that they were destroying them, and that for the sake of their own advantage and profit. And so, in context these "buyers" could be other influential Israelites who, together with Israel's rulers, "tended" the Lord's flock in a self-serving manner, exercising power over them to their harm.

But the “buyers” could also represent the Gentile powers that took possession of the Lord’s flock as the result of the deceptive, exploitative influence of Israel’s shepherds. In a very real way, Israel’s leaders – prophets, priests and kings – had sold their fellow Israelites into the hands of other “shepherds” whose goal was to take them to “slaughter” through conquest, exile and subjugation (ref. 2 Kings 17:1-23 in relation to Israel; Jeremiah 10:1-21, 12:1-10, 22:11-23:2, 25:32-38, 50:6-7 and Ezekiel 34 in relation to Judah). Assuming this meaning, the Lord further indicated that these Gentile shepherds were accomplishing their work of slaughter with seeming impunity (Jeremiah 50:6-7): To that day, His people remained under the subjugating, desolating hand of Gentile power; He had neither arisen to deliver them nor returned to them to regather them as His sheep (cf. Psalm 89:19-52 with Nehemiah 9:1-37 and Daniel 7:1-9:19).

In response to this dreadful circumstance, the Lord announced that He was “*no longer going to have pity on the inhabitants of the land*” (v. 6a). The identity of this group of people is also subject to different interpretations:

- Some scholars hold that the Lord was referring to the *Gentile nations*. In this case, he was saying that He was going to withdraw His pity from the *earth’s* inhabitants. This interpretation is supported in a couple of ways: First of all, it fits with the larger context of the Lord’s burden against the nations (cf. again 9:1-6, 12-13) as well as the overall instruction in Zechariah’s prophecy (ref. 1:18-21, 12:1-9, 14:1-3, etc.). A second point of support is that the Lord went on to say that these persons – these “inhabitants” – were going to fall under the power of their *kings* (11:6).
- The second option is that the Lord was speaking of the *Israelite nation*; He was going to remove His compassion from the inhabitants of the land of Israel – i.e., from the Israelite people. This appears to be a better interpretation for several reasons, but the most important is that it best suits the immediate context. First of all, verse 6 is introduced by a Hebrew conjunction that indicates that this verse provides the reason or explanation for verse 5: “*For I shall no longer have compassion on the inhabitants of the land...*” The implication, then, is that the circumstance depicted in verse 5 was the result of Yahweh’s determination to withdraw His compassion. So also it follows that the “flock of slaughter” is to be associated with the “inhabitants” whom He was rejecting. This, in turn, helps to explain the significance of the broken staff representing *favor* and how Zechariah’s breaking of that staff was part of his compliance with Yahweh’s command to “pasture the slaughter-flock” (11:7, 10).

Related to this is the fact that a second staff was involved in this episode: the staff called *union* which denoted the union of the two houses of Israel. As part of pasturing the slaughter-flock, Zechariah broke this staff as well, signifying the fracturing of the covenant house of Israel (11:7, 14).

Putting all of these observations together, the following conclusions emerge:

- 1) Zechariah's "shepherding the slaughter-flock" had reference to the destructive ministration of Israel's shepherds (cf. 11:15). Under the oversight of her human shepherds, Israel had become a flock marked out for slaughter.
 - 2) Israel was a "flock of slaughter," but in accordance with the Lord's determination. His flock had willingly departed from Him to follow false shepherds and so had brought the judgment of destruction upon itself; the nation's apostasy was the reason for its "sale" to other shepherds who took them to slaughter. And this transaction was carried out through Israelite leaders who assumed "ownership" of Yahweh's flock and then, by their own apostasy, effectively "sold" the sheep to other shepherds to be slain.
 - 3) Israel's horrific situation was the Lord's judgment against His wayward flock. Israel's refusal to follow Him as their true Shepherd resulted in His withdrawal of His compassion, care and protection (11:6a). Yahweh gave His flock over to slaughter, so that Zechariah's action in "shepherding the slaughter-flock" gave poignant expression to His own disposition toward His covenant people: *He'd pastured them, yet they became a slaughter-flock*. By following other shepherds ("gods" as well as men) the children of Israel broke their covenant union with Him and He affirmed this violation by turning away from the covenant and fracturing Israel's internal unity which marked them out as the Abrahamic people. In this way Yahweh marked out His flock for slaughter, which destruction was realized when both houses of Israel were given over to foreign shepherd-rulers. And when these Gentile rulers "tended" His flock this way, He did not intervene but allowed the desolation (11:6b).
- d. The Lord charged His prophet to tend the doomed flock of Israel and explained the significance of this directive. In turn, Zechariah recorded that he complied with the divine word; *he "pastured the slaughter-flock" and, in this way, testified to Israel's affliction* (literally, "I tended the flock of slaughter, and thus the afflicted flock" – 11:7; cf. v. 11). There is no way to know all that this "pastoral" work entailed, but Zechariah recorded three actions associated with it:

First, he made and then broke in the sight of the people two staffs which represented the two key components of Yahweh's rejection of His people: The removal of His *favor* (which had secured Israel's blessing) and the fracturing of Israel's *unity* as His covenant house (vv. 10, 14).

Second, Zechariah eliminated three shepherds in one month (vv. 8-9). This is a perplexing statement, and all the more so because the text provides little clarification. One hint is its use of the definite article – *the* three shepherds, indicating that these were particular individuals. A second is Zechariah's commentary identifying these shepherds as men who had vexed him in his spirit and who also loathed him (v. 8b).

Some commentators treat this circumstance literally, believing that Zechariah actually took the lives of these three individuals. This is certainly possible, but the symbolic and representative nature of his shepherding task indicates otherwise. A figurative “annihilation” of these shepherds is also suggested by the prophet’s subsequent statement which reflects back on his action (11:9). It seems, then, that Zechariah annihilated – “cut off” – these three men by severing himself from them. He rejected them, even as he rejected the flock they were shepherding (“I will not pasture you”), giving shepherd and sheep over to themselves and their just fate: “*What is to die, let it die, and what is to be done away, let it be done away; and let those who are left devour one another’s flesh.*”

Thus the particularity of these shepherds (*the* three shepherds) seems to reside in their disposition toward Zechariah and his toward them. They are not further identified and it’s pointless to speculate who they may have been. *What’s important is that they represent the shepherds in Israel who opposed the Lord and His prophets.* But such shepherds greatly influenced the people of Israel, so that Zechariah’s actions expressed Yahweh’s posture toward His wayward flock and not merely their apostate leaders. Thus this “cutting off” and “giving over” (as well as the breaking of the two staffs) were a poignant reminder to the recovered exiles of their true condition and relation to Yahweh: Though back in Judea and finding success in their efforts to rebuild His sanctuary, they yet remained His “slaughter-flock” – a sheepfold separated from its true Shepherd and languishing under the destroying hand of ruthless, self-serving shepherds.

The Lord had given over His flock to be sold for slaughter, *but He did so because they had first sold Him.* By forsaking Him to follow after other shepherds and other gods the sons of Israel had effectively assigned the worth of their Shepherd-Lord – a worth so low that they were readily willing to let Him go in exchange for obtaining other shepherds and gods they regarded as precious.

Thus the imagery of verses 12-13. After breaking the staff of *Favor* in the sight of the people, Zechariah called upon them to give him his due as the shepherd of the slaughter-flock (i.e., the flock of Israel). In this, too, the prophet was acting on behalf of Israel’s true Shepherd: He asked for his wages, but as they were Yahweh’s wages – *Yahweh’s valuation.* And when they considered the Lord’s worth, they assigned to Him the price of thirty pieces of silver – *the value of a non-Israelite slave under the Mosaic Law* (Exodus 21:32; cf. Leviticus 25:39-46).

- e. At this demeaning payment the Lord commanded that the coins be “thrown to the potter” and Zechariah complied (11:13). This event was later explicitly associated with Jesus’ betrayal (Matthew 27:1-10), but what did it signify in its own historical context? Such an action occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament, but it’s clear that Yahweh was calling for the payment to be treated as a contemptuous devaluation of Him. Thus it’s possible that this act signified that Israel had valued their Shepherd-Lord at the price of a piece of common household pottery – an inexpensive, everyday item that would not even be missed if it were broken.