

- f. Zechariah had previously fashioned two staves, and now, following the episode with the thirty pieces of silver, he broke the second staff which symbolized the union of the two houses of Israel (11:14). The text doesn't explain the connection between these two events, but at the very least it highlighted the important truth that the fracturing of the covenant household of Israel was both a reflection and consequence of its valuation of its covenant Shepherd-Lord. The sons of Israel had set Him aside for other shepherds, and He responded by giving them over to dissolution and slaughter. Thus Zechariah's action in breaking the staff of union served first as a reminder of Israel's desolation and exile (which continued to that day), but it also prophesied of a future day which was also going to be marked by division within the covenant household.

Another day was coming when Israel would be called upon to assign a value to its Shepherd-Lord, and that would be the day of Yahweh's great theophany in His Servant, the messianic Branch. All of the prophets spoke of it (ref. Isaiah 7-11, 40:1-11, 49:1ff; Jeremiah 23, 30-33; Ezekiel 34, 37; Daniel 2, 7; Hosea 1-3; Amos 9:11ff; Micah 4-5; Haggai 2; Malachi 3; etc.), but Zechariah made clear that this theophany would be bittersweet and bring about dire consequences for the Israelite nation: Many in Israel would embrace Him, but many more would reject Him, resulting in judgment and wrath transcending anything the nation had experienced in its past (cf. Luke 2:25-35 with 19:1-48, 21:1-24, 23:13-31).

For if Israel incurred guilt worthy of destruction, desolation and exile by rejecting Him in the persons of His prophets and other faithful "shepherds," *how much greater would be their guilt when they rejected Him in His messianic Servant – the Shepherd filled with His Spirit; the Shepherd who embodies His person and word* (ref. Isaiah 9:1-7, 42:1-4, 59:1-21, 61:1-3; cf. again Luke 3-4). If their former guilt rendered them a flock marked out for slaughter, how much more their future, greater guilt (Matthew 23:29-39; Luke 23:20-31; Hebrews 10:26-29)?

The union of the Israelite people was first broken in connection with the division of David's kingdom and the formation of the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. That division still existed in Zechariah's day. But another division was coming in the future – this one a *spiritual* division rather than a tribal and political one. This new division was to be provoked by David's Branch with the new factions within Israel being determined by the people's valuation of Him. Henceforth "Israel" would be determined by one's relationship with the Lord's Messiah (cf. Matthew 3:1-12; 7:13-23; John 8:31-47, 10:1-16, 15:18-25; also Romans 2:28-29, 9:1-33).

- g. Unbelief and enmity were bound up in the hearts of the children of Israel, but their shepherds exacerbated the problem by encouraging them to follow their wayward affections and pursue other "ways" and other "gods." No Israelite was free from culpability for his own apostasy, but the Lord assigned the greatest fault to the apostate shepherds who preyed upon the people's folly. Thus it was fitting that the Lord should conclude His prophetic condemnation of His slaughter-flock by having His prophet play the role of a foolish shepherd (11:15-17).

This final instruction mirrors the prophecy's opening pattern in that the Lord issued a charge to Zechariah and followed it with an explanation. Then the prophecy closed with another poetic section. In this way, the shepherd prophecy – which is the third hinge of Zechariah's overall prophecy – forms an *inclusio*: a distinct context marked out by matching bookends (11:1-6, 11:15-17). Each of these bookends consists of an explained charge to act as a shepherd bounded on the outside by a poignant poem of condemnation and lament (vv. 1-3, 17).

Previously Yahweh directed Zechariah to assume the role of a shepherd by which he depicted the Lord's own shepherding relationship with the flock of Israel; now He instructed him to play the part of a foolish shepherd (11:15). The first role-playing episode focused on the Lord's disposition and determination respecting His wayward *flock*; this one highlighted His disposition and determination respecting Israel's false *shepherds*.

And as His judgment on the flock of Israel had both present and future dimensions (relative to Zechariah's day), so it was with His judgment on Israel's shepherds. The Lord had effectively destroyed the nation's shepherd-leaders through the conquest and exile process, *but here He insisted that another such day lay in the future*. Indeed, He was going to raise up another false shepherd "in the land" – another exploiter and destroyer of His flock in Israel who would then, like his predecessors, come under the fire of divine indignation and retribution (11:16-17). Consistent with the symbolic nature of the broader context, this individual isn't identified (cf. vv. 8-9), and this has led to all sorts of speculation about who this shepherd represents and how this prophetic word should be interpreted.

- A common view is that this foolish shepherd symbolizes the *Roman imperial power* that "shepherded" the nation of Israel to utter destruction in 70 A.D. This fits with the imagery of verse 16 and the fact that this first burden concerned the nations. It is further noted that this shepherd is introduced in the prophecy immediately following the flock's rejection of its true Shepherd through its devaluation of Him in the potter episode (vv. 12-13). This sequence was fulfilled historically in Jesus' rejection and crucifixion which resulted in the Roman incursion and destruction of Jerusalem and the covenant nation (cf. Luke 19:28-44, 21:20-24).
- But as the previous three shepherds symbolized the apostate leaders of Israel's history, so it's likely this latter shepherd represented the unfaithful *Jewish leadership* that was to arise in Israel's future (note esp. 11:17a). And the larger context suggests the time frame for this appearance. Such foolish shepherds would be present at the time that the other future aspects of the prophecy are fulfilled: the time when Israel's "blessing" and "union" are consummately destroyed and it suffers its fate as the Lord's slaughter-flock. *And those things were to occur in conjunction with the nation assigning Yahweh's valuation at thirty pieces of silver* – the day when He came to His flock in the person of the Branch-Shepherd.

*In fact, the Scripture argues that both of the above are true.* For, although Rome slaughtered both the Shepherd and the flock of Israel, it did so in response to the apostate Jewish power: Pilate sought to release Jesus but the slaughter-flock and its shepherds would not permit it (John 18:28-19:12); so also Titus laid siege to Jerusalem as the Lord's retribution for His flock's rejection of their Messiah. Israel and its shepherds secured their own destruction (Daniel 9:24-27).

Therefore, while Rome may well be in view in this imagery of the foolish shepherd, Israel's leadership at the time of Jesus must be regarded as the ultimate referent. Those rulers and leaders certainly fit the Lord's description of men who care nothing for the sheep and their well-being but, to the contrary, consume them in the interest of their own agenda and profit (11:16). Jesus overtly identified His generation's shepherds in this way and they responded by seeking to destroy Him in order to maintain their control over Yahweh's flock (cf. Matthew 9:27-36 with John 10:1-31; cf. also Matthew 12:1-14, 15:1-14, 23:1-36 and John 11:38-53).

Thus the prophecy ended as it began – with a poetic lament. The opening one called for the shepherds and rulers to wail in agony because their power and glory were being destroyed; this closing one summed up that destruction by proclaiming the verdict of *woe* upon such men (11:17). In Hebrew, *woe* is most often an expression of calamity or cursing (“alas”) typically associated with divine judgment. Thus the Scripture applies it to Gentile peoples as well as the sons of Israel (cf. Isaiah 3:1-11, 5:1-25, 10:1-19; so esp. Matthew 23:1-39). In this instance, the divine curse is directed at the sort of individuals indicated by Zechariah's role playing – foolish, unfaithful, and therefore *worthless* shepherds.

More than simply stripped of their power and glory, such leaders are under Yahweh's curse: In the imagery of the woe statement, they “*have a sword laid on their arm and on their right eye*” so that both are rendered completely useless. The arm that ought to have protected the flock and the eye that should have watched over it were instead dedicated to the shepherd's own profit. And the shepherd who renders himself worthless in this way will find the Lord consigning him to that worthlessness: The arm and eye that will not serve the good of the sheep will be rendered unserviceable – utterly withered and utterly blinded.

Notably, such shepherds are aptly described in terms of *forsaking the flock*. This is the image of the *hireling* which Jesus employed in referring to the leaders of Israel; even when present with the sheep, the hireling has already “forsaken” them by having no real concern for them (John 10:1ff). Such were Israel's shepherds: Their concern was for themselves and so they exploited the Lord's flock to their own gain, leading them astray and keeping them from the Good Shepherd.

This is the foolish shepherd who justly incurs the Lord's curse leading to his own destruction. Refusing to serve the flock and devoting his energies and resources to his own profit, he will suffer the loss of them. That loss will render him incapable of shepherding Yahweh's sheep, but also no longer able to serve himself.