

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

JER. 23:1 Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD.

2 Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the LORD.

3 And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.

4 And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the LORD.

5 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.

6 In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, The LORD our righteousness.

7 Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that they shall no more say, The LORD liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt;

8 But, The LORD liveth, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land.

NOTES

God Sends a Righteous Branch

Lesson Text: Jeremiah 23:1-8

Related Scriptures: John 10:1-16, 25-30; Genesis 1:26-28;
Isaiah 4:2-6; 11:1-16; Luke 9:28-36

TIME: probably between 597 and 586 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

GOLDEN TEXT—"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth" (Jeremiah 23:5).

Lesson Exposition

SHEPHERDS OLD AND NEW— Jer. 23:1-4

The end of Jeremiah's royal collection (Jer. 21:1—23:8) begins with judgment against Judah's kings and God's promise of a future restoration for his people. These four verses constitute three oracles (prophetic speeches) that capture the progression of the divine pronouncement. Each oracle is characterized by a shift in person, moving from third person to second person and ending with God speaking in the first person.

The first oracle (Jer. 23:1). Typical of judgment oracles in the Hebrew Bible, verse 1 begins with the declaration: "Woe!" This grievous cry of the prophet unambiguously sets the tone of God's message against the shepherds of Judah. As discussed above, shepherd imagery was used for royalty in the Old Testament and the ancient Near East. According to Jeremiah, the kings were responsible for Babylon's exile of the Judahites, and their failure had not gone unnoticed.

The second oracle (Jer. 23:2). The second oracle picks up the judgment of the previous verse and carries it to its end. Here, the Lord speaks in the second person, addressing the shepherd-kings directly.

Jeremiah identified the object of God's judgment as the shepherds who shepherd (vs. 2). Awkwardly, in its original language, this phrase is an exact duplicate. The use of "shepherding shepherds" is emphatic, accentuating the role at which the Judahite kings failed so miserably. In other words, the shepherding shepherds failed to shepherd. Instead, they scattered the flock. Later in the verse, this act is characterized with additional play on the word for shepherd. The Hebrew word for "evil" sounds nearly identical to the Hebrew word for "shepherd." Instead of shepherding God's flock, the shepherding shepherds did evil.

Beyond this play on shepherds, a second wordplay occurs in verse 2. Employing the wide range of meaning of the Hebrew word translated "visited," Jeremiah contrasted the kings'

inaction with God's coming action. Because they had failed to visit to the flock—that is, to care for the people—God would visit the shepherd-kings, bringing judgment on them.

The third oracle (Jer. 23:3-4). Continuing the pattern set by the previous oracles, verses 3-4 conclude the first unit of the passage. God spoke in first person as He transitioned from judgment to restoration. After condemning the kings who failed to obey His commands, God turned to His people to offer hope. On the cusp of exile, God promised restoration.

Beyond the notable shift from condemnation to restoration, the third oracle stands out for another reason. In the previous two verses, the prophet blamed the shepherd-kings for the Babylonian Exile. But in verse 3, God identified Himself as the agent responsible for exile. He would drive His people abroad.

Although God's role in Judah's destruction is new to Jeremiah 23, the underlying theology is present throughout the Old Testament. Even in the earliest moments of Israel's history, God warned His people that a pattern of disobedience and sin would result in their deportation.

Coupled with verse 3's exilic theology is the doctrine of the remnant. Especially present in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, the promise of a redeemed remnant often accompanies the Bible's reflection on exile (cf. Isa. 10:20). Although the reign of the powerful was coming to an end, God's people would not vanish. Rather, He would raise up a portion of His people from exile and restore them to the land.

The concluding verse of the section promises new shepherd-kings (Jer. 23:4). After the exile, God would raise up new leaders who would care for His people. In this promise, Jeremiah picked up the wordplay he used

in verse 2. The word for "visit" used in God's judgment of the shepherd-kings occurs once more. In this context, however, it means "to be lacking," or missing. With the same word, God condemned the kings, promised retribution, and promised His people that no one would be missing.

THE DAVIDIC KING OLD AND NEW—Jer. 23:5-6

After the three oracles and their progression from judgment to restoration, Jeremiah turned to consider the Davidic King. The epithet Jeremiah used to describe the royal figure is often translated "Branch," though "sprout" or "scion" might better capture the meaning of the Hebrew word.

At a future time, God would raise up a scion, or heir, for King David, just as He would raise up shepherds to govern His people (Jer. 23:4). This descendant would be characterized by righteousness, a characteristic emphasized in verses 5-6. He would be the rightful Branch, He would do what is right, and His name would be "the Lord our righteousness."

Budding theology. Jeremiah's prophecy of a Davidic heir is the expectant fulfillment of God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7. Although the Davidic dynasty ruled Judah for centuries, Jeremiah and the people looked toward an ultimate fulfillment of God's promise—the Messiah. Isaiah described the messianic figure as a shoot from the stump of Jesse, David's father. He would usher in an age of peace and wear righteousness like a belt around His waist (Isa. 11:1, 5). In His day, the remnant of God's exiled people would be gathered to Him (vss. 10-11).

Political outgrowth. Beyond the passage's theological dimension and its gaze toward the future, Jeremiah's description of the Davidic heir also had a contemporary political function.

After three years of submission to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, King Jehoiakim rebelled against the tyrant. The revolt failed. Jehoiakim's death occurred about this time, and his son Jehoiachin assumed the throne. Following the moral patterns of his predecessors, the young king also did evil in God's sight (2 Kgs. 24:8-9). Three months later, Jehoiachin and his closest companions were seized by Nebuchadnezzar and exiled to Babylon (vs. 12). In his place, the Babylonian king set Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah as his puppet king over Judah, renaming him Zedekiah (vs. 17).

When Jeremiah wrote this oracle, Judah was facing a political crisis. Undoubtedly, many debated the legitimacy of the kingship, questioning whether the exiled Jehoiachin or his uncle Zedekiah was the rightful ruler. In response, Jeremiah offered an unexpected alternative. The future scion of David is the true King. He is the rightful Branch who does what is right in the land (Jer. 23:5), unlike the puppet king Babylon appointed.

To emphasize further the contrast between the illegitimate Zedekiah and the rightful Branch, Jeremiah took a page from Nebuchadnezzar's book. He called the Branch by a new name. Verse 6 renders the name as "the Lord our righteousness." This is a clever play on the name Nebuchadnezzar gave Mattaniah. In Hebrew, Zedekiah means "the Lord is my righteousness." By giving the Branch a name almost identical to the one Nebuchadnezzar gave Judah's puppet king, the prophet expressed his disappointment in Zedekiah and his anticipation of the rightful Branch.

THE EXODUS OLD AND NEW— Jer. 23:7-8

Throughout the Old Testament, the exodus is regarded as the birth event of Israel. Just as God broke through the waters to create the cosmos (Gen. 1:2), so too did He break through the Red

Sea to form the nation Israel (Ex. 14). It is not surprising, then, that Jeremiah would iterate an oath to the Lord that highlighted this event (Jer. 23:7). Yet a day would come, the prophet wrote, when this nation-creating event would be overshadowed. Instead, everyone would focus on the nation's rebirth: the return from exile.

Unlike the exodus, which drew God's people out of the south from Egypt, God would draw His people from the north. Its most apparent referent is Babylon, though other countries may also be within the prophet's scope. God would bring back the offspring of Israel from every land to which He had scattered them. This second exodus would eclipse the first. And those whom God uprooted from their soil (12:14) would dwell on it once again (23:8).

—Andrew Rudolf

QUESTIONS

1. How does a judgment oracle typically begin (Jer. 30:1)?
2. Who does God hold accountable for Judah's captivity (vs. 1)?
3. What did the kings fail to do (vs. 2)?
4. What did the kings do instead (vs. 2)?
5. What did God promise to do for the nation (vss. 3-4)?
6. What group of people did God promise to appoint for the nation (vs. 4)?
7. Who, specifically, did the Lord promise to send to the nation (vss. 5-6)?
8. What is the person's name, and why was that name chosen (vs. 6)?
9. Why is the exodus important to Israel's identity (vs. 7)?
10. Why is it significant that the return from the north will eclipse the exodus from Egypt (vs. 8)?

—Andrew Rudolf

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. God will judge leaders who take advantage of their positions. We should take leadership seriously (Jer. 23:1-2).
2. No matter our circumstances, God is always able to rescue us (vs. 3).
3. Godly leadership is a gift from the Lord, and we must pray for it (vs. 4).
4. Jesus is King (vs. 5)!
5. The Lord is our righteousness! If we ever think we are unworthy, we should take comfort and rest in His worthiness (vs. 6).
6. Although the exodus was great, God has done (and will do) even greater things, and we can wait expectantly for Him (vss. 7-8).

—Tom Greene

Golden Text Illuminated

“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth” (Jeremiah 23:5).

The golden text for this lesson speaks of a coming King, a righteous Branch from the line of David, who will reign with justice and prosperity. This prophecy, given through Jeremiah, offers hope to a people longing for perfect righteousness and justice in a world marred by sin and corruption.

Throughout history, people have yearned for leaders who will govern with integrity, wisdom, and compassion. We see this desire reflected in the literature, art, and political movements of every age. Yet, even the best of human leaders fall short, succumbing to the temptations of power, greed, and self-interest.

In Jeremiah's time, the leadership of Israel was particularly corrupt. The kings and shepherds, who were meant to guide and protect the people, had instead led them astray into idolatry and wickedness. The nation was on the brink of exile, facing the consequences of their disobedience and the failure of their leaders.

Yet, during this bleak situation, God promised a future hope. The golden text declares that a day is coming when a righteous Branch from David's line will arise. This King will not be like the corrupt leaders of the past but will reign with justice and righteousness.

The prophecy of the righteous Branch finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Son of David and the King of kings.

—Gene Kissinger

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. How might a bad leader today “scatter the sheep” (Jer 23:1)?
2. What makes someone a good and godly leader?
3. What leadership roles do you have?
4. Are there any ways you might be tempted to take advantage of your leadership roles?
5. Has God ever disciplined you to warn you not to misuse a leadership role?
6. Do you ever feel like you are in exile? When? How could God intervene?
7. What does it mean for us that Jesus is King *now*?
8. How much of this lesson's Scripture text is past tense, and does any of it remain for the future?
9. How does the Lord's being our righteousness change the way we live?

—Tom Greene