

An Exegetical Study of Shepherd-Sheep Motif in Zechariah 11:4-17

Philip Asura Nggada, PhD
Department of Religion and Philosophy,
University of Jos, Jos, Plateau State
Email: asuraphilip@yahoo.com
+2348034474304

Abstract

The literary piece of Zechariah 11:4-17 has generated controversy among scholars around the authorship, literary genre and identity of the shepherd. Some argue that there are two different authors with a literary disconnect. For others, the form of literary genre revolves around prose, poetry and the identity of the shepherd as the messianic figure in the Old Testament with Christological implications. This article argues that intra and intertextual reading of the text reveals that shepherd-sheep motif is a progressive phenomenon from one Testament to the other without any disconnection in its literary unity. The methods adopted for this research are historical, exegetical, inter/intra textual and theological approach. It was found that shepherd motif in Zechariah has a strong Christological and theological implication for leadership in the Old Testament and Contemporary Times. The research recommends that anyone in leadership position must be able to lead with an untiring desire and execute justice, equity and fair play to all. Failure to abide by this disposition shows that the person is unfit to lead and would attract God's Judgment.

Key words: Shepherd, Messiah, Intra and Inter textuality, Christology.

Introduction

The shepherd-sheep motif in Zechariah's literary piece has generated hot arguments among scholars around the form of writing, identity of the shepherd and authorship. The main thrust of this paper is to be able to investigate the literary genre, to find out what the symbols of shepherd-sheep portrays and the identity of the messianic shepherd. Looking at the complexities and the nature of the research. The researcher critically come up with the most appropriate method for this kind of study as being the exegetical approach. This is because it is adequate and has the tendency to bring out the authorial intention of the text. It was observed that Zechariah's piece of writing is set against the background of the first returnees from the Babylonian exile. In other words, the prophet's ministry took place in the post exilic period. A closer investigation of the background of the text reveals a similar context with Haggai. Despite King Cyrus of Persia's edict for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild Yahweh's temple in 539 B.C. The communities of the Jewish people were faced with external opposition and variety of personal and practical difficulties, which delayed the rebuilding of the temple until God spurred Zechariah and Haggai to stir up the people for the construction of the temple of the Lord. When one studies the background of the text carefully, we see chapters 1-8 are issues of immediate concern to the restoration of the community (Dillard and Longman III 428). The question that this research begged to address is the identity of the shepherd and his role.

Authorship and Date

The authorship of Zechariah has been a disputable fact among scholars. Most biblical and literary experts affirm chapters 1-8 and chapters 9-14 to be works of two different authors, until recently Carstasen (504) argues that chapters 9-14 seem to be the works of an anonymous writer other than Zechariah. Reasons being that chapters 9 and 12 each begins with the word oracle as does the book of Malachi; since Malachi too is anonymous. Other reasons revolve around different literary genres. Carstasen (507) further observes that there are notable differences in the following: (a) chapters 9-14 are predominantly poetry, while chapters 1-8 are prose. (b) Chapters 9-14 do not contain vision, while chapters 1-8 use vision. (c) Last 6 chapters do not mention Zechariah, while the former records that. We can go on and on. But a critical and analytical mind may tend to pay cursory observation that such arguments are not strong enough to disconnect the literary unity of the text. It clearly appears that the prophecy of Zechariah emanates from a single author. This research agrees with the unpopular opinion that Zechariah is the scribe behind his write up. This research substantiates the fact that writers have different literary skills of presenting their ideas, so the question of genre and names varies whether present or not in the two sections are weak to nullify Zechariah's authorship. Since scholars have not authentically proven who that anonymous author of the section is as we find in the study of Isaiah (Deutero and Trito-Isaiah) This study subscribes Zechariah the son of Iddo, as the author of his book.

Regarding the date of Zechariah being a contemporary of Haggai, both prophecies are carefully dated. We gathered with certainty that the first utterance comes two months after Haggai's associate began to preach in 520 BC. From the background we could see the certainty that Zechariah is set against the background of the first generation of returnees from the Babylonian exile, dated to the second year of Darius 520/519 BC (Longman II and Dillard 428).

The central point of Zechariah's message is captured in 1:4b thus says the Lord of hosts. "Return (*shub/v*) from your evil ways and from your evil deeds" the connection this observation has with the shepherd sheep motif of our study is the fact that the bad shepherds have been cautioned to repent and the messianic implication of the shepherd is further stressed by the cruelty of the shepherds which the sheep deserves by also slaying their noblest leader 12:10-13:1 (Carstasen 507).

Purpose and Theology

The primary purpose of Zechariah was to rebuke the people of Judah, encourage and stir them up to embark on the construction to complete the temple's building. Additionally, the prophet calls on Judah to return to the Lord or *shuv* or return back or *repent* (Holladay 363). If they return to him, he would also return to them and fulfill all his promises.

The theology of any given text is wrapped in its purpose, having considered the scholarly opinion of the authorship and date of the two halves of the book of Zechariah. One thing that is certain is the literary unit of the whole text, looking intently to the whole text there is that evidence of a gradual development of its theology. The theology of the text revolves around two principal themes - Redemption and Judgment. This is evident when one looks at the first half that is chapters 1-8 which mostly concerns itself with the series of visions, reformation, redemption and judgment both for Israel and Gentile nations around. It should be noted also that the taste and experience of redemption in the restored community was not yet full. But even a greater redemption will be

realized in the future which the second half that is chapter 9-14 addresses (Longman III & Dillard 436).

In a more theological discourse Baker (1406) argues that the book is related to its messianic as well as its apocalyptic and eschatological motifs. He further stresses that the messianic emphasis predicts Christ's coming; lowliness, his humanity, rejection, betrayal, priesthood, kingship, building the temple, his coming glory and establishment of peace and prosperity. With the above understanding one could see the role of the messianic shepherd.

Meanwhile, most scholars affirm the theological significance of Zechariah's name to mean "to remember", preferably the Lord remembers. In the context of Zechariah, it then means the Lord remembers his covenant, promises and takes deliverance action to fulfill it. Finally, the book promises deliverance from the Babylonian exile, restoration and a functioning temple; and even a greater picture of salvation and restoration to come through the messiah.

Structure

Basically, the structure of Zechariah 11 has been broadly divided into two major sections: firstly, 11:4-14, which dwells on the foolish shepherd (Mitchelle & Merlin 302-14). However, most commentators and exegetes vary in their opinion. Some see the structure in a consistent whole with a major heading – Bad shepherds and Bad flocks (Cody 357).

Genre

Genre analysis helps the exegete to determine the form, content and function of a particular unit (Hayes and Holladay 83). The type of literary genre under investigation has attracted lots of debates among scholars; some scholars posit that Zechariah chapter eleven is allegorical in nature, others see it from historical perspective, narrating the long history of Israel's disobedience to their God (Cody 357). Both poetical and historical narratives are strong possibilities of the form of literature the text is. A further investigation of the genre reveals that there are prophetic visions, judgment and salvation oracles, although the prophetic vision 1:7-6:8 is called apocalyptic literature. But the text under investigation falls within salvation oracles, which are seen in chapters 9-14. It becomes obvious if the prophetic vision is read alongside with salvation oracle, the prevailing theme is encouragement because of the glorious future that awaits the people of God (Baker 1406). This study opines that the genre of Zechariah 11:4-7 is a mixture of historical narrative with salvation oracle

Translation of the Hebrew Text

ZEC 11:4 Thus says the LORD my God, "Pasture the flock *doomed* to slaughter.

ZEC 11:5 "Those who buy them slay them and go unpunished, and *each* of those who sell them says, 'Blessed be the LORD, for I have become rich!' And their own shepherds have no pity on them.

ZEC 11:6 "For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of the land," declares the LORD; "but behold, I will cause the men to fall, each into another's power and into the power of his king; and they will strike the land, and I will not deliver *them* from their power."

ZEC 11:7 So I pastured the flock *doomed* to slaughter, hence the afflicted of the flock. And I took for myself two staves: the one I called Favor and the other I called Union; so, I pastured the flock.

ZEC 11:8 Then I annihilated the three shepherds in one month, for my soul was impatient with them, and their soul also was weary of me.

ZEC 11:9 Then I said, “I will not pasture you. What is to die, let it die, and what is to be annihilated, let it be annihilated; and let those who are left eat one another’s flesh.”

ZEC 11:10 I took my staff Favor and cut it in pieces, to break my covenant which I had made with all the peoples.

ZEC 11:11 So it was broken on that day, and thus the afflicted of the flock who were watching me realized that it was the word of the LORD.

ZEC 11:12 I said to them, “If it is good in your sight, give *me* my wages; but if not, never mind!” So, they weighed out thirty *shekels* of silver as my wages.

ZEC 11:13 Then the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter, *that* magnificent price at which I was valued by them.” So, I took the thirty *shekels* of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the LORD.

ZEC 11:14 Then I cut in pieces my second staff Union, to break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.

ZEC 11:15 The LORD said to me, “Take again for yourself the equipment of a foolish shepherd.

ZEC 11:16 “For behold, I am going to raise up a shepherd in the land who will not care for the perishing, seek the scattered, heal the broken, or sustain the one standing, but will devour the flesh of the fat *sheep* and tear off their hoofs.

ZEC 11:17 “Woe to the worthless shepherd

Who leaves the flock!

A sword will be on his arm

And on his right eye!

His arm will be totally withered

And his right eye will be blind.” (NASB)

EXEGETICAL COMMENTS

For the interest of this study, the exegetical unit deals with the careless shepherds as a whole. Although what makes this exegetical unit different is its allegorical genre and its exact historical correspondence and its image in the New Testament. A viable and sustainable insight to this difficulty is the question; is Zechariah speaking of himself shepherding God's people or is he representing God as shepherd? Or is Zechariah reciting the long and disobedient history of Israel with this allegorical statement or is he speaking of the inhabitants in the land who had already fallen into disobedience (Chad 1). In the above submission, all the questions raised are possibilities. One might not be wrong and inadequate if he embraces any of the possibilities.

Undoubtedly, verse 4 is very crucial in understanding the passage. The text commences with a prophetic oracular formula mostly used by prophets over the centuries *co amar yevah* which is translated "Thus says the Lord" or "This is what the Lord says". This ascertains the origin of the divine instruction, and it thus reliably informs us that the prophet is only an instrument to channel this divine course. But the oracular tone takes a negative turn against both the shepherds and the flock. A closer investigation of the following texts reveals Jer. 23:1-4. Ezek. 34:1-31 and Ezek. 37:15-28 stand at the background. One could glaringly see that the symbolic action of the prophet is to bring judgment on Judah, preferably on rulers or leaders who fail in both civic and religious responsibilities. Other possible reason for the judgment is the rejection of the messianic shepherding similar to the servant in the servant songs of Isaiah 42:1-4. (Chad 1)

Meanwhile, in the symbolic action of the prophet becoming a shepherd doomed to slaughter, Cody) submits that "the basic mandate to the prophet is to play the shepherd of the flock, which is for willing". The interpretation suggests that the flock is Judah and the motive for the mandate is judgment on the rulers of Judah. (357).

Vv 5-6 describes the actions of the people that attract Yahweh's punishment. One wanders in this prose descriptions who are the buyers and sellers? Perhaps the flock of Israel is bought as slaves by foreign nations or outsiders and those who sell them are their rulers or leaders. This gives us a good picture of the lack of caring for the sheep by the shepherds (rulers) of Israel. The above situation is similar to what is obtainable in Ezekiel 34 :1-10 where shepherd-sheep metaphor is represented by the leaders and the people of Israel (Nggada *Humble Vicegerency*189). They became so proud and so insensitive to the needs of the flock, parading themselves with their riches at the expense of the basic needs of the flock. Their shepherds (rulers), both civil and religious, have no pity or concern for the flocks. This thought is contrasted with the primary function of the good shepherd.

The first clause of verse 6 re-echoes the last clause of verse 5 "... have no pity". One begins to wander why might Yahweh do same as the shepherds of Israel? The simple answer to this question is the fact that Yahweh gives same judgment to all inhabitants of the land, perhaps both the rulers and the flocks for violating his covenant stipulations. The judgment could also be because of the corruption found in Israel. We could see from the content of the verse that Israel exploits the people by amassing wealth for themselves which is apparently seen from their response of "I have become rich (Zech. 11:5). Israel's exploitation does not only come from their shepherds, but also from their neighbours perhaps foreign nations, according to this expression ("fall each into another's power"). From all indication it thus shows that the corruption is both horizontal (neighbours) and vertical (kings), Zech. 11:6 (Chad 1).

Vv 7-8 there is the recurrence of Yahweh's instruction for Zechariah to assume the role of the shepherd for the people, which indeed the prophet assumes and acted the way he had been instructed. The indication of staff in the verse is typical of a shepherd, the staffs are meant for protection and direction. Philip Nggada compares this section with shepherd motif in Psalm 23:4-5 where the Psalter proclaims Lord's rod and staff guiding and protecting him, (Nggada *JUSREL* 19) but in this text, there is slight variation of the staffs being used symbolically, to depict favour and union which further elucidates that the Lord pastures his people with favour and union. A scholar in this school of thought interprets the two staffs of favour and union to represent God's person, his beauty and majesty; God who is wise and faithful as the following texts suggest; Ps. 27:4; 90:17; Prov. 3:17 (Cody 358). We can see here that the symbol of Zechariah assuming a shepherd's role is to clearly demonstrate God's care for his people with blessedness and protection.

At this point one may begin to ask, why is Yahweh so loving and caring despite Israel's disobedience? The answer is found in the image of the good shepherd whose care and desire are untiring. The shepherd's caring motif has always been consistent with Israel throughout their relationship with Yahweh.

In verse 8 the prophet who assumes the shepherd's role is said to have removed three shepherds. In this context the prophet is representing Yahweh as shepherd. There has been considerable debate among scholars to identify the three shepherds. Much ink has been expended in an attempt to clearly figure out who these shepherds are. Cody argues that "some scholars attempt to identify the three shepherds with three historical persons and thus to date the oracle. But the text seems to be silent about these details (358). However, Chad opines that "if one takes v8 to represent Israel's history then the three shepherds might be the successive removal of the final three wicked kings of Judah with one month representing their short reign (2kings 23:34-24:20)" (1). The above statement is not farfetched from the interpretation of the text, except that the good shepherd will dispose the bad shepherds or unfit leaders (Baker 1418). We could see in vs 9 that despite God's graciousness and faithfulness the people were unthankful, so Yahweh gives them over to their idolatry and immorality as described by their impending death and (Zech. 11:9 of Ezek. 5:10; Lam. 2:20) vv 11-12 gives us the picture of Yahweh breaking his covenant with Israel by the symbol of breaking the two staffs.

The expression "if it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not keep them" this expression should not be taken literally, but should be understood in the light of the context. The fact that the Messianic Shepherd demands his wages refers to the severance of ending the relationship but thirty pieces of silver is an insult to compare the kind of service rendered by the shepherd, after all in the ancient Israel thirty shekels of silver is the price of a slave.

The symbolic action of throwing the money to the potter in the temple signifies worthless price. It thus suggests that the fit place to cast the money is to the priest in the house of the Lord. But the English version agrees with the Masoretic rendering in Mt. 27:10 "and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord appointed me" (Barnes, PCSB).

V14 captures what is obtainable in verse 10 of the breaking of the first staff. The second staff 'ties' is broken. This symbolizes the break of the two kingdoms Judah and Israel, but we see the exact opposite of these dissolution in (Ezek. 37:15-19; 21-24; Hos 1:11; 3:18; Isa. 11:12-13) which speaks of Yahweh uniting and gathering of the children of Israel from where they had been

scattered worldwide. Thus, the Lord would fulfil when he brings both Israel and Judah under the messianic shepherd despite his rejection (Barnes, PCSB).

Vv 15-17 speaks of the foolish or false shepherd. Here Zechariah is given a new mandate to play the role of a foolish shepherd. In his role as the foolish shepherd, he will not spare the flock, nor feed or protect the flock but he will devour, exploit and destroy the people. The above verses correlate with Jeremiah 23:1-4 which presented the oracle of Judgment upon the shepherds of Israel (Nggada *JORAS* 42). The withering of the arm and the blind nature of the shepherd's eye is to portray to Israel that this shepherd fails in his responsibility of healing and sustaining the flock, he also fails to seek the shepherd of Israel (Psalm 80:1). A close look at Israel's history is literal with foolish and careless shepherds (leaders) who exploited devoured the sheep and exposed them to selfish purposes. This also describes the symbolic judgment that would come upon Israel.

How does the interpretation above correlate with the shepherd motif in this study? It is clear that the major theme of Zachariah 11 is that of the shepherd. Repeatedly, one sees the activities of the shepherds (Leaders) of Israel and the nonchalant attitudes of the flock too. The shepherds were careless, selfish, exploitative and greedy. They were more of a hireling than shepherds who have the flock at heart. Therefore, the principle and practice of the shepherd motif is being violated by Israel's shepherd. Despite all of these, the good shepherd with his untiring desire to care continues to care for Israel because of his unfailing love and promises.

IMPLICATION TO THE AFRICAN SITUATION

The African situation is not much different from what happened in ancient Israel. Most of the nations in Africa that got their independence from colonialism took oath of office to exercise justice, equity, unity, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of movement and freedom to acquire property anywhere within the continent. But sadly, succeeding generations of African leaders are completely different from the first generation of African leaders. They used their powers to forcefully subjugate the common people and eschewed their freedom and de-franchised them of their legitimate rights. The African nation that was once a place of tourism, peace and freedom became a hotbed for corruption, factions, insecurity and dictatorship. The chorus of freedom from the lips of Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Nelson Mandela from South Africa, Dr Nnamdi Azikwe of Nigeria, seems to have disappeared into thin air. Africa is saddled with injustice, corruption, nepotism, ethnic division and gross violation of human rights across the continent. The Boko Haram saga has gradually and dramatically metamorphosed into kidnappings, banditry, and Janjaweed of the historical Sudan and host of others (Gwammna 12)

Political Trends

Drawing from the exegetical analysis of the text we have examined, it is clear that the passage Zechariah 11:4-17 is dealing with the shepherd-sheep motif or leadership motif. It thus reveals a situation where the shepherds exercised no pity for the subjects; so, Zechariah declared to the shepherds of the Lord's coming judgment, which verse 17 declares. This calls for leadership responsibility, which requires faithfulness and equal treatment for all citizens. The Nigerian situation in the political sphere is sadly noted with political thugs who grossly violate the natural rights of innocent citizens for voting rights, this is due to the fact that for fear of intimidation.

Leaders are called to serve the people as intended by the creator, for all leaders and subjects are accountable to God.

Socio-Economic Trends

It is interesting to note that Zechariah's text has correlation with shepherd motif that symbolizes caring and sustenance of Israel and Judah. Zechariah was mandated to play the role of a foolish and worthless shepherd because of the attitude of the leaders and the people too. Lack of attendant attitude displayed by the leadership of Judah and Israel shows no concern for the welfare of the people, the leaders were exploitative, greedy and selfish. The above rendition is not far away from what is obtainable in Nigeria. Sometimes the attention given to the people's welfare by the leadership is mildly addressed. Many times, until the people protest before leadership would attend to them with prompt action. The margin between the rich and poor is wide and uncalled for.

Religious Context

The religious milieu of Israel and Judah was nothing to write home about. The background had already informed our readership concerning the failed leadership in both kingdoms (Judah and Israel). The priests and prophets who were the religious leaders were so careless and insensitive to the spiritual needs of the people. They engaged themselves in worthless ventures instead of teaching the Torah and guiding the people to grow and mature in the ways of the Lord. Yahweh's Judgment will equally fall on them. The implication of this to the Nigerian *Sitz im Leben* is the fact that religious leaders are not exempted. Pastors, prophets, teachers, apostles and evangelists are equally responsible for shepherding the Church to add more value to the society for this is right and pleasing to God.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined shepherd sheep motif in Zechariah 11:4-17 and saw that shepherd imagery runs right through the text. We have also established that the shepherd symbols depicted leadership responsibility. The research has also grappled with the identity of the shepherd as the text gave near and distant activities of a shepherd. The researcher also wrestled with the fact that could this shepherd imagery be interpreted literally? Or there was an ideal shepherd? The text posed a challenge to the exegete to draw their conclusion. Our findings have shown that the shepherd on the one hand refers to the leaders of Judah and Israel. It prefigures the ministry of the Messiah as the ideal shepherd. The study has finally drawn implication to the situation in Africa and Nigeria in particular in which leadership and democracy have been shattered. This calls for redress in leadership pursuit and execution of its mandate. The call for true and efficient leadership is urgently needed in the political process to help in good governance for peace to reign. But in the event that leadership is not in tandem with Yahweh's demands and commandments then judgment will equally befall the state. This research recommends all those in leadership position should be able to do the needful. Therefore, it is a clarion call for the leadership in Nigeria to take up to their responsibility of good stewardship of maintaining justice, equity, fairness in order for peace to reign and likewise for the people to be responsible citizens.

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