

Jeremiah 23:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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

Analysis

This oracle opens with a devastating indictment against Judah's 'pastors' (ro'im, רֹעִים)—literally 'shepherds,' referring to the nation's political and spiritual leaders. They have not merely failed to feed the flock but actively destroyed and scattered it. The Hebrew verbs emphasize willful, destructive action. These leaders pursued their own interests, oppressed the people, and led them into idolatry rather than protecting and nurturing them.

The shepherd metaphor is rich in biblical theology. God presents Himself as Israel's true Shepherd (Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34), and He appointed human leaders to shepherd His people under His authority. When these under-shepherds fail, they do not merely disappoint human expectations—they betray a divine trust. Their accountability is therefore severe: 'I will visit upon you the evil of your doings.' The same verb for 'visit' (paqad, פָּקַד) can mean both 'attend to' (showing care) and 'punish' (executing judgment)—God will attend to these shepherds in judgment.

This passage anticipates Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees and scribes who 'shut up the kingdom of heaven' and devoured widows' houses (Matthew 23). It also establishes the principle that spiritual leadership carries heightened accountability: 'unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required' (Luke 12:48).

Historical Context

Jeremiah witnessed the reigns of multiple corrupt kings: Jehoahaz reigned only three months before Egyptian captivity; Jehoiakim was a ruthless tyrant who murdered the prophet Uriah; Jehoiachin surrendered to Babylon after three months; and Zedekiah ignored Jeremiah's counsel and rebelled against Babylon, leading to Jerusalem's destruction. The religious leaders were equally corrupt, opposing true prophets while supporting false ones who prophesied peace when there was no peace.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. What does this passage teach us about the responsibility and accountability of spiritual leaders?
2. How can we recognize 'bad shepherds' today who scatter rather than gather God's flock?
3. In what ways does this judgment on corrupt leaders foreshadow Jesus' words about false prophets and teachers?

Interlinear Text

ה וי	רע ים	מאבד ים	ומפץ ים	את	צאן
Woe	be unto the pastors	that destroy	and scatter	H853	the sheep
H1945	H7462	H6	H6327		H6629
מרעית י	נאם	יהוה:			
of my pasture	saith	the LORD			
H4830	H5002	H3068			

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 10:21 (References Lord): For the pastors are become brutish, and have not sought the LORD: therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered.

Ezekiel 13:3 (References Lord): Thus saith the Lord GOD; Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!

Matthew 9:36 (Parallel theme): But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.

Jeremiah 22:22 (Parallel theme): The wind shall eat up all thy pastors, and thy lovers shall go into captivity: surely then shalt thou be ashamed and confounded for all thy wickedness.

Jeremiah 12:10 (Parallel theme): Many pastors have destroyed my vineyard, they have trodden my portion under foot, they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness.

Jeremiah 50:6 (Parallel theme): My people hath been lost sheep: their shepherds have caused them to go astray, they have turned them away on the mountains: they have gone from mountain to hill, they have forgotten their restingplace.

Jeremiah 2:8 (References Lord): The priests said not, Where is the LORD? and they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit.

John 10:12 (Parallel theme): But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep.

Jeremiah 23:2 (References Lord): 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.

John 10:10 (Parallel theme): The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

