

Jeremiah 51:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

I will also break in pieces with thee the shepherd and his flock; and with thee will I break in pieces the husbandman and his yoke of oxen; and with thee will I break in pieces captains and rulers.

Analysis

I will also break in pieces with thee the shepherd and his flock; and with thee will I break in pieces the husbandman and his yoke of oxen; and with thee will I break in pieces captains and rulers—The relentless repetition of naphats continues, now targeting occupational and social structures. The shepherd/flock pairing represents pastoral economy; husbandman (ikkar, farmer) and oxen represent agriculture; captains (pachah, governors) and rulers (sagan, prefects) represent civil authority.

This comprehensive list demonstrates that judgment penetrates every sphere of society—economic, agricultural, political. The "yoke of oxen" detail is particularly vivid; even the fundamental tools of civilization are shattered. The progression from demographic categories (v. 22) to vocational and political structures (v. 23) shows how divine judgment dismantles both the people and the systems sustaining civilization.

The term "shepherd" carries special irony. Ancient Near Eastern kings were called shepherds of their people; Nebuchadnezzar styled himself as Babylon's shepherd. Yet Babylon, which broke other shepherds, will itself be broken. This connects to Jeremiah 23:1-4, where God condemns Israel's failed shepherds and promises to raise up the ultimate Shepherd (fulfilled in Christ, John 10:11). Earthly shepherds fail and face judgment; only the Good Shepherd endures.

Historical Context

Babylon's agricultural and economic systems were among the ancient world's most sophisticated. The Babylonian heartland's irrigation network, managed by state-appointed officials, sustained large populations and military campaigns. The administrative structure included governors (pachah) over provinces and prefects (sagan) managing cities—the very offices named in this verse.

When Babylon fell to Persia (539 BCE), this entire administrative structure was dismantled. The Cyrus Cylinder records the Persian king's reorganization of Babylonian territories under new governors. Archaeological evidence shows agricultural disruption as Persian priorities shifted. Babylon never regained its role as an imperial center—its shepherds, farmers, and rulers were indeed broken, though the city itself survived under foreign rule. The prophecy's precision validates its divine origin.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. Why does God's judgment target not just people but also the systems and structures of civilization?
2. How does the 'shepherd' imagery connect to God's condemnation of failed leadership throughout Scripture?
3. What parallels exist between ancient Babylon's comprehensive collapse and potential judgments on modern nations?

Interlinear Text

וְנִפְצֵת י' I will also break in pieces H5310	בְּךָ H0	רֹעֵה H7462	וְעֶדְרֹו and his flock H5739
וְנִפְצֵת י' I will also break in pieces H5310	בְּךָ H0	אֶרְ the husbandman H406	וְצִמּוֹ and his yoke of oxen H6776
וְנִפְצֵת י' I will also break in pieces H5310	בְּךָ H0	פְּחֹת captains H6346	וְסֹגְנִים: and rulers H5461

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