

THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

As you consider the many ancient prophecies of Christmas, certain themes blend together. We have seen, for example, that several messianic prophecies highlight the justice that Messiah would bring. Several focus on the peace that Messiah would bring. Another common theme is Messiah's shepherding, which is the major focus of the next prophecy we will consider in Ezekiel 34.

Ezekiel ministered long after the deaths of Isaiah and Micah, whose prophecies we looked at previously. He ministered in Babylon, having already been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar. Common themes in Ezekiel and Jeremiah suggest that Ezekiel may have been exposed to some of Jeremiah's preaching before capture—but it was in Babylon that he was called to prophesy.

Ezekiel prophesied during a particularly difficult time for Judah. God had promised David that he would never lack a king on the throne of Israel, but during Ezekiel's lifetime, Judah's last king—Zedekiah—was deposed by Nebuchadnezzar. It seemed as if David's line had come to an end. But in deep darkness shines Ezekiel's promise of a Shepherd-King.

The ESV divides this chapter into six paragraphs, which form the major divisions of the chapter. In fact, they form two triads, which parallel each other, but with different emphases. The first triad (vv. 1–6; vv. 7–10; and vv. 11–16) is addressed to Judah's worthless shepherds, while the second triad (vv. 17–19; vv. 20–24; and vv. 25–31) is addressed to Judah's scattered sheep.

The Lord begins by addressing Judah's worthless shepherds, and says three things to them.

First, in vv. 1–6, the Lord rebukes Judah's shepherds. He had appointed kings and priests to gently lead his people, but they had failed. Shepherds should look out for the welfare of the

flock entrusted to them, but Judah's kings and priests had neglected their responsibility.

Worse, not only had the shepherds failed to feed the sheep, but they had actively fleeced the sheep. They had taken the sheep's food and gorged on it themselves. As the Lord said, "You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep." They had failed to

strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the broken, and seek the lost. In a very unshepherdy fashion, they had "ruled them" with "force and harshness." The result is that the sheep were "scattered" and "wandered ... with none to search

or seek for them." God was displeased and strongly rebuked the shepherds for their mistreatment of the sheep.

Second, in vv. 7–10, Yahweh talks of the recompense that he would exercise against the worthless shepherds for their failure to fulfil their responsibility before God. In most frightening language, the Lord declares, "Behold, I am against the shepherds." How terrifying a thought to think that the Lord is against you! The Lord would "put a stop" to this mistreatment by the shepherds and act himself to "rescue" the sheep.

This prophecy was fulfilled in the destruction of the temple and the Babylonian exile. With no more Jewish monarchy, godless kings could no longer serve as worthless shepherds. With no more temple system, the priests could no longer fleece the sheep. As dreadful as the Babylonian exile was, it was an act of rescue:



God rescuing his sheep by judging the worthless shepherds.

Third, the Lord announces that, having given the worthless shepherds over to foreign exile, he would not abandon his sheep, but would act to rescue them himself (vv. 11–16).

If Israel's leaders would not fulfil their God-given responsibility, God would step in himself to shepherd his people. The sheep were scattered because of the faithlessness of the shepherds, and since the shepherds would not seek out the lost sheep, God would do so himself. Judah had for a long time been looking to foreign nations for security, but those alliances had worked, and would continue to work, against them. But the Lord would now stand to shepherd and restore his sheep.

In the second half of the chapter, the Lord turns his attention to the sheep themselves. They were not guiltless in all of this. He issues the same threefold statement to them.

First, the Lord rebukes the faithless sheep (vv. 17–19). As oppressive as the kings and priests were, that was not where the problem stopped: There was injustice and oppression between the sheep. Many of them had eaten what they could find but, instead of leaving food for their fellow sheep, had deliberately trodden down what was left so that their fellow sheep would starve. The Lord would therefore separate sheep from sheep—the righteous sheep from the unrighteous sheep. He would deal with the oppressors and strengthen the weak.

Jesus, of course, picked up on this language in Matthew 25, where he said that he is the one who will ultimately separate sheep from goats at the final judgement.

Second, the Lord speaks of the recompense that he would exercise against the sheep (vv. 20–24). Here is where the messianic rubber hits the road.

The Lord would stand to judge his people—between fat sheep and lean sheep, between oppressors and oppressed, between hunter and prey. “I will judge between sheep and sheep.” And he would do so in the most wonderful way: by appointing “over them one shepherd, my servant David.”

The Lord had told them that he would no longer delegate shepherding responsibility but would do it himself. But now he speaks of a successor—a descendant of David—whom he would set up as their ruler. How could he himself act as their ruler while still appointing a descendant of David to act in that capacity? By becoming a descendant of David himself!

Third, the Lord again promises to rescue his people (vv. 25–31). He would establish a covenant of peace with them, ensuring their complete wellbeing and flourishing. This covenant would banish wild beasts and ensure the security of his people. It would produce showers of blessing. It would ensure his people's experiential knowledge of him: “They shall know that I am the LORD.” What wonderful blessings this covenant of peace would bring to a beleaguered, scattered people!

But remember how the Lord would do all of this: by coming himself as a shepherd from the lineage of David. As we turn to the New Testament, we find a group of shepherds greeted by angelic messengers with a message of peace because of a baby, from the lineage of David, born in a manger. That baby grew up to become a good shepherd for God's people (see John 10). He sought the lost sheep, restored the wandering, bound up the broken, and protected the threatened. He called to his sheep, and those who heard and responded to his voice received eternal life.

It is strange, but true, that Old Testament scholars sometimes puzzle over the seeming discrepancy between God no longer delegating shepherding responsibility to others and yet appointing a descendant of David as his delegate. But it doesn't puzzle us at all, because that's exactly what Christmas is all about. Christmas is about our need for a shepherd, and God appointing himself as a shepherd by coming in human form as a descendant of David.

More than anything this Christmas, we need to believe God and to trust in the one shepherd whom God has sent to lead and guide and rule his people. He alone can give lasting satisfaction and blessing. Let us look to and embrace the one shepherd given for the good of our souls, who brings with him a covenant of peace to ensure our eternal blessing and our experiential knowledge of the one, true God.