

The Monarchical Mandate for the Marginalized: A study of shepherds in Jeremiah 22-23



Daniel Zander, Vanguard College Alumni.¹

ABSTRACT: *The depiction of God being the shepherd of God's flock is familiar among many modern Christians. This is an image rooted in the themes of provision, protection, and authority, which characterize the reign of God as King and Shepherd of His people.² In the same thematic stream, the kings and rulers of Israel were also seen as shepherds.³ Jeremiah 22 contrasts the wicked shepherds of Israel and their rule of oppression with the righteous shepherd that is Josiah and his rule of justice. The praise of Josiah's righteousness is then sanctified in Jeremiah's prophecy of the Branch of David in Jeremiah 23: one wholly Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.*

KEYWORDS: *Justice, shepherd, Christ, government, public, ecclesiological, biblical justice, marginalized, oppressed, poor, orphan, widow, righteousness*

Introduction

Jeremiah is a complex and dramatic biblical book as it uses poetry and prose to convict the heart of the reader to live righteously under God's holy direction. The book of Jeremiah gives a comprehensive account of the wickedness of the people of Israel and their unwillingness to repent, both in their personal and the corporate domains. Jeremiah 22 and 23 demonstrate the wickedness of the unjust reigns of the Hebrew leaders, Jehoahaz (otherwise known as Shallum),⁴ Jehoiakim,⁵ and Jehoiachin⁶ (known by the prophet Jeremiah as shepherds), while contrasting such reigns with the righteous reign of Josiah.⁷ Ultimately, these chapters lead us to an understanding of the nature of justice in God's Kingdom as perpetrated by our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. As the reader will soon discover, these shepherds either embraced or rejected God's monarchical mandate for justice in the land.

¹ Daniel Zander is a recent alumnus of Vanguard College, graduating with a Bachelor of Theology (Pastoral Ministry). He is passionate about justice ministry which has led him to work with Shiloh, a Christian non-profit which provides faith-based programming for at-risk youth. Daniel also ministers to McKernan Baptist Church as the Worship Ministry Assistant.

² Allen Myers. *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans). 1987. 939.

³ Is. 44:28, Jer. 6:3, 2 Sam. 7:7, NRSV.

⁴ Jer. 22:11, NRSV.

⁵ Jer. 22:16, NRSV.

⁶ Jer. 22:24, NRSV.

⁷ Jer. 22:15, NRSV.



Historical Study

Being a shepherd was a common vocation in Ancient Near Eastern culture.⁸ Due to the continued image of provision, protection, and authority over sheep, kings and rulers were seen as shepherds within their own nations.⁹ Israel was not exempt from the tradition of Ancient Near Eastern cultures in viewing their leaders as such. As twenty-first century Christians, we typically attach the imagery of the shepherd to Jesus Christ. However, Jeremiah 22 demonstrates that the shepherds of Israel were evil and oppressive rather than holy and just. We expect the leader of God's flock to be one of justice and mercy, but Jeremiah 22 serves as a warning that any shepherd or leader (be it political or ecclesiological) fall well short of the expected mandate of ruling with justice for the poor, the stranger, the oppressed, the widow, and the orphan. Specifically, the rules of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiachin show the biblical reader that those who do not rule with justice are far from knowing God.

Before exploring the reigns of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, a study into the nature of justice in the Ancient Near East needs to be undertaken. It is suggested that the Code of Hammurabi attempts to have Babylon's authorities submit to a law of justice in the land; indeed, this was a feature that is said to be common among many Ancient Near Eastern societies.¹⁰ Of these societies, Israel too required its leaders to adhere to the Torah, which includes its own form of justice in the land: the neglect of military might, political favour in the form of marriages, and accumulation of excess wealth, rooted in the divine mandate for humility in the kingship.¹¹

Secondly, Jeremiah 22 gives an account of the misdeeds of the kings of Israel by mentioning that Shallum (known as Jehoahaz)¹² had committed idolatry, and his successor Jehoiakim had dealt injustice in the land.¹³ Rather than being an indictment against these acts in particular, Jeremiah 22 serves as a rebuke against any shepherd of Israel who reigns with injustice. John Bracke informs the reader of Jeremiah that "The king is understood to be God's agent responsible for the administration of justice."¹⁴ The perversion of justice brought upon God's people by the hands of the kings Jehoiakim and Jehoahaz stand in stark contrast to the justice during the reigns of King Josiah and the Branch of David.

Lastly, Jeremiah 22 and 23 show the reader that just shepherds ruled over Israel in the past and will reign in totality in the bright future of God's Kingdom through the Branch of David, even if Jeremiah had prophesied the Davidic dynasty's destruction.¹⁵ In regard to Josiah in Jeremiah 22, McConville states that his reign "...in contrast, passes lightly over the success of Josiah, using it only to sharpen the criticism of his successors."¹⁶ While the shepherds of Israel previously accumulated dishonest wealth and spilled innocent blood, Josiah judged in favour of the cause of the poor and needy: such is the way of the righteous shepherd.¹⁷

This is made perfect in the image of the Good Shepherd, whose presence for the people of God was prophesied in Jeremiah 23. Succeeding the judgments in Jeremiah 22, Jeremiah 23 gives a tremendous promise from God, providing hope in an otherwise bleak prophetic book: "I will raise up

⁸ Jørn Varhaug, "The Decline of the Shepherd Metaphor as Royal Self-Expression", *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*. 33, no. 1 (2019). Pp. 16-23. 18.

⁹ Allen Myers. *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans). 1987. 939.

¹⁰ Peter T. Vogt. *Interpreting the Pentateuch: An Exegetical Handbook*. *Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications). 2009.

¹¹ Deut. 17:16-20

¹² Jer. 22:9,11.

¹³ Jer. 22:18,21,22.

¹⁴ John M. Bracke "Justice in the Book of Jeremiah." *Word & World* 22, no. 4 (2002): 387-95. 389.

¹⁵ Jer. 22:30.

¹⁶ J.G. McConville. *Judgment and Promise: An Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah*. (Leicester, England: Apollos). 1993. P. 56

¹⁷ Jer. 22:16,17.

shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.”¹⁸ The passage finds its summation in the restoration of the Davidic dynasty: “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raised up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”¹⁹ Where previous shepherds scattered the flock of God’s people through stomping on the poor in their unjust wealth, the Good Shepherd stands as a beacon of justice, representing the cause of the poor and the downtrodden in the very fabric of the Kingdom of God.

Literary Study

It is tempting to draw stark divisions between the use of prose and poetry in Jeremiah due to the seemingly disproportionate amount of storytelling devices used in the former and latter halves of the book. Walter Brueggemann suggests that there may be a relationship between the practice of prose and poetry in the book of Jeremiah; while poetry is largely used in the first half of the book, it is still coherently interwoven in the latter half, thereby strengthening the weight of Jeremiah’s prosaic sermons.²⁰

Jeremiah was a proven orator who expertly utilized poetry within his prophecies. However, among all the cryptic language about potsheards and loincloths which served as a description for Israel’s state of injustice, Jeremiah was still required to use the literary form of prose to prophesy destruction against the unjust shepherds in a clear and outright manner. In a commentary on an earlier passage of prose, R.K. Harrison declares: “Lest the impassioned poetic oracle should be dismissed as the irrational outpourings of an emotional bard, the prophet now speaks in solemn prose.”²¹ In Jeremiah 22 and 23, particularly, the prophet’s sermonic prose serves as a direct judgment against the wicked shepherds: a judgment that had already begun in Jeremiah 21:11. Whereas Jeremiah 21 keeps the prophecy of destruction in a general fashion, Jeremiah 22 details the shepherds who are under threat of destruction. Even then, this threat remains only a warning. The corrupt shepherds are given a condition that may still lead to life for them should they give life to the orphan, the widow, and all who have been dealt injustice (even after all the oppression that had been wrought): “For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David.”²² Adversely, God promises through Jeremiah: “But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.”²³ As Jeremiah progresses through his indictment against the shepherds of Israel, he bolsters the prose with appropriate use of poetry in Jeremiah 22:13-17. The oppressor is portrayed as a competitor in cedar, referencing Jehoiakim’s cruel forced labor for a greater palace and therefore, a greater reputation as king.²⁴ The poetic prophecy then climaxes with a reference to King Josiah in verse 17 where God gives blunt rhetorical questions with Jeremiah as his mouthpiece: “He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him. Is not this to know me? Says the LORD.”²⁵ Evidently, a righteous shepherd over God’s flock is one that is an arbiter of social justice. Furthermore, the very evidence that one knows God in any capacity is if

¹⁸ Jer. 23:4.

¹⁹ Jer. 23:5.

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann. “Meditation upon the Abyss: The Book of Jeremiah.” *Word and World* 22, no. 4 (2002): 340–50. 343.

²¹ R. K. Harrison. *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, v. 21. (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press) 2009.

²² Jer. 22:4.

²³ Jer. 22:5.

²⁴ Jer. 22:15.

²⁵ Jer. 22:16.

they themselves are a representative of social justice. This is exemplified by the leaders of God's flock (the shepherd) to be exercised by the entirety of the flock.

As the reader progresses through Jeremiah 22, they will find that Jeremiah's prophecies transition from being directed to the shepherds of Israel to being directed to the general people of Israel.²⁶ Their persistence in refusing to listen to the word of God is reflected in Jeremiah's words: "This has been your way since your youth, for you have not obeyed my voice."²⁷ As a result, God promises that "The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds, and your lovers shall be put in captivity."²⁸ There is no hope for God's people in the filth of their oppression and violence: their leaders will be scattered and their allies will be torn down.

While there was no present hope for His people, God still promises His fidelity toward them in the form of an ultimate shepherd: the Branch of David. He promises that there will be a righteous remnant preserved to be under the rule of good shepherds.²⁹ Additionally, the Branch of David is promised, a title that is often used in relation to messianic prophecies.³⁰ The line of David shall be restored in the revelation of a coming King, a Good Shepherd, One who must be our righteous ruler.

As Jeremiah prophesies the coming of Jesus Christ, it is paramount to be reminded of Jeremiah's theme of justice throughout the entire book. Jeremiah's grief in the face of overwhelming evil and injustice is expressed in the existential weight of seeing the wicked prosper. Attempting to close such a propositional gap, the biblical scholar David Melvin tells us that: "The prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous are then part of the sin of the society which has necessitated Jeremiah's prophetic ministry and which now necessitates the destruction of the nation."³¹ Justice lies at the core of both Jeremiah and YHWH's heart, presenting an internal conflict for each of these keystone characters. On the one hand, justice must reign in the land of God's people. On the other hand, the justice that must reign necessitates the punishment of God's people. Like Jesus' weeping for Jerusalem, YHWH's wrath is rooted in grief at the sight of injustice in the places that His people occupy.³²

Contemporary Applications

The people of God today are in need of shepherds who oversee God's flock with a heart crying out for justice. The inequality of wealth caused by irresponsible spending in some Western churches reflects the wicked leadership of Jehoiakim who accumulated wealth oppressively. While certainly to a lesser extent than the injustice wrought in ancient Israel, the Church in North America is still presented with the path of life or the path of death. Scripture gives us an eternal echo that those who sow seeds of oppression will follow a path of death.³³ Jeremiah 22 serves as a solemn warning against turning a blind eye to the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed. Oppression of the poor through the mishandling of church funds have been prevalent among many churches. Missiologist Tim Chester argues that this oppression takes root not only in individual sin, but points towards a deeper systemic sin wherein the Western Church actively avoids justice to the poor. In discussing the rising discourse

²⁶ F. B. Huey Jeremiah, Lamentations. The New American Commentary, v. 16. (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1993). 208.

²⁷ Jer. 22:21.

²⁸ Jer. 22:22.

²⁹ Jer. 23:5.

³⁰ Derek Kidner. The Message of Jeremiah: Against Wind and Tide. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988). 90-91.

³¹ David Melvin. "Why Does the Way of the Wicked Prosper? Human and Divine Suffering in Jeremiah 11:18-12:13 and the Problem of Evil." (Evangelical Quarterly 83, no. 2 (2011): 99-106). 105.

³² Lk. 19:41-42.

³³ Deut. 30:15-16, NRSV.

on justice for the poor through the Church, Chester writes: “For some this renewed emphasis on church is greeted with reluctance because their experience of church is far removed from their experience of work among the poor.”³⁴ While one may discuss individual cases of ecclesiological injustice, we must recognize the systemic sin of the inequality of wealth that is reflected in the practices of North American church services that do not invite or even accept the poor. Social justice is at the core of public theological discourse, and it must continue to be. While some in the Church misrepresent the cause of social justice, Scripture is clear in the words of Jeremiah that to know God at all is to advocate for the cause of the poor and needy.³⁵ Christopher Wright informs us that Jeremiah gives us details on the responsibilities of human governments as he rebukes the Church for favoring a rebellion against the cultural sexual agenda while ignoring the cause of the marginalized, seeing as the book of Jeremiah, and the whole of Scripture are much more extensive on tearing down oppressive systems.³⁶ Naturally, the shepherds of the Church will pay more attention to some topics rather than others. Due to personal interest, the poor and the oppressed could very well be ignored within our local church bodies. Nevertheless, Jeremiah (in unity with the whole of Scripture) exhorts the believer (as well as the believer’s shepherd) to advocate for the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Some churches allow for a ‘benevolent fund’: donation of funds for the purpose of combatting poverty or other social injustices within their community. Preaching on passages like Jeremiah 22 and 23 will also challenge the congregation to hold governments (whether public or ecclesial) accountable to do works of justice. These are simple and effective methods for advocating for the poor and the oppressed within the community. As the Church continues to repent of its institutional injustice, the question will increasingly be presented on how we, as the Church, continue to uphold values of justice, mercy, and humility in the midst of an unjust society.

Furthermore, the ethics of the Kingdom of God echo the relevance of being representatives of justice within the Church. If we are to follow the rules of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, we are to pay close attention to his words for the poor: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”³⁷ This New Testament statement gives the Israelite reader a reminder of the tale of Jeremiah and his many prophecies: after the abhorrent fall of Jerusalem wherein evil had its way and the wrath of God had been completed over Israel, it was the poor of the land who were the promised remnant of God’s new kingdom, with fruitful vineyards and just shepherds appointed over them.³⁸ The rule of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, is based out of a compassionate heart for the poor and the oppressed, not only on a personal level, but also in advocating for this value to be seen in a public and governmental fashion. In contrast, the rule of the violent shepherds of Israel is rooted in oppression and injustice meted out towards the poor, the oppressed, the widow, and the orphan.

Conclusion

As prophesied by Jeremiah, the leaders of God’s people have a divine mandate to conduct justice in the land before them. God’s blessing does not reign in places of uncontrolled and unpunished injustice. He has appointed shepherds over His flock who must take such a responsibility of bearing justice seriously, lest they see that they have persistently rebelled against God. The punishment of the shepherds of Israel and the contrast offered by the Good Shepherd shows that, as His sheep, we are to

³⁴ Tim Chester. *Justice, Mercy and Humility: The Papers of the Micah Network International Consultation on Integral Mission and the Poor*. 2002. (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press). 8.

³⁵ Jer. 22:16.

³⁶ Christopher J. H Wright. *The Message of Jeremiah: Grace in the End*. (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press). 2014. 247.

³⁷ Lk. 6:20.

³⁸ Jer. 39:10.

follow in the footsteps of Jesus' example of divine justice to the stranger, the poor, the oppressed, the widow, and the orphan.

References

References should be provided in alphabetical order in Crimson Pro 11 point, indented 1 cm and fully justified. Referencing should follow APA or Chicago style.

- Bracke, John M. "Justice in the Book of Jeremiah." *Word & World* 22, no. 4 (2002): 387–395.
https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/22-4_Jeremiah/22-4_Bracke.pdf.
- Brueggemann, Walter. "Meditation upon the Abyss: The Book of Jeremiah." *Word and World* 22, no. 4 (2002): 340–350. http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/22-4_Jeremiah/22-4_Brueggemann.pdf.
- Chester, Timothy, ed. *Justice, Mercy and Humility: The Papers of the Micah Network International Consultation on Integral Mission and the Poor* (2001). Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002.
- Harrison, R. K. *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament commentaries v. 21. Nottingham, England : Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press ; IVP Academic, 2009.
- Huey, F. B. *Jeremiah, Lamentations*. The New American commentary v. 16. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1993.
- Kidner, Derek. *The Message of Jeremiah: Against Wind and Tide*. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988.
- McConville, J. G. *Judgment and Promise: An Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah*. Leicester, England: Apollos [u.a.], 1993.
- Melvin, David. "Why Does the Way of the Wicked Prosper? Human and Divine Suffering in Jeremiah 11:18-12:13 and the Problem of Evil." *Evangelical Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2011): 99–106.
- Varhaug, Jørn. "The Decline of the Shepherd Metaphor as Royal Self-Expression." *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 33, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 16–23.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09018328.2019.1599623>.
- Vogt, Peter T. *Interpreting the Pentateuch: An Exegetical Handbook*. Handbooks for Old Testament exegesis. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Message of Jeremiah: Grace in the End*. Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014.