

## Oracle of Judgment and Restoration: An Exegetical and Intertextual Analysis of *Jeremiah 23:1-8*

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the oracle of indictment and restoration in Jeremiah 23:1-8, which seeks to address the shepherds of Israel who scattered the sheep of Yahweh. This negligence and lack of attendant attitude is what the God of Israel is addressing to the leadership of Israel. The aim and objective of this paper is to draw clearly the thin line between indictment and restoration in Jeremiah 23 as our pivot text. In order to achieve that, the following methods were used: historical, exegetical, textual and syntactical-theological method. These approaches were found viable in researching biblical themes with accurate interpretation. The discoveries made were astounding for it reveals Yahweh's startling quality of untiring desire for shepherding. It also reveals that Judgment and Restoration have messianic tone; therefore, the study thus recommends that both the sacred and secular leadership should learn to give good governance to the people under their jurisdiction for all are under the supervision of Yahweh and every leadership is answerable to Yahweh.

**Key Words and Phrases:** Shepherd, Sheep, Indictment, Restoration, *ro'eh*

### **1.0 Introduction**

The prophecies of Jeremiah are primarily set against the background of the rule of Josiah's three sons and grandson, the last four rulers of Judah (Dillard and Longman III 285). The prophet indeed ministered during the most tumultuous and critical eras in the history of the Jewish people. During that period the great Assyrian empire was at the verge of collapse and it was during the rise of the Babylonian empire; during these years Judah was swept into idolatry, corruption, injustice and immorality of diverse dimensions (Harrison, p.802). On the personality of the prophet, there are accurate historical records by most scholars that the prophet was born around 640BC in a definite historical location of Anathoth, a village two to three miles north-west of Jerusalem. Jeremiah was from a priestly lineage and his father Hilkiah was also a descendant of Abiather who too was from a priestly stock (Harrison 802).

In order to fully grasp the prophecies of Jeremiah, one needs to take a step further with a great deal of Biblical material to source in order to fill in some of the historical background of Jeremiah. To this account we have the narratives of 2 Kings 21-25 and 2 Chr. 33-36 which give us a comprehensive account of the life and ministry of Jeremiah. Additional materials are also found in the books of his contemporaries like Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Ezekiel (Thompson, p.10).

## 2.0 Authorship and Date

The authorship of Jeremiah has never been disputed among scholars; both the internal and external evidences are glaring. The book preserves the accounts of the prophet's ministry whose personal life and struggles are known to us in greater detail than any other prophet in the Old Testament. A mention should be made of Jeremiah's closest associate Baruch, who is said to be responsible for the final editorial work of the book (Barker, p.1115).

Regarding the date of Jeremiah's work, there have been two strong opinions; one school of thought simply assert that the date of the prophet's birth coincide with the date at which the prophet commenced his ministry. The other school of thought is more specific and opines that the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign was both the year of Jeremiah's birth and call to ministry. If the two views are accepted, it then means that the date of Jeremiah covers a period from 627BC-586BC (Thompson, p.10). This research substantially agrees with this opinion because it covers the birth of the prophet and the span of his ministry.

## 3.0 Purpose and Theology

The primary purpose of Jeremiah is to urge God's people to *shub* which is translated "to repent" or "to return from their sinful act and back to God" (Holladay, p.362). Jeremiah indeed confronts many different calibre of people with their sins, e.g the kings, prophets, priests and people. The weight of his message rest on the shepherds of the people including the foreign nations (NLT 1197). Theology plays a vital role in the message of most prophets in the Old Testament. Jeremiah's theology stems out of his perception or ideas of God and his practical experience with Yahweh which shapes his theological message. Thompson (p.107) submits that "Jeremiah's views about God, Israel, the nation and the individual, sin, repentance and the future hope, have greatly influenced his message". But much of his theology comes from his own encounters with Yahweh in the rough and tumble of life. Harrison (819) opines that Jeremiah's concept of God had much in common with that embraced by the eight-century prophets who acknowledged Yahweh as the sovereign creator of the universe as well as ruler of history who could commission king Nebuchadnezzar to do his bidding (Jer. 27:6).

In Jeremiah's theological discourse, one can see that the prophet has a good knowledge of the attributes of God, for example love and compassion which he shows to Israel steadily despite their arrogance and covenant infidelity. One sees again Yahweh demands implicit obedience from Israel and strictly detests sacrifices to pagan deities and oblations offered to him by a disobedient nation (cf. Jer. 6:20; 7:21f; 14:12).

Having insight to the content of the Torah, Jeremiah is fully aware of the covenant stipulations and relationship between Yahweh and his people Israel, he is also aware of the faithlessness and apostasy which characterize the religious life of the people of Israel throughout their history. Yahweh through the mouth of his prophets rebuked them and they went through diverse forms of affliction, which primarily led to their exile in Babylon. They had to endure this chastisement. Jeremiah's theology also rests upon the forceful condemnation and immoral behaviour of Israel especially the shepherds of Israel (kings, prophets and priests in Jer. 5:30f, 6:13f; 14:14 (Harrison 819).

Of what connection has the theology of Jeremiah on the shepherd motif? This idea was used to depict the functions of both religious and political leaders in Israel (Taylor 7). It is apparently clear that Jeremiah in chapters 21-23 deals with condemnation on the shepherds of Israel who violated their civil and religious responsibilities instead of tending, guiding, leading, sustaining and protecting the flock, they exploited them for their own gain. This is an absolute contrast to the shepherd motif in the Old Testament which calls on shepherds or leaders to love, care and desire the well-being of the people under their governance.

#### **4.0 Structure**

Due to the book's chronological disorder, it is difficult for scholars to arrive at a consensus on the book's structure. However, little but renowned expertise on the text of Jeremiah has this insight as their contribution. Thompson (9) posits that the structure of Jeremiah is as follows:

- I. The call of Jeremiah and the two visions (1:4-18)
- ii. The Divine Judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (2:1-25:38)
- iii. Jeremiah's controversy with false prophets (26:1-29:32)
- iv. The book of consolation (30:1-33:26)
- v. Incidents from the days of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah (34:1-39:8)
- vi. Jeremiah's experiences after the fall of Jerusalem (40:1-45:5)
- vii. Oracles against the nations (48:1-51:64)
- viii. Appendix: the fall of Jerusalem (52:1-34)

Meanwhile, R. Harrison's (pp.801-2) analysis is worthy of note:

- i. Prophecies against Judah and Jerusalem (1-25)
- ii. Biographical material connected with Jeremiah (26-45)
- iii. Various oracles against foreign nations (46-51)
- iv. Historical appendix (52)

From the two standpoints, one can see that there is a slight variation on the chapter division on the pronouncements of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem. The former has 2:1-25:38 while the later 1-25. Even with this divergent construction, the obvious thing is that the main theme of the chapterization has not been distorted. For the sake of this research, the study embraces an exegetical unit of 23:1-8 from the main structurization of chapters 1-25. This is because chapters 21-23 strictly dwell mainly on judgment of the rulers (shepherds) and faintly on the subjects under governance.

## 5.0 Genre

Having noted the role and significance of literary genres of other texts, it is also important to look very closely at the text of Jeremiah, especially the text under investigation. Most scholars affirm that there are two sections in the passage comprising of poetic segment in vv 1-6 and a prose segment in vv 7-8. These literary genres exhibit the characteristics of condemnation and future hope of the children of Israel (Thompson 486).

## 6.0 Exegetical Comments

### 6.1 Translation of the Hebrew Text

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" says the LORD. **2** Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: "You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. **3** Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. **4** I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, says the LORD. **5** "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. **6** In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our

righteousness.' 7 "Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when men shall no longer say, 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' 8 but 'As the LORD lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' Then they shall dwell in their own land." (RSV)

Having established the background and preliminary procedures for doing exegesis, chapter 23:1-8 falls under an exegetical unit. Thompson (485) sees this exegetical unit as dealing with promises for the future of the dynasty and the people. In this submission the two exegetes further give the specific theme contained in the passage, rather than being general. Following this argument Dumbrell (141) and Thompson (485) maintain the oracle of judgment against the house of David and foreign nations. Following the review of the various considerations above, this study embraces the following sub-units within the exegetical units.

## 6.2 Judgment on the Shepherds (vv. 1-4)

These verses fall within the literary unit of the oracle of judgment upon the rulers of Judah who corrupted Israel or God's flock. This exegetical unit is similar to Kiel's and Delitzsch's discussion of Ezekiel 34:1ff. (Nggada, p.39). The verses also give a future restoration of the children of Israel from exile and the enthronement of Davidic king who is ideal and would care for the flock of Israel. Thompson (486) sees the genre of the passage to compose of two poetic segments vv 1-4 and vv 5-6, and a short prose section vv 7-8. The prophet introduces the text with an oracle of indictment and woe, which in essence confirms the theme above as judgment. Prophets in the Old Testament are fond of using this word preceding other statements of prophecies.

Looking at the grammatical construction of the phrase *hoi ro'im*, technically the word is derived from *ro'eh* (Mansoor 207), which is translated shepherd, in this construction *hoi ro'im* is translated "woe to the shepherds". In this context the shepherds refers to the rulers, kings and other figures in leadership responsibility. From the context of the verse and the literary background of the text, it thus means that these shepherds have a role to play in dispensing their God-given responsibility of taking care, leading, protecting and providing for the flock. But they failed and were careless and neglectful rulers for quite a number of years. From the background of the text, especially the historical records of the ways of Judah, one would tend to believe that the task for kings or rulers of Judah were bad shepherds and fits in properly in this context. They were the ones, who caused the suffering of the flock that brought about their exilic experience. In fact the blame strictly rests on the rulers (Thompson 487). The verse closes with the prophetic oracular formula *ne um yevah* translated

“declares the Lord” or “says the Lord”. This appendix further intensifies the certainty of the coming judgment because the Lord says it. In verse two, the prophet gives the reason for the judgment and goes on with specifics. The introduction of the word *lacen* which is translated “therefore” is a purpose clause which also gives the consequences of their action.

Jeremiah resumes again to the prophetic oracular formula *co amar yevah* giving us the impression and the certainty of the coming judgment. For as far as the Lord says, it shall come to pass. This is in contrast to the false prophets' declaration in Jeremiah's day. In the following court room scenario we see Yahweh in the position of a judge and the shepherds (rulers) being indicted for three charges: (i) For scattering the flock (ii) For driving them away (iii) For not paying attention to them. From the charges leveled against the shepherds (rulers) of Judah, it thus appears that the rulers lack shepherding motif. The verb that heightens this understanding is *pagad* which is translated in the following ways in most of the Ancient Near East languages; in the *Akkadian*, *pagudu* means “to watch over”, “to entrust”, “to appoint”; in *Ugaritic*, *pagad* means “to order”; In *Phoenicia* the meaning is similar to *Akkadian* “to appoint” or “to authorize” in *Aramaic*, *paqad* means to order and in *Arabic*, *Fagada* to miss or be missing (Williams 658). Thompson (487) observes that the verb has a range of meanings. Among these are the followings “look after”, “go to see”, “take care of” “long for” “pass in review” “muster” “commission” “appoint” “call to account” “ask for vindication” “avenge” (when used with 'al). From these range of meanings, Thompson further observes that there are two usages that are very close to the Masoretic meanings rendered by translators. Thus NEB translates “you have not watched over them, but I am watching you to punish you for your evil doing”. Those translations give the sense and meaning of the text. These shepherds did not prioritize concern for the flock rather they only attended to themselves and left the flock to wander. Yahweh will bring judgment upon the bad shepherds for violating the principles of shepherd motif.

In verse 3 the prophet declares the regathering of the remnant of the flock by Yahweh himself. A commentator observes that “By contrast with verse 1 Yahweh says that it is he who scattered the flock”. One would think there is contradiction in the text. But it is by no means a contradiction, the interpretation suggests that the nation was scattered or went into exile due to their rebellion and rejection of the covenant provisions. The bad shepherds were those responsible for their curses towards the end of verse 3 and beginning with verse 4, a promise and a hope is attached. This time around it is Yahweh that will do it.

Jeremiah promises a far much regathering of the Jews in which God will call his people from all the nations of the world from which they have been scattered.

He will gather them in their own land, purge them and send them their promised messiah (cf. Jer. 30; Isa 2:1-5; 4; 9:1-7; 11:1-12; 6; Zech 12:14; 21). He will set shepherds or rulers over Israel who will attend or watch over the flock or care for the flock. Threat, anxiety and dismay will be a thing of the past. It further suggests that Israel will have good rulers and good governance. Barnes analysis shows that these shepherds are men like Ezra, Nehemiah and Maccabees raised by God. A promised made to David in (2 Sam 7:12-16).

### **6.3 The Ideal Shepherd/King vv. 5-6**

In vv. 5-6 most commentators affirm that this section is a short poetic piece, which further gives the important aspect of messianic thinking (33:15-16). From the content of the verse, it describes the ideal shepherd or king and his role during his messianic reign. In Jeremiah's description this ideal king will rule with justice and righteousness, under his leadership there will be one united nation instead of the two kingdoms North and South experienced over the years. Salvation, peace and safety will characterize his reign. Who then is this ideal shepherd or king? Could it be someone from Davidic dynasty or David's family tree? How do we identify this king and when should we expect him? To further advance the complexities of this ideal shepherd is the name he is called, namely, *yevah tsedeqnu* which is translated "the Lord our righteousness. No one in all the Old Testament prophecies is identified with this name, even king David who is also being described as one who rules with justice and righteousness in his time was not given such a sacred name.

However for a Biblical theologian and modern Biblical exegete this description applies to *immanuel* which is translated "God with us", this name applies to Jesus Christ who is also from the tribe of Judah, a descendant of King David. This same king is seen as the ideal shepherd who fits in the context of the good shepherd in John 10.

### **6.4 The deliverance of the people of Israel vv. 7-8**

Verses 7-8 is a prose section in our exegesis. It gives a broad spectrum of deliverance of the people of Israel, which supersedes the deliverance of Israel from Egypt not in terms of miracles but in respect to its earnest deliverance from Babylon. Closer investigations of these verses reveal a repeated occurrence of these lines in Jer. 16:14-15 but with slight variations. The placements of these verses play a significant role even in this construction. But LXX places these verses at the end of the chapter and after v 40 which suggests a fluctuation in Jeremiah's tradition, but the meaning of the text in its context is appropriate (Thompson 491). The question is why this repetition? From the exegetical evidence, it suggests that the prophet is making an emphasis or making the more impression.

Meanwhile, those two verses give the essential part of the total picture of the messianic age. Yahweh's flock who were scattered and dispersed in other lands would return to their own native land when the ideal shepherd began his reign. This picture is also similar to the Exodus experience in Egypt but is far more in grandeur. It gives an impression that the descendants of Israel would return from the north and from all the countries of the world where they have been scattered. It also pictures a divine blessing as recorded in Ezek. 34 and 37. This interpretation further suggests the role of the ideal shepherd in leading, guiding and providing for the flock.

From all the exegetical evidences in the texts explored, it thus reveals that the shepherd motif is an essential drive in the Old Testament, which the shepherds of Israel lacked. Their main focus is not for the well-being of the flock but theirs. They lacked the untiring desire to cater for the flock, which Yahweh confronts the leadership of Israel within all its history. Yahweh did not just leave Israel to be destroyed rather as a compassionate and purposeful God, he projected the messianic age for Israel to know that he loves them and has a future for them despite their arrogance.

## **7.0 Implications for Leadership in Nigeria**

The implications of the shepherd motif in Jeremiah 23:1-8 have significant impacts on leadership responsibility in both the Church and society in Nigeria. Nigeria has witnessed different systems of government from autocratic to dictatorship and from military to democratic systems of governance. Since the concept of the shepherd motif has bearing on leadership responsibility, we shall now explore the various contexts in the Nigerian life situation.

### **7.1 In the Political Context**

A look at Nigeria in the post-independence era, one would not be wrong to compare her with Israel's life in the eight century. It was a period of prosperity, relative peace and moral decadence. Yet it was also a time of mass oppression, exploitation of the underprivileged and corruption. There was discrimination at all sectors and a sharp contrast between the wealthy and the poor. Other social vices include injustice, violence and bloodshed. Most of the prophets of the eight century decried their voices to be heard from kings' palaces to the extreme quarters of the poor. They saw injustice, falsehood and oppression in both the civil and religious leadership and called for a redress in Israel's life situation. These shepherds, who are supposed to care for the needs of their subjects, maintain peace and order, justice and righteousness plunged the nation into chaos because of their selfish ambition.

What we have seen above is not far-fetched from what is obtainable in Nigeria. Before the emergence of Democracy in Nigeria, the country has witnessed

several military coup-d'etats in 1966, 1976, 1983, 1984, 1993-1999 (Nggada, p.76). Towards the end of the last two military administrations (Gen. Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and Gen. Sani Abacha), Nigeria experienced mass exploitation and gross violation of fundamental human rights, this came up as a result of bad leadership. This is an indication of the violation of the principle of shepherd motif which is based on the ideals of caring. The shepherds devoured, scattered and led astray the flock with no sense of caring and protection. In this study, one discovers that the untiring desire to care by the shepherd is what is completely absent in Nigeria's leadership responsibility.

With the birth of democracy there was the expectation of the breath of freedom, equity and good governance, but it is unfortunate that our politicians in the various arms of government are involved in high level corruption to the extent of not responding to the needs of their subjects. This also attracts God's judgment. Therefore, the need for a caring leadership which is based on the principle of shepherd motif is urgently needed in Nigeria for sustainable leadership. As Oladejo Okediji notes: "A shepherd-leader is to ensure that in his civic and political duty a new political class which is genuinely committed to Justice, accountability, transparent political behavior and good governance that focus on compassion, especially for the poor, needy and helpless" (p.51). This statement concurs with the principle of the shepherd motif which is strictly based on caring.

## **7.2 In the Economic Context**

Economically, Nigeria is a blessed country with surplus mineral resources like petroleum in the Niger-Delta, tin and columbite in central Nigeria, good and fertile land for agriculture and livestock. One expects to see what Pangdang Yamsat (28) says quoting Aristotle "Politics is all about power sharing, the sharing of resources and the maintaining of justice for the good of all citizens of a given state or nation". Due to the unequal distribution of political power, the subjects of this country are suffering a great deal. Orphans, widows and the underprivileged cannot make ends meet. The avaricious rich employ the service of the common people at a very cheap rate to enrich themselves. And as a result of that the rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer. All of these happen because some few individuals are holding and controlling the wealth of this nation. This is a clear indication of gross violation of the principle of good governance. Jeremiah and Ezekiel in their prophetic utterances call the leadership of Judah to order for their lack of being true shepherds. As shepherd of Israel they are called to serve and to care for the flock of Yahweh but these shepherds focused on themselves at the expense of the suffering flock.

One dimension of the shepherd motif is to maintain justice, righteousness and truth. This too we find quite lacking in the leadership of this country. The

leaders take bribe to pervert justice and they have “turned justice into poison and righteousness into bitterness” (Mic 3:11, NIV). This is a clear picture of our judiciary; the common person cannot find justice because the leadership has been bought over and so the guilty ones are set free while the not guilty are punished. Should not our leaders maintain justice and order? Since the principle of shepherd motif demands justice and righteousness in governance for peaceful co-existence, therefore our leaders should practice and encourage that for the same purpose.

### **7.3 In the Social Context**

The Nigerian social context reflects Israel's community during the time of the prophecy of Jeremiah and the eight century period in which there is a clear distinction between the rich and the poor. The politicians and some few individuals belong to the rich class while the less privileged and the peasants' farmers belong to the other group. With this social inequality, the rich ones use their influence and connections to evict widows and orphans from their legitimate homes and inherited lands. These avaricious land grabbers used the labour and sweats of the underprivileged to amass wealth for themselves and children. Such is the situation in Nigeria, the rich use their privileged positions to seize land and other viable possessions of the poor and the defenseless to enrich themselves, while the poor are left without due rights and privileges. Because of this high level of injustice, it has affected our social endeavours and breeds antisocial behaviours like; robbery, assassination and violence. Needless to say, if there were the application of the principle of shepherd motif in our leadership, these things would have changed.

### **7.4 In the Religious Context**

Recalling the religious life of Israel during the sixth and eight centuries, there was a high level of moral decline, corruption, injustice and apostasy. Israel is called to serve as light to the nations and be a city of peace and truth. But it has turned out to be the opposite. The religious leaders (shepherds) were called to be faithful and responsible in order to take care of the flock of Yahweh. They were also called to serve as custodians of truth, justice and righteousness but they turned out to be something else. Above all they were called to be models of good leadership for the nations but the shepherds ended up working against these virtues. Such is our nation Nigeria. Unfortunately, Christian leadership (CAN, other Church leaders) which is rooted and built upon the principle of shepherd motif enshrined in the Old Testament, many a time turns out to be something else. Instead of setting a good precedence, she violates the principle of justice, righteousness and truth in her leadership. It is unfortunate that some shepherds who call themselves mentors eventually hate with passion those whom they are mentoring for fear of being overthrown as in the case of some pastors. At least if every system fails, the Church should be able to stand out and

correct the abnormalities and restore good leadership patterns in the manner of shepherd motif for both the Church and society. This is currently lacking in both the Church and society. In our attempt to explore the shepherd motif enshrined in the Old Testament, we discover that what makes leadership sustainable is the untiring desire to care by the shepherd. Despite the behaviour of the flock, the good shepherd shows care and concern continuously for their well-being.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

We have critically examined Jeremiah 23:1-8 in the context of its historical setting. We saw the prophet warning Israel's leadership for their irresponsibility in governing the nation. The prophet accused Israel's leadership for three things (i) for scattering the sheep (ii) for driving away the sheep (iii) for not paying attention to the needs of the sheep. This is what attracted judgment for the nation. Despite this pronouncement Yahweh still has a future hope for them if they would repent and turn away from their evil ways. Therefore, the shepherd motif enshrined in this text has great potentials to offer the Church and society in terms of good leadership to implement, failure to do that would attract judgment on both the leaders and the people.

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