



Prophetic sensing of Yahweh's word

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This article focuses on Jeremiah 23:18, which implies that the prophet stood in the council of Yahweh (*sôd*) to see and hear the word of Yahweh. In this verse, it seems that the senses of the prophet played a role in receiving Yahweh's words. Verse 18 forms part of 23:16–22 in which Jeremiah warned the people of Judah not to listen to prophets who mislead them with optimistic messages. In this article, attention is given to the question whether standing in the council of Yahweh is a deciding criterion for receiving true words from Yahweh. The motif of the divine council is also investigated. An argument is presented that 'sensing' should be understood in the double sense of the word, namely sensory experience as well as the intellectual activity of understanding. It is argued that both meanings of the word sensing are necessary to determine the truth of Yahweh's word.

Introduction

In the title of the article, I use the term 'sensing' the word of Yahweh. The use of the word sensing originates from Jeremiah 23:18 where reference is made 'to stand in the council of Yahweh,' 'seeing' and 'hearing' his word. The words seeing and hearing prompted my interest in that they refer to senses that seem to have played a role for the prophet to receive Yahweh's word.

Jeremiah 23:18 forms part of the passage 23:16–22. It concerns the issue of communicating the true words of Yahweh to the people of Judah. It seems that standing in the council of Yahweh is a deciding factor in receiving the true words of Yahweh. The question therefore is: Is the claim to have received Yahweh's word in his council sufficient evidence for truth claims?

Besides the main question mentioned above, some related issues need to be addressed in this article: The idea or motif of the council of Yahweh needs further investigation to understand what it implies. Another aspect that needs attention is the response of the people of Judah not only to the proclamation of the false prophets, but also to Jeremiah's prophetic words addressed to them. Another question is how verse 22 should be understood. The text implies that, if a prophet stood in the council of Yahweh, the people would have responded positively to the prophet's proclamation and would have turned away (*šūb*) from their wickedness. If Jeremiah as true prophet stood in the council of Yahweh, why did the people not respond positively to his prophetic proclamation? How does one make sense of the issues raised above? In this article, I want to address these issues.

Structure, composition and content of 23:16–22

Most scholars agree that 23:16–22 forms a separate unit. However, regarding the subdivisions of the passage, different viewpoints and supportive arguments for a specific viewpoint abound.¹ It becomes even more frustrating when arguments for emendations to the text and suggestions of editorial and redactional activities in the creation of the text are offered.² How the passage is divided will remain a contentious issue, but there are enough keywords throughout 23:16–22 to regard it as a unit. Some of these keywords are references to 'word', negative words such as deluding (v. 16), despise and stubborn (v. 17), wicked (v. 19), evil way and the evil of their doings (v. 22) and also council of Yahweh (vv. 18, 22). The content also addresses the contrasting ideas of peace and no calamity on the one hand over against wrath and judgement on the other hand. There is enough structural and content matter that makes it possible to work with these verses as a unit and to make sense of what it tries to communicate.

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1. Carroll (1986:459–460) for instance combines verses 16–17 and 21, verses 18 and 22 and verses 19–20, whilst Craigie, Kelly and Drinkard (1991:342) treat the whole passage of verses 16–22 as a unit. Fretheim (2002:335–338) divides 16–22 into 16–17 and 18–22. Lundbom (2004:189–193) works with a similar division of the passage. When it comes to 23:18–22, his view is that verses 18 and 21–22 were part of the original poem to which 19 and 20 were later added. Allen (2008:2266–2267) has a somewhat different combination of the verses, namely 16–20, which he subdivides in 16–17 and 19–20, and then 21–24, which he subdivides in 21–22 and 23–24.

2. McKane (1986:577–584) and Lange (2002:113–115, 119–124) both offer detailed discussions of many of the scholarly views on this passage.



In Jeremiah 23:16–17, Jeremiah first of all urges his audience not to adhere to the words of the opposing prophets and then explains why: ‘they speak of visions of their own minds not from the mouth of the Lord’. However, Jeremiah not only opposes the other prophets but also reveals his opinion of the people of Judah. He labels them as people who despise the word of Yahweh and are stubborn. Instead of leading the people of Judah to respect and therefore to obeying Yahweh’s word, these prophets strengthen them in their wicked ways by comforting them with assurances of peace (*šālôm*) and no form of calamity. It is clear from these two verses that Jeremiah does not only have a problem with the false prophets but also with the people who have a disregard for Yahweh’s word. Prophets are supposed to guide people to adhere to the word of Yahweh and to live in obedience to his word. It is also interesting to note that Jeremiah not only criticises the means of receiving a word from Yahweh, namely self-concocted visions, but also the fact that these words did not come from ‘the mouth of Yahweh’. Verse 18 is introduced with a particle conjunction as a causal clause that links this verse to previous verses where mention is made of so-called visionary experiences. This verse implies that none of the opposition prophets actually stood in the council of Yahweh. At the same time, verse 18 links with verse 22 which also refers to the concept of Yahweh’s council.³ Stulman (2005:215–217) regards verse 18 as the first verse of the section, 23:18–22.

The next group of verses in this passage, Jeremiah 23:19–22, can be considered together. Verses 19 and 20 both address the anger and wrath of Yahweh. The prophet makes it clear that Yahweh’s anger will hit the people of Judah like a mighty storm. This will severely affect the people who Jeremiah once again labels as wicked. Verse 20 emphasises that the people should not even think that it will be a brief storm. On the contrary, it will continue until the goal Yahweh has in mind had been reached. All indications are that punishment and destruction are intended. What exactly is in mind here will only become clear to the people once it has become a reality. These two verses should perhaps be considered to be later additions to the passage 23:16–22 (cf. McKane 1986:579; Rudolph 1968:151–152) since they also appear in Jeremiah 30:23–24. Duhm (1901:187) argues that 23:19–20 fit better in the context of 30:23–24, but Thiel (1973:251) is of the opinion that these two verses fit neither of the two contexts. Their addition here should also be considered in light of later redactional activity on the text of Jeremiah in the exilic or post-exilic period by the Jeremiah tradition (Carroll 1981:169). This tradition supported the theology of Deuteronomy that departs from the view that punishment follows disloyalty and disobedience (cf. Dt 29:18–19 in the MT). It is possible that the editors felt that, after the reprimand in 23:16–18, the consequences of the disobedience and stubbornness validate the judgement announcement of 23:19–20.

Verses 18 and 22 are key verses in this passage, as will become clear from the discussion. It is interesting that verse 18 consists

³It is interesting to note that the Masoretic text has a *setuma* at the end of verse 18 and therefore regards 23:16–18 as belonging together.

of two rhetorical questions. Bright (1965:152) does not read verse 18 as rhetorical questions but as follows: ‘Who is it that stood in Yahweh’s council? How can you tell him?’ In this way, it links with verses 19–20 and implies that a person who stood in the council will know that judgement is a suitable proclamation for this period in time in the history of Judah. Schmidt (2013:45) reads verse 18 as expressing doubt as to whether it is at all possible for a human being to know God’s decisions. However it seems that verse 22 implies that it is possible.

The questions are asked as a consequence of the condemnation of the actions and proclamations of the false prophets mentioned in verses 16 and 17. Verse 18 reads: ‘For who has stood in the council of Yahweh so as to see and hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?’ The questions in the context of 23:16–17 imply that none of these false prophets referred to ever stood in the council of Yahweh to see and to hear what they were supposed to proclaim to the people of Judah. Verse 22 also refers to the motif of ‘the council of Yahweh’. This verse again emphasises the point that the false prophets are misleading the people and proclaiming false messages to them. These prophets are once again blamed for the false proclamation of Yahweh’s word because the people would have turned away from their wicked ways had the words they proclaimed truly come from Yahweh.

A brief excursion on Jeremiah 23:18

There is a suggestion in the text-critical apparatus that verse 18 should be aligned with verse 22, that *mi* should be followed by a third person plural suffix to read ‘who from them’ stood in the council of Yahweh. There is no textual evidence to necessitate such an addition, and the MT should be maintained (Lundbom 2004:195).

The Septuagint as well as the Syriac and Vulgate versions read ‘and saw’, but the MT should be maintained as both the verbs ‘see’ and ‘hear’ are jussives – ‘let him see’ and ‘let him hear’. The Septuagint lacks the verb ‘hear’, but there is no reason to omit it from the MT (Lundbom 2004:196). The Septuagint also omits the reference ‘my word’. The *Ketib* ‘my word’ should be read as (*Qere*) ‘his word’ (Holladay 1986:633). McKane (1986:580–581) provides an in-depth discussion of all the possibilities that scholars have offered to explain why the text should be amended or why the Septuagint omitted certain words. It is perhaps true that the text does not fit the logic that scholars demand from it, but due to the lack of acceptable suggestions, the integrity of the text should be respected. The context contributes enough to form a reasonable understanding of what is communicated.

Many Bible versions kept the wording ‘to see and hear’ in spite of the omission of ‘to hear’ in the Septuagint. Almost all versions maintain the translation ‘council of Yahweh’. The NET however moves away from the image of a council and interprets the Hebrew *sôd Yahweh* as ‘the Lord’s inner circle’.

It is also interesting to note the various possible translations for the *hif’il* form of the verb *qšb*. Some versions translate it

as 'paid attention to' (ESV and NET as examples) whilst the NRSV reads 'given heed to' and the German ZUR translation has it as '*sein Wort geachtet*'. Verse 18 ends with a *waw consecutivum* particle linked to a *qal* imperfect third person masculine singular form of the verb 'to hear', emphasising that the person really heard Yahweh's word (Lundbom 2004:196–197).

The following translation is suggested for the purpose of this article: 'For who stood in the council of Yahweh to see and to hear his word, or has paid attention to his word and heard?' It is clear that Jeremiah 23:18 emphasises the senses of seeing and hearing which will later be discussed in some detail in this article. In the next section, the motif of the council of Yahweh will be investigated.

The divine council

The motif of the council of Yahweh appears in verses 18 and 22 of the passage under discussion. The noun *sôd* appears in seven texts with different meanings: Psalms 25:14 (confidants of Yahweh), 55:15 (pleasant company or close company), 83:4 (conspiracy), Proverbs 11:11 (those who reveal secrets), 15:22 (lack of counsel), 20:19 (reveal secrets or gossip) and Jeremiah 6:11 (gathering place). The noun with the particle preposition *b* is used in Job 29:4 (council of Yahweh), Psalms 89:8 (council of the holy ones), 111:1 (company of the upright), Jeremiah 15:17 (company of merry-makers), 23:18 (council of Yahweh) and Ezekiel 13:9 (council of my people). The noun *sôd* with a third person singular suffix also occurs in Proverbs 3:32 where it refers to the upright people who are in Yahweh's confidence and Amos 3:7 where it refers to the prophets with whom Yahweh shares his secrets. Although the various contexts determine the meaning of the noun *sôd*, it clearly refers to intimate groups who conspire or gossip or to people who are in an intimate relationship with Yahweh, for instance his prophets or the upright or the holy ones.

The motif of a council of Yahweh also appears in other passages in the Old Testament, although a different Hebrew word is used to indicate such a council. Passages that come to mind are Job 1:6, 2:1, 1 Kings 22:19 (the prophet Micaiah sees Yahweh on his throne surrounded by the heavenly host) and also Isaiah 6 (Isaiah sees Yahweh on his throne with his robe filling the temple).

The language of the divine council is known from literature from Mesopotamia and Syria, from Ugaritic and Akkadian texts (Smith 2001:41).⁴ Israel did not have a pantheon of gods as we find in the Baal worship, but promoted the idea of a monotheistic God. It seems that many other gods existed in Israel, but the prophets in particular fought against the worship of any other gods. Smith (2001:50) refers to the views expressed by P.D. Miller that '... the divine assembly of ancient Israel thus holds as one reality a monistic impulse

in a pluralistic cosmic structure'. Miller continues saying the following:

... the divine assembly expresses at once the relatedness of the divine assembly to the world as well as its transcendence; thus relatedness and transcendence belong to an order in the cosmos ruled by divinity. (Smith 2001:50)

Israel's use of the language of a divine council or assembly stems from the mythological background of this concept in the Ancient Near East and is in Carroll's (1981:173) view metaphorical in nature. Although the language is similar, it is customised to fit the belief system of Israel when it is used in reference to Yahweh. The prophets in this regard played an essential role to define divinity in terms of one God.

In a recent study on prophecy in the Ancient Near East, Stökl (2012) uses Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian and Hebrew-Bible sources for a comparative discussion on the issue. In his treatment of the concept of a divine council, he shows that it was a familiar concept in all of these sources. He differs from Nissinen (2002:4–19) who argues that, in Assyria, sitting in the divine council was a prerequisite for prophecy.⁵ In Stökl's view, there is no evidence in the Old-Babylonian period of prophetic figures' involvement in the divine council. It is the same for the Neo-Assyrian period, except for a link between an ecstatic group and the divine council (Stökl 2012:224–226). However, he indicates that there is prophetic participation in the divine council in the Hebrew Bible, in particular in the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah (Stökl 2012:224). The question about what it means for a prophet to stand in the council of Yahweh remains. To try and answer this question, I shall entertain the views of some scholars who commented on Jeremiah 23:18 and 22.

Jones (1992:310–311) regards the concept as part of Hebrew mythology. For him, the expression 'to stand in the council of Yahweh' is a way of asking whether the message comes from the prophet himself or from Yahweh as the transcendental source of prophecy. True prophets listen to what Yahweh says, they do not invent. Jones (1992) further comments as follows:

In this sense the biblical myth holds together, in the unity of a single pictorial image, ideas and principles which are lost in the subtle qualifications and relativities of a psychological understanding. (p. 311)

Images are powerful tools to captivate what is at times difficult to express in words. The image of the council of Yahweh is a way of capturing the prophet's sensing of what Yahweh wants to communicate.

Moberly (2006:74–75) also understands the image of the council of Yahweh as a way of imaginatively describing a situation of people who are privy to the presence of Yahweh as a monarch surrounded by his advisers and messengers (cf. 1 Ki 22:19–22). In his view, this image describes the situation of presence and intimacy, a place where Yahweh

4. Heinz-Dieter Neef (1994) has written a monograph on the concept *sôd YHWH* in which he briefly provides an overview of the use of the concept in the Ugaritic, Phoenician and Aramaic religions before he offers a more comprehensive discussion of the use of the motif in the Old Testament.

5. Between 1991 and 2013, Nissinen has written extensively on the topic of prophecy in the Ancient Near East.



could share his secrets with his servants (cf. Am 3:7). This implies that true prophets would have access to the mind of Yahweh and to knowledge of his will. Thompson (1980:497) refers to those who stand in the council of Yahweh as the circle of people who are '... privy to the deep purposes of Yahweh and are in his confidence'. The important aspects to note here are the sense of the presence of Yahweh and the sense of understanding his will. Jeremiah 23:18 emphasises this in particular by using the expressions 'to stand in his council', 'to see', 'to hear', 'to pay attention to' and again 'heard'. In Lundbom's (2004:196) view, the verb 'to see' should be understood in terms of the visionary experience that prophets claim to have. To 'see' in the council is a special ability that the prophet receives to have insight in what Yahweh wants him to see, insight to discern realities which normal humans are unable to grasp (cf. Meier 2009:41–42, 54–55). In terms of the image 'to stand in the council', to be in such a position to be able to see and to hear suggests presence and closeness in terms of space. As Neef (1994:42) states, '*sôd meint hier den „Rat Jahwes“, d.h. die unmittelbarste Nähe zu Gott, die Möglichkeit, sein Wort zu hören, um damit zur Verkündigung dieses Wortes legitimiert zu sein*'. The image of a council (*sôd*) is thus an expression of the closest community and trust that can exist between Yahweh and the true prophet. Brueggemann (1998:211–213) refers to research done by Patrick Miller on the divine council where he places it under the rubric of 'Yahweh's sovereign authority'. Brueggemann argues that Jeremiah's claim to have been present in the council implies that his message of judgement was sanctioned in heaven. Authentic prophetic words will be revealed to have power and inspiration as effected by divine initiative. In reference to the divine council, Diamond (2003:575) states: 'Only privileged Yahwistic intimacy constitutes true inspiration.'

Up to this point, the discussion of the notion of the divine council has shown that most scholars regard it as a metaphorical expression. The idea of a council is projected onto the celestial in order to say something about a reality of which we have limited knowledge and about a lack of language to give expression to that largely unknown divine reality. This view is challenged in a study by Jindo (2015:76–93) in which he argues from a point of worldview. He maintains that the motif of a divine council should be understood in terms of the Ancient Near-Eastern worldview as well as the biblical worldview (cf. Grabbe 2010:125). In terms of his argument, the cosmos was seen as a polity with God literally as king (Jindo 2015:79–80). Various celestial beings formed part of the heavenly council, but there were also some humans such as the prophets who had intermediary roles (Jindo 2015:81). In his view, the notion of a divine council is not simply a way of expressing a close and intimate relationship between a prophet and Yahweh, but a reality in which some prophet first-hand took part in the divine council. For a human, this claim is very exceptional and not the norm (White 2014:175). However, Jindo (2010:77) also admits that the celestial sphere is not always the place where a prophet receives the divine word. He refers to Amos 3:7 where the noun *sôd* has the meaning of 'secret' which is

imparted to Yahweh's servants. In view of this, he (Jindo 2010) asserts the following:

I prefer to understand the term 'divine council' in a broader sense, as a 'disclosure of divine secret or plan,' and it is not restricted to the experience in the celestial sphere.⁶ (p. 77)

Jindo (2015:82) regards the functions of the council to be an appointive body as well as a judicial body. The aim of the council is to maintain cosmic order, and the members of the council have the duty in their various spheres of influence to contribute to this aim. He (Jindo 2015) concludes as follows:

The notion of the heavenly council functions as part of a paradigm through which the biblical authors sought to illustrate the deeper truth behind appearances: that what appears to the naked eye to be a matter of coincidence or of natural causality is a result of decisions made in the heavenly council. At the same time, this very notion leads us to recognize that what we see and think we know largely remains unknown. (pp. 92–93)

It can safely be said that there is no dispute about the idea of closeness and intimacy to Yahweh expressed by the motif of the divine council. However, if we accept Jindo's enlightening discussion and observations, a prophet's claim to be standing in Yahweh's presence, seeing and hearing what happens in the divine council, involves much more. A prophet who is privy to the divine council therefore receives his or her appointment and also the message to carry to Yahweh's people. Sensing Yahweh's word according to this argument then implies a real experience of being in Yahweh's presence and receiving his authentic word. The use of the motif 'council of Yahweh' in Jeremiah is very rare and can therefore not be regarded as a general criterion for true prophecy. Perhaps the best understanding of this motif is to regard the prophet's experience of being in the 'council of Yahweh' as a special sensing of Yahweh's secret knowledge or plan regarding his word.

There is an important point to note at this stage. However real the experience of Jeremiah of his participation in the divine council as 'true Prophet' might have been, for the other prophets and especially the people, it remained only a claim. His claim alone is not enough proof. The claim alone that the sensing of Yahweh's will is real is not enough to prove that it is indeed the case. The proof of the pudding lies in the eating – the power of the word to convince people to respond positively to that word and the fulfilment of the word are of real importance.

The double meaning of sensing

This brings me to the important point of sensing. As mentioned, I am interested in the use of the senses of seeing

6. Lenzi (2014: 84–86) argues, based on comparative research on Ancient Near-Eastern documents, that the biblical prophesies we have are the product of scribal activities that transformed former Hebrew prophecy. He says that scribes used the Hebrew prophecy to gain authority for their literary prophetic products. He concludes by saying: 'In the Bible ... secrecy only serves an authorizing function for divine secret knowledge ... ; the knowledge itself is delivered openly, available to all who could hear it' (Lenzi 2014:86). He refers to Psalm 25:14 to illustrate this point by pointing out the parallelism in this Psalm between *sôd* (secret counsel) and his covenant.

The secret counsel (סוד) of Yahweh belongs to those who fear him, His covenant, in order to make them (i.e., those who fear him) know.

and hearing in receiving Yahweh's word. However I became aware of the double meaning of the word sense when reading the book of Karlfried Froehlich with the title *Sensing the Scriptures*. He goes on to discuss the double meaning of the word sense as it appears in the English language, in Latin and also in Greek. It boils down to the fact that the word 'senses' can be understood in terms of physical perception but also as understanding or making sense of words and phrases. Froehlich (2014) says the following:

The entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows that the word-field in English covers the five bodily senses as well as several psychological activities in the vicinity of feeling, but a large area of use concerns words and language: sense is 'the meaning or signification of the word or phrase'. (p. 12)

He remarks that, when it comes to Latin, the emphasis is somewhat different. This difference entails the following:

... the largest area of usage here is perception, awareness, and feeling, while *sensus* as the meaning of a word or phrase constitutes a small and relatively late group under the heading, 'that which occurs in the mind'. (Froehlich 2014:12–13)

In this article, I want to relate the discussion on sensing the word of Yahweh to the double notion of the word 'senses' as Froehlich has highlighted. It seems to me that the prophet in Jeremiah 23:18 had a physical sensing of Yahweh's word in his presence in the council of Yahweh. He experienced the presence of Yahweh and was privy to see and to hear Yahweh's message for the people of Judah. The sensing of Yahweh's word has to do with perception, awareness and feeling. This experience was so real to the prophet that he, without any doubt or reservation, claimed that he had received Yahweh's word. However, it is also true that putting this claimed sensing of Yahweh's word in words immediately involved language and therefore the intellectual aspect of the mind. Froehlich (2014:13) quotes Thomas Aquinas who says: 'What is in our intellect, has been in our senses before.'

A few more words need to be said on the second meaning of the word 'sensing.' As mentioned, the process from perception to verbalisation implies a cognitive element. Putting feelings and perceptions into words involves the intellectual activity of choice of words and the structuring of words into sentences to make it intelligible (cf. Froehlich 2014:130). Because words have meaning, to understand these words or decode these words involves the mind. The argument I would like to promote is that the double meaning of the word sensing is a prerequisite for interpreting the word of Yahweh. This also applies to every claim made by people, even today, of receiving and communicating the word of Yahweh. In the case of Jeremiah, the words of judgement he received from Yahweh were put into words and sentences. These words were conveyed to the opposing prophets but also to the people of Judah. For these people to hear and understand the prophetic words involved using the physical senses but also sensing as an intellectual endeavour. They had to understand and make sense of Jeremiah's words and had to decide how to respond to his messages.

For the prophet, sensing Yahweh's word involved receiving and perceiving the words of Yahweh, and for those people at whom the message was aimed, sensing implied hearing and interpreting the message as an intellectual exercise first and foremost. The people of Judah who received the words of the prophets were situated in a particular social context, and they interpreted and gave meaning to these words in terms of their context and the relevance of the words in their context. In the next paragraph, I would like to return to Jeremiah 23:16–22 to discuss the double meaning of sensing as it applies to this passage.

Discussion of sensing on various levels

In the discussion of the abovementioned passage, I want to focus on three levels of sensing. The first level is on the reception of Jeremiah's proclamation of judgement by the people of Judah and the opposing prophets. The second level of sensing concerns the tradition that has preserved the Jeremiah oracles and that is responsible for the collection of the oracles against the opposing prophets. The third level of sensing has to do with our modern-day interpretation of biblical texts and its appropriation.

Level 1: Jeremiah and his contemporaries

According to the book of Jeremiah, the prophet Jeremiah acted in turbulent times in the history of Judah (cf. Craigie *et al.* 1991:xlvi–xlvii; Perdue 2015:87–88). I am fully aware of the strongly argued views today that it is impossible to reconstruct the prophet as historical figure and that the focus should be on the book rather than the person of the prophet. (cf. Barstad 2009:15–20). This article will not entertain the 'fact-fiction' debate, but the following viewpoint stated by Barstad (2009) seems relevant:

Through the ancient stories, we get access to historical reality in ancient Israel. The Book of Jeremiah, for instance, may, in its present form, be classified as a prophetic novel. When we read this story, we learn a lot about what prophecy was like in ancient Israel. (p. 24)

The truth of the matter is that what is described in the book of Jeremiah is not only a literary reality, but it corresponds with many other descriptions of the phenomenon of prophecy both in the Ancient Near East and in the Israelite tradition (cf. Nissinen 2009:119–120). The level under discussion, whether reality or presented as reality, describes a situation where the prophet Jeremiah opposes a group of probably Jerusalemite prophets who he regards as proclaiming false oracles. Carroll (1986:73) refers to these prophets as 'official mantic functionaries of court and cult' and Brueggemann (1998:211) calls them 'establishment prophets'. According to Jeremiah, the two main issues in this period were the threat of the Babylonian invasion and the disloyalty of the Judean people to Yahweh and the covenant. Jeremiah linked these two aspects by regarding the Babylonian invaders as an instrument of punishment by Yahweh for disobedience to and betrayal of Him. Jeremiah's message was a persistent

call for the people to 'turn back' to Yahweh and to obey his covenant stipulations. If the people continue to behave the way they do, then Yahweh's judgement is inevitable. Jeremiah was upset that there were prophets who should have had a better understanding of the critical historical circumstances that Judah experienced because of the Babylonian threat but still refused to face reality. To convey messages of hope to a people that, in his view, had become estranged from Yahweh is nothing less than false prophecy. For Jeremiah, these prophets are false since they are not attuned to the will of Yahweh, namely for the people to turn back to Yahweh.

The book of Jeremiah makes it clear that there were other voices in the Judean society who interpreted history differently and understood the relationship with Yahweh differently from the prophet Jeremiah. These other voices were more positively inclined and proclaimed messages of peace and optimism. Some prophetic groups had an optimistic approach and interpreted the temple, the palace and the king from the lineage of David, all situated in Zion, as symbols of security and trust (cf. Brueggemann 1998:210–211; Overholt 1970:1–23). It is against this background that the oracles of Jeremiah should be understood. In Jeremiah 23:16–22, Jeremiah is addressing the people of Judah to alert them to the fact that the prophets they so willingly listen to proclaim false messages of hope and peace.

In the passage under discussion, Jeremiah not only warns the people not to listen to the opposing prophetic voices in society, but continuing the judging nature of the oracles he has proclaimed thus far, he again conveys a message of doom in verses 19 and 20. What Jeremiah sensed from his participation in the council of Yahweh was that the message of his opponents, namely peace (*šālôm*) and 'that calamity will not come upon them', is a delusional untruth. It is, however, clear from the book of Jeremiah and from this passage that the people of Judah sensed Jeremiah's proclamation as untrue and thought that they should disregard it. Their rational response to Jeremiah's sensed word from Yahweh was to reject it and to rather follow the opposing view with which they were more comfortable. The point is that, even though Jeremiah was convinced that he received his message in the council of Yahweh, it did not guarantee its acceptance as such by his audience. The truth of the matter is that the people of Judah were confronted by two contradictory messages, both presented with a claim of speaking words of divine origin (cf. Overholt 1989:163). These people did not regard themselves as wicked or stubborn. That is a judgement from Jeremiah's point of view. From Jeremiah's point of view and from his sensory experience in the council of Yahweh, the rival prophets were not authentic prophets sanctioned with a mission and a revelation from Yahweh. They were therefore misleading the people of Judah and supporting them in their disregard of Yahweh and his word. The people of Judah therefore rejected Jeremiah's 'word from Yahweh' on both notions of sense, bodily (senses) and rationally (mind). Jeremiah's message did not appeal to them in any sense of the word. The decision then as to who proclaimed the true

words of Yahweh can therefore not be solved at this level alone. We are left with contradictory claims of truth.

A valid question would be whether Jeremiah's labelling of the Judeans as people who despise Yahweh's word as stubborn (v. 17), wicked (v. 19) and evildoers (v. 22) offer enough evidence to validate him as a true prophet of Yahweh. From the response of the people and leaders in Judah to Jeremiah's constant rebukes that they are disloyal to Yahweh and the covenant stipulations, the answer is no. They rejected Jeremiah's moral reprimands, but more than that, they rejected Jeremiah's theology that is based on the idea that punishment is the consequence of disobedience, that the covenant relationship demands loyalty and obedience (cf. Fretheim 2002:34–35; Huey 1993:31–33; McConville 2002:63–64).⁷ This is the theology we find in Deuteronomy 29:18 where mention is made of people worshipping foreign gods but still claiming: 'We are safe even though we go our own stubborn ways' (Dt 29:19, NRSV). The response to this is the following:

... the LORD will be unwilling to pardon them, for the LORD's anger and passion will smoke against them. All the curses written in this book will descend on them, and the LORD will blot out their names from under heaven. (Dt 29:20, NRSV)

We find this theology in Jeremiah 7:23 and 24 as well. It reads as follows:

But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.' Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels, and looked backward rather than forward. (Jr 7:23–24, NRSV)

The passage in Jeremiah 13:8–10 also substantiates the view promoted in Jeremiah 23:17–20:

Then the word of the LORD came to me: Thus says the LORD: Just so I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own will and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing. (Jr 13:8–10, NRSV)

The refusal to heed Jeremiah's call to the people to change their way of living and turn back to Yahweh is not only a rejection of his proclamation and theology but also a denial of him as a true prophet in the service of Yahweh. It was only when the tradition took up his course that Jeremiah was vindicated as true prophet. This brings the second level of sensing into focus.

⁷As mentioned before, one of the most complex matters of research on the Jeremiah text is to determine the redactional activity in the book. There is no doubt that there is a strong correspondence between the theology of the book of Deuteronomy and that of Jeremiah. However, people differ about the extent to which Jeremiah was influenced by the theology of the Northern traditions and how heavily the book was edited by the so-called Deuteronomists. Thiel (1973), for instance, attributes much of the material to the Deuteronomistic editing of the Jeremiah text and so does Carroll (1986). Maier (2002:356–359) also ascribes the tendency of Jeremiah as a prophet of judgement and doom as due to the Deuteronomistic redaction of the book of Jeremiah in the exilic period. Perhaps a more balanced view would be not to deny Deuteronomistic editing of the book but also to allow for influences of Northern traditions on Jeremiah due to his exposure to the Torah and the Josianic reform efforts.



Level 2: The Jeremiah tradition

The question then is whether a second level of sensing that involves the tradition can contribute to assessing who spoke Yahweh's true word and who was authorised to do so. It is not disputed much nowadays that the book of Jeremiah reveals redactional reworking and that the traditionists who preserved the Jeremiah oracles shaped the format of the book to the product we have today (cf. Carroll 2008:196–202; Gerstenberger 2011:336). Entertaining the redactional activities involved in the formation of the Jeremiah text as we have it in the MT or any other version of the text is a very complex issue (cf. Schmid 2012:126–130, 169–176, 205–206). Any attempt to address this issue or suggestions in this regard will still not capture the reality of matters (cf. Sharp 2011:36). The ensuing discussion is not an attempt to pinpoint or be specific as to who the traditionists and redactors of the Jeremiah tradition were, but to promote the idea promulgated in this article that sensing as a matter of reason functioned in the acceptance and presentation of the Jeremiah oracles as true words from Yahweh. An important point to recognise at this level is the difference between the oral situation and the written report of that oral encounter. The oral discourse takes place in a particular situation which plays a role in the creation of meaning in that dialogical situation, but the written format of the dialogue becomes disengaged from that situation and a surplus of meaning becomes a reality (Hill 2011:111). This is particularly true of sensing on this proposed second level of giving meaning to the oral claims of Jeremiah that he received Yahweh's words. It is clear that at some stage some sympathisers of Jeremiah were at pains to collect the oracles of Jeremiah and group them together to form a cycle of oracles on the prophets (23:9–40). Most probably, these traditionists experienced the Babylonian exile and could therefore testify that the words that Jeremiah claimed to have received from Yahweh turned out to be true. These people sensed Jeremiah's proclamation to be true because of their emotional and bodily (physical) experience of exile. However, they could also judge intellectually that Jeremiah's claims were true and needed to be preserved as evidence that he was indeed in the council of Yahweh and authorised to proclaim the word of Yahweh to the people of Judah. In Deuteronomy 18:21–22 we find the following criterion for judging whether a prophet is authentic. If the question is asked, 'How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?' (v. 21), the answer provided in verse 22 (NRSV) is the following:

If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

The tradition could make the judgement that the words Jeremiah proclaimed were indeed realised.

A number of scholars have pointed out that the prophetic texts seem to indicate that prophetic activity in the period before the exile and during the exile were under suspicion and doubted by the people (Lange 2002:313). Carroll (1986:75)

mentions that '... the cycle of oracles against the prophets in the book of Jeremiah may well be part of the anti-prophetic polemics of the Persian period'. The tradition however used the Jeremiah oracles to settle a dispute on the authenticity of some prophetic proclamations. For this purpose, they collected the Jeremiah oracles, interpreted them in terms of their experience of the exile, validated the material and reworked the oracles to form the collection of oracles judged by them to be by false prophets. In the discussion offered in this article, the complexity of deciding in which instances the text was amended or what should be regarded as editorial additions to or commentary on the Jeremiah oracles was discussed. The possibility was mentioned that, in the process of the reworking of the Jeremiah oracles, 23:19–20 as judgement verdict was inserted as a logic consequence of the false proclamation by the rival prophets. The point is that the Jeremiah text was interpreted for the purpose of the context of those who were responsible for the collection and preservation of Jeremiah oracles as true words from Yahweh. Sensing Yahweh's word in this regard implied interpretation of Yahweh's words and searching for its meaning. As Overholt (1989:181) states so aptly: 'Prophecy is a social phenomenon. Whatever authority they may get from on high, prophets are dependent upon audiences for their effective authorization.' The truth of Jeremiah's proclamation as words from Yahweh was vindicated, and the opposing views were disregarded as false visionary experiences and false prophecy. It is in terms of interpreting the words spoken by Jeremiah as true that the judgement of the people as evil and stubborn is validated (cf. 23:16–17, 22). Froehlich (2014:130–131) is thus correct in his judgement that experience alone is not sufficient as a claim for receiving and conveying true words from Yahweh. It needs definition, it needs language, and it needs interpretation. Both notions of sensing are needed to validate words claimed to be from the council of Yahweh as true. Jeremiah's claim that he is a true prophet sanctioned by Yahweh and entrusted with his word was not convincing enough in his own time to vindicate his claim. The recognition, interpretation and validation of his oracles by the tradition contributed to the affirmation that he indeed stood in the council of Yahweh and was entrusted with true words from Yahweh.

Level 3: Contemporary interpretation

The third level of sensing the word of Yahweh that needs attention is our interpretation of the biblical text within our various contexts. Because the Old and the New Testaments are fixed in textual format, hermeneutical and methodological principles are needed to access the meaning of the text. In this regard, the emphasis is on sensing in terms of the intellectual activity of analysis and appropriation (cf. Hill 2011:111). The sensory aspect of hearing (reading) will dominate the experience of arriving at some form of understanding of the word of Yahweh in language format.

Scholars and exegetes writing commentaries do meticulous work on the biblical texts. In this regard, sensing operates as a strictly intellectual exercise. The text is submitted to intellectual



scrutiny and logic questioning. An example of this concern is the question raised earlier that if Jeremiah as true prophet formed part of the council of Yahweh, why did the people not respond positively to his prophetic proclamation as 23:22 said would be the case of a true prophet? Carroll (1981:169–173) discussed this issue in some detail and concluded that none of the prophetic contingencies, neither Jeremiah nor the opposing prophets, managed to change the mind of the people. In line with his argument, this was an indication that prophecy as such was a failure and in crisis. I agree with him that it must have been a confusing and challenging situation for the people of Judah to decide who to believe. I also agree with Carroll that the mere claim to have been standing in the council of Yahweh cannot serve as a deciding criterion for the truth of a prophetic word, because what proof can a prophet offer to verify such a claim? Where I disagree with Carroll is his view that both Jeremiah and the other prophets failed to turn the people of Judah from their evil ways to worship and obey Yahweh. The fact is that the opposing prophets did not try to change the minds of the people of Judah, but approved of their conduct and even reinforced their way of living by comforting them with messages of peace and security. The Babylonian threat was real, and involvement in idol worship and Baal practices was real as well. The reform efforts of King Josiah are proof of the fact that foreign-worship practices threatened the covenant relationship between Judah and Yahweh. The real issue therefore was a matter of moral depravity, resulting in disloyalty to Yahweh. It is however not the success of Jeremiah that is at stake but the nature of the message for this particular period in time in the history of Judah (cf. Fretheim 2002:337–338). The view that Jeremiah's claim to have been present in the council of Yahweh carries no weight and that, in the light of 23:22, he is also not a true prophet because he failed to turn the people back to Yahweh is an unsuitable verdict by exegetes based on clinical logic from a retrospective vantage point. At the time when Jeremiah made the plea for change, he was still of the conviction that the stern warning to the people to be obedient to Yahweh's will or face punishment could change their minds to turn back to Yahweh.

Understanding the word of Yahweh with the aim of appropriating it for one's own context implies a sense of understanding of one's context that might be more than a rational analysis of the context. It might involve sensing conditions in terms of perception, feeling and insight which then need to be conceptualised in language. The double notion of sensing is again involved in creating meaning and making sense of Yahweh's word. However, the sensing of Yahweh's word might be more than a disciplined analysis and search for understanding and meaning of the texts in terms of our rational efforts. Froehlich (2014) says the following in reference to Luther and his view on the power of the Word of God:

The first has to do with the reader's laborious and initially frustrating wrestling with a difficult text, a struggle that sometimes ends on the opposite note – namely, in the joyful and liberating experiences of being overpowered and enlivened by the text. (p. 133)

Interpreted in terms of the two notions of sensing, the disciplined rational effort of making sense might result in a transformative sensing by that word from Yahweh. It seems from the discussion on the third level of sensing that the sequence of sensing might be in the reverse of the initial sensing of the word as coming from Yahweh. Interpretation might lead to transformation by the power of the divine word.

Concluding observations

White (2014:175) concludes that the presence of humans in the divine council is exceptional and allows access to prophets only rarely. In Jeremiah, the noun *sôd* is used only twice in reference to the council of Yahweh in the passage under discussion, and for the other occurrence in Jeremiah 15:17, the noun *sôd* is used referring to the 'company of merry-maker'. In Ezekiel 13:9 which is closely related to Jeremiah 23:16–22 on the matter of false prophecy, the noun *sôd* does not refer to the council of Yahweh but to the 'council of my people'. There is therefore not enough evidence to regard the idea of participation in the council of Yahweh as a general criterion for true prophecy. If this is the case, we cannot make generalised claims that this is how Yahweh's words should be received. I agree with Lange (2002:131) that Jeremiah's primary concern is not in establishing criteria for identifying false prophets but that he weighs within his own context prophetic word against prophetic word in terms of its relevance and validity for its context. The Jeremiah tradition played an important role in validating Jeremiah's prophetic proclamation. In our engagement with Jeremiah's prophetic words in the attempt to interpret and appropriate them for our various contexts, the double meaning of sensing is essential. I believe that a special sensing of Yahweh's word is possible, that senses such as seeing and hearing of his words are a reality. However, as I have argued, that claim alone is not enough. The cognitive aspect of sensing should also be allowed room in arriving at the mutual confirmation: This is indeed a word from the mouth of Yahweh, a word that reveals the heart of Yahweh.

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