

# Jeremiah 23:23–24 as polemic against prophets' views on Yahweh's presence

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Jeremiah 23:23–24 is a short passage in the cycle of oracles in which the prophet Jeremiah is supposedly in conflict with other prophets in his society. It is possible that this short passage first had an independent existence before it became part of the collection of oracles in 23:9–40. This article argues that as an independent oracle the passage claims that Yahweh is not just a localised god, but an omnipresent God from whom no person can hide. When read as part of the mentioned cycle, it should be regarded as a polemic against a view held by some prophets that Yahweh's nearness guarantees peace and security. Their domesticated view leads to complacency and disregard. It is argued that Jeremiah opposes their view by stating that Yahweh is also a distant God who is aware of their false and deceitful attempts to provide revelatory knowledge to the people. In this regard chapter 23:23–24 serves as a polemic against so-called false prophets and implies a threat of judgement.

## Introduction

Jeremiah 23:9–40 is a collection of oracles against so-called false prophets. This is clear from the introductory words in verse 9 which state that what follows 'concerns prophets'. At some stage in the literary history of the book of Jeremiah some person or people have found it necessary to collect oracles that concerned the prophets and in this effort the oracles have been organised in the manner in which they are now known. The collection intends to relate the oracles to the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah 23:23–24 forms part of this cycle of oracles against so-called false prophets. This short passage is preceded by two sections in verses 9–15 and 16–22 and followed by another two sections in verses 25–32 and 33–40. The interest of this article is verses 23 and 24, which seem to be a separate unit. It is difficult at first sight to see the relevance of Jeremiah 23:23–24 to the cycle of oracles against the prophets. At face value these two verses do not seem to be too difficult to understand, but a closer look at the detail of the text reveals that it is quite a challenging unit to interpret. Not only are there significant textual differences between the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Septuagint version, but verse 23 in the MT also leaves a margin for ambiguous interpretations. The question is whether the focus should be on the distant God or, in anticipation of verse 24, on both the nearness and the distance of Yahweh (Carroll 1986:464–466). Furthermore, the question remains whether the emphasis should be on a literary interpretation of the text or on a theological interpretation. These and other matters will be addressed in this article.

As is always the case, scholars differ on whether these two verses should be regarded as a free-standing, unrelated passage (Holladay 1986:639; Lundbom 2004:200; McKane 1986:587), and if not, whether the passage connects to the previous section or sections (Allen 2008:267–268) or should it be linked to the passage starting in verse 25 (Fretheim 2002:338; Rudolph 1968:153; Thompson 1980:499–502). In the light of the redactional history of this collection and the fact that it is not obvious why verses 23 and 24 have been included in this collection, it will first be treated as a separate unit before interpreting it in the context of the cycle of oracles on prophets.

A close look at the structural aspects of this passage confirms that these two verses belong together and form a well-defined unit. It is furthermore clear that these verses are poetic in nature (cf. Lundbom 2004:200). If this short passage can be regarded as a separate unit, the question will be what it intends to communicate as a unit and secondly how this passage fits into the cycle of oracles concerning prophets in opposition to Jeremiah. The investigation will first pay attention to the literary and rhetorical aspects of the text and secondly to the theological-ideological matters emanating from the exposition.

## Analysis of Jeremiah 23:23–24

The likelihood has been expressed that these two verses form a separate unit. It is important, however, first to determine whether this is indeed the case. Besides the stylistic difference from

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the previous section, the BHS has a setuma at the end of verse 22 – an indication that verse 23 is regarded as part of a new section.

A closer look at these two verses indicates that they form a stylistic unit. Verse 23 is introduced by ה<sup>1</sup>-particle interrogative, linked to the masculine plural construct form of the noun אֱלֹהִים, followed by מִן particle preposition attached to the adjective קָרוֹב -adjective masculine singular absolute. These words are followed by a first person singular pronoun אֲנִי which is repeated twice in verse 24. It is emphasised that Elohim is the speaker in all three questions asked in these two verses. The first part of the question in verse 23 is completed by the affirmation formula וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, which is again a very distinctive feature of these two verses. This formula is repeated twice in verse 24. The interrogative sentence in verse 23 is completed by a negative particle לֹא followed by the masculine plural construct form of the noun אֱלֹהִים and then by מִן particle preposition attached to the adjective רְחוֹק. The interrogative particle in the first clause of verse 23 also applies to the second clause introduced by וְגַם, making it a double question. Upon reading, the double question creates an ambiguous sense at first in that one first wants to answer no to the first clause and yes to the second. The וְגַם in the second clause of verse 23 does not make this clause negative, but it responds negatively to the first clause in verse 23 that is referring to the statement of Yahweh's closeness. In fact, the interrogative particle ה followed by וְגַם in the second clause, states the fact that Yahweh is indeed a distant God and not simply a nearby god. These adjectives in verse 23 generally refer to spatial dimensions (Lemke 1981:542). Lemke, however, points out that these adjectives can at times also have a temporal meaning and can hence be understood literally or even metaphorically.<sup>2</sup>

Verse 24 is introduced by the particle אַחַר followed by the Ni imperfect third person masculine singular form of the verb סָתַר. A second rhetorical question is asked in the first clause of the sentence in verse 24, also referring to a place of space – a secret place – followed by a first person singular pronoun אֲנִי. The first clause of verse 24 is completed in a similar fashion as in verse 23 with a negative particle. This particle is connected to a first person singular imperfect Qal form of the word 'to see' (רָאָה) with a third person suffix masculine singular energetic nun, followed by the affirmation formula,<sup>3</sup> 'says Yahweh' (וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה).

The second clause of verse 24 is again introduced by ה – particle interrogative linked to a negative particle לֹא, indicating a third rhetorical question. The particle combination הֲלוֹא does not make the clause negative, but makes a statement that indeed the obvious answer is that Yahweh fills the heaven and the earth. The Qal participle masculine singular absolute form

of the verb מָלָא is used preceded by a first person singular pronoun אֲנִי to indicate that Yahweh is still the one asking the questions. The second part of this clause is also concluded by the affirmation formula, 'says Yahweh' (וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה). The objects that the verb 'to fill' refers to are again spatial entities, namely the heaven and the earth. That Jeremiah 23:23–24 is a unit is further confirmed by the observation that a chiasmic structure exists between the first line of verse 23 and the last line of verse 24. Firstly, the interrogatives ה, אַחַר, and ה form a chiasm. Brueggemann (1973:358) has indicated that the usual form of the double question is (ה) and (אַחַר) which resembles wisdom literature. The chiasmic use of the interrogative in verses 23 and 24 in his view is 'a remarkable development' of the double question. The chiasmic structure also includes the spatial indications in verse 23 of near and far that correlate with the spatial indications in verse 24 – heaven and earth. The heaven is indicated as far and the earth as near. Between these chiasmic elements the pivotal sentence then is 'Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the Lord' (NRSV). This clause in the chiasmic structure therefore needs to be considered with great care as it forms the pivotal point in the structure.

Verse 25 seems to introduce a new section ending in verse 32. Jeremiah 23:23–24 has distinctive stylistic features that differ from the previous and following sections, namely three consecutive rhetorical questions structurally combined. As far as content is concerned, at first sight there seems to be no connection between the preceding sections (verses 16–22) or with the section to follow in verse 25ff. In the light of the structure and content of verses 23 and 24, it seems that these two verses should be treated as a separate oracle.

## Interpretation of Jeremiah 23:23–24 as an independent oracle

As initially stated, one purpose of this article is to attempt an understanding of what this brief passage wants to communicate to its audience. As such it is not too difficult to come to some understanding of this passage, but its general nature does not necessarily explain why it should be linked to Jeremiah. As a separate passage it could easily fit into any of the Old Testament literary corpora. From a first reading there are no clear indicators why it should be regarded as part of the book of Jeremiah and therefore needs further investigation.

Although there is no clear historical context to which these verses can be tied, what they communicate is very important and promotes a strong theological point of view. As mentioned before, three rhetorical questions are posed in these two verses. The answer to the first question 'Am I a God nearby, says Yahweh, and not a God far off' seems to be ambiguous. Read in isolation verse 23 does not allow for a conclusive yes or no. It seems, however, that verse 23 is raising the issue at stake, namely Yahweh's nearness and distance. If one reads verse 23 as anticipating verse 24 that proclaims Elohim is omnipresent, then verse 23 should be interpreted to say that he is not simply (or only) Elohim that is close, but also far (cf. Schmidt 2013:47; also Fischer 2005:699).

1.The Septuagint, Theodotion and Syriac versions omit the interrogative particle. In Carroll's (1986:464–465) view the inclusion of the interrogative particle in the MT allows for an interpretation of the transcendence of Yahweh. There is no obvious reason to change the Masoretic text (MT).

2.Lemke (1981:542–551) offers a detailed overview of all the uses of both the adjectives קָרוֹב and רְחוֹק in the Old Testament.

3.Lacking in the Septuagint.

Brueggemann (1973:358–359, 361) has convincingly shown that the interrogative  $\pi$  followed by  $\alpha$  tie verses 23 and 24 structurally together. Added to this is the extended use of the interrogative in the second half of verse 24 which completes the chiasm that ties the two verses even closer. The two verses belong together structurally, but, as demonstrated in the discussion before, also as far as content is concerned. It therefore makes sense to read these two verses together.

The answer to the second rhetorical question ‘Can someone hide in a secret place and I not see him, says Yahweh’, also implies a no answer. There are some passages in which the combination of the concepts of ‘hide’ and ‘see’ appear. The following verses seem relevant for our discussion, especially the one in Jeremiah 16:17. It reads: ‘For my eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from my presence, nor is their iniquity concealed from my sight’ (NRSV). Besides the fact that the verb ‘to hide’ relates to Jeremiah 23:24, the mentioned verse emphasises the fact that nothing is concealed from Yahweh’s eyes or escapes his attention. People cannot hide from him, nor can their deeds be concealed from him. Another relevant verse is Isaiah 29:15. It reads: ‘Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for the LORD, whose deeds are in the dark, and who says, “Who sees us? Who knows us?”’ (NRSV).

In both these passages a form of the verb ‘to hide’ (סתר) is used. The hiddenness is related to deeds of iniquity, things done in darkness, therefore wrongdoings and evil things that people do which they would like to hide from Yahweh. It is, however, clearly stated that these evil doings will not escape Yahweh’s knowledge.

Allen (2008:267–268) also argues for the importance of verse 24a, especially the idea that some people might think that they can hide and that Yahweh cannot see them. He refers to several passages where people express the idea that because Yahweh cannot see them, they can freely sin (cf. Ps 10:11; 94:7; Isa 29:15; 47:10 and Ezk 8:12; 9:9). He also refers to passages where seeing is related to punishment (cf. Gn 6:5, 12; 11:5; Job 11:11; 34:21).

The third rhetorical question in verse 24b posed to its audience is ‘Do I not fill the heaven and the earth, says Yahweh’. The implied answer to the third question is yes. The phrase ‘the heaven and the earth’<sup>4</sup> is often associated with the act of creation and implies everything that has been created. In many instances it functions as an inclusive term for what God has created. The combination of this phrase with the verbal form ‘to fill’ implies that Yahweh fills everything, including all spaces. Verse 24b therefore serves as a confirmation that Yahweh cannot be localised to be either near or far, or even that there can be a space where someone can escape Yahweh’s eyes. The important theological point these two verses make is that Yahweh’s presence is near and far, therefore universal (Fretheim 2002:338).<sup>5</sup> These two verses in Jeremiah 23 refer

4. Genesis 1:1; Exodus 20:11, 31:17; Deuteronomy 4:26, 30:19, 31:28; 2 Kings 19:15; 2 Chronicles 2:11; Isaiah 37:16; Jeremiah 32:17, Haggai 2:6, 21.

5. Goldingay (2006:97–98) has argued in reference to Mic 3:11 that Yahweh’s nearness at times might imply trouble for the people and his distance imply lack of help, therefore trouble for them.

to his immanence and his transcendence (Craigie, Kelly & Drinkard 1991:346; Thompson 1980:501). The chiasmic structure helps to clarify the ambiguity of the first interrogative question by emphasising that nobody can hide from the presence of Yahweh and that yes, Yahweh indeed fills the heaven and the earth and can therefore not be localised.

Except for the reference to near and far in Jeremiah 12:2, there seems to be no direct verbal correlations between these two verses and other similar passages. The context in chapter 12:2 refers to hypocrisy, whereas chapter 23:23 concerns views on Yahweh’s presence (cf. Holladay 1986:639–640). Lundbom (2004:201) refers to one reference in Psalm 138:6 where the word ‘from far away’ (מִרְחֹק) is used, however not much is to be learnt from this reference. A psalm that much better ties in with the idea of the universal presence of Yahweh is Psalm 139:1–12, especially verses 7–12. This psalm clearly expresses the idea that there is not a single space or place that will escape Yahweh’s attention or where someone can hide from him.<sup>6</sup> Some passages in the Old Testament therefore support the statements about Yahweh’s omnipresence and the consequence that no one can escape his sight.

Another aspect that needs attention is the use of the affirmation formula ‘says Yahweh’ (אָמַר יְהוָה).<sup>7</sup> If Vetter (1976:2) is correct, the use of this formula may allude to a context where oracles find their home.<sup>8</sup> He is correct in that it confirms that statements which are made are authenticated by the formula ‘says Yahweh’ (Fischer 2005:700). It is used no less than three times after each of the rhetorical questions to give weight to the sayings. If it is true that it alludes to the oracular nature of sayings, then the three rhetorical questions should be understood as revelatory sayings. If it is accepted that this affirmation formula emphasises the oracular nature of sayings, then it may explain why these two verses are linked with oracles related to prophets. Prophets are people who speak oracles they receive from Yahweh (cf. Jones 1992:312). The three rhetorical questions in verses 23 and 24 are therefore to be regarded as oracular utterances from a prophet proclaiming that Yahweh’s presence cannot be localised, but is universal in nature. If this argument holds water, then it may at least partly explain why these verses have been included in the collection of oracles concerning the prophets. What needs further investigation and ties in with the problem stated in the introduction is how these two verses relate to the other passages in the cycle of oracles about the prophets. An early indication is that these verses address a disputable view of Yahweh’s presence.

From this discussion it can be concluded that the structure of the two verses binds them together as a unit. The structure helps to determine the meaning of verse 24 and places the

6. Cf. Job 34:22 ‘There is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves’ (NRSV).

7. This affirmation formula appears 162 times in the book of Jeremiah. It is also frequently used in the following prophetic books: 19 times in Isaiah, 19 times in Zechariah, 16 times in Amos and 7 times in Haggai. A density of the formula אָמַר יְהוָה is to be found in Jeremiah 23 (11 times). See, in this regard, 23:11, 12, 23, 24 (twice), 28, 29, 30, 31, 32 (twice) and 33.

8. Lundbom (2004:2000) as well as Holladay (1986:699) translate אָמַר יְהוָה with ‘oracle of Yahweh’.

emphasis on the fact that Yahweh's presence is universal and therefore nobody can hide from his presence. Brueggemann (1973:358) has indicated that in Jeremiah the double question structure is consequently used to oppose another view. Jeremiah 23:23–24 will then be a dispute to the view that Yahweh can be localised. The oracular nature of the utterances may suggest that some prophets are repudiated in these verses for localising Yahweh. To add to this, some inter-texts support the idea of Yahweh's omnipresence and even suggest that there are overtones of punishment, that evildoers cannot escape Yahweh's 'seeing'.

## Jeremiah 23:23–24 in the context of 23:9–40

From the preceding discussion it seems that Jeremiah 23:23–24 structurally forms a separate section. It has become clear however, that there are several features in these two verses that indicate that they are not strange to the book of Jeremiah. Interrogative questions are often utilised as a rhetorical device in Jeremiah<sup>9</sup> and the formula  $\text{הֲלֹא־יָדָעַתְּ}$  is used in more instances in Jeremiah than in any other literature in the Old Testament. It is therefore important to investigate how these two verses relate to the literary context of the cycle of oracles concerning the prophets.

It is quite clear when reading the book of Jeremiah that the temple plays an important role as a place to deliver prophetic messages. There are quite a number of places where the prophet Jeremiah is placed against the background of the temple when delivering some of his disturbing messages. Passages that come to mind are Jeremiah 7; 20:1–6; and 26. It is common knowledge that the temple occupies a central position in the official religious life of the people of Israel and Judah. It serves as a place where the people go to worship Yahweh and to seek atonement of their sins. It is regarded as a place where the people of Israel and Judah can receive revelatory messages from the prophets who serve as intermediaries between Yahweh and the people. It is also the place where the priests teach the Torah to the people (cf. Tiemeyer 2009:243).

Perhaps of even greater importance is the theological significance of the temple to the rulers and the people of Israel and Judah. When the temple that Solomon built was dedicated to Yahweh, his glory ( $\text{כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה}$ ) filled the temple (1Kgs 8:11). It became the earthly abode of Yahweh amongst his people (Waltke 2007:710). The people of Judah also received the promise that the descendants of the Davidic king would always occupy the throne in the Southern Kingdom (2 Sm 7). Over time the presence of the temple and a Davidic king on the throne in Jerusalem have developed into a construct that serves as a notion of security. The temple and the Davidic king on the throne in Zion (Jerusalem) have become symbols that guarantee the presence of Yahweh in the midst of his people. This results in the fact that Yahweh's

presence has been localised in the temple in Jerusalem. The prophetic figure Jeremiah as he is portrayed in the book of Jeremiah proclaims the message that Yahweh's presence in the temple in Zion should not be regarded as unconditional (cf. Jer. 7 for example). Jeremiah strongly promotes the Torah and obedience to the Torah as the ethical obligation of the leaders and the people of Judah (cf. Maier 2002:370–372).

If Jeremiah 23:23–24 is interpreted against the background sketched above, then it is possible to read these verses as a polemic against the localisation of Yahweh in the temple. This implies that the people of Judah should not restrict Yahweh's presence to the temple thinking that there are spaces where they can hide from his presence or act without his knowledge. The message is clear – Yahweh's presence fills the heaven and the earth. The leadership of Judah, which includes the prophets, should therefore conduct their lives with the realisation that Yahweh's presence is everywhere.

If these two verses mentioned in Jeremiah 23 are read within an exilic context, then an important message is conveyed to the exiles. It can, on the one hand, serve as encouragement to the people in the Babylonian exile by proclaiming that Yahweh's presence is not restricted to the temple in Jerusalem, but that he is present in their midst, even though they are far from Jerusalem and the temple. On the other hand it can serve as a reprimand to the people that they should not think that they are far off and can escape his eyes. They should live with the awareness that he has knowledge of the ways in which they conduct their lives, because he is also 'from far'.

Reading Jeremiah 23:23–24 within the cycle of oracles reflecting conflict between prophetic figures or prophetic groups is not an easy task. Content-wise there seems no obvious links to the preceding section in 23:16–22. This last-mentioned text unit contains a warning to the people not to listen to the prophets who promote themselves as speaking on behalf of Yahweh. The indictment against these prophets is that they speak of visions they have concocted in their own minds and in the process have created false expectations of peace. The reason why these prophets should not be taken seriously is because they do not stand in the 'council' of Yahweh (23:18). Further reasons as to why the people should not listen to these prophets are that Yahweh has not sent them and that he has not spoken to them. Chapter 23:22 repeats that they are disqualified to represent Yahweh, because of their absence in his council.

From the above summary of the content of chapter 23:16–22, it can be concluded that prophets can only be regarded as true prophets if they have stood in the presence of Yahweh in his council. This implies a localised idea of Yahweh's presence. If this is true, then this passage seems to be in direct conflict with the content of verses 23 and 24 which opposes the idea of a localised presence of Yahweh.<sup>10</sup>

9.Brueggemann (1973:358–359, 361) has convincingly shown that what we have in verses 23 and 24, the interrogative  $\text{הֲלֹא}$  followed by  $\text{אֵל}$ , is typical of Jeremiah. Cf. Jeremiah 18:14; 2:14, 31; 3:5; 8:4, 19, 22; 14:19, 22.

10.In a discussion of the 'council of Yahweh' Jindo (2010:77–78) refers to a view expressed by Weinfeld that 23:23–24 rejects the idea of a divine council because of his omnipresence and omniscience. Jindo differs from Weinfeld and indicates that 23:23–24 emphasises that nothing is secret for Yahweh, not even the deceit of the prophets who speak without being authorised by Yahweh to do so.

The argument presented above is based on the notion that the reference to the council of Yahweh should be understood in terms of spatial dimensions. If, however, the council of Yahweh is not understood as a spatial reference, but as a relational term, then the two passages will not be in contradiction. The council of Yahweh can then be regarded as indicating that an intimate relationship should exist between a person and Yahweh in order for such a person to hear, see, and experience Yahweh's word (cf. Wessels 2015:3–4). If this line of argument convinces, then the reference to 'the council' should not be taken as a spatial indicator. It is therefore not in contradiction with the idea that Yahweh's presence is universal (vv. 23–24). The possibilities should then be considered that verses 23 and 24 are a polemic against prophets who regard Yahweh's presence as localised in the temple as the place where they receive oracles from him.

As mentioned before, Allen (2008:267–268) refers to several passages where people think that because Yahweh cannot see them, they can sin without consequences. He, however, also refers to several passages that link the idea of Yahweh's 'seeing' to punishment. One passage which Allen regards as the most important is Genesis 6:5. It reads: 'The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually' (NRSV).

In this verse the 'seeing' of Yahweh refers to the words 'wickedness' and 'evil', concepts regularly used in Jeremiah 23:9–22. Allen (2008:268) remarks about the interrogative in 24a: 'So the second question alludes to deserved disaster and is tantamount to an announcement of disaster. It is tied into the preceding context as part of a network of related terms'. Although he is correct in observing the similarity of terms between the two passages, it is perhaps forcing the issue to conclude on these grounds that verses 23 and 24 should be linked to the preceding verses 9–22.

If the above argument based on the content of verses 16–22 or even 9–22 and verses 23 and 24 is rejected, then other avenues should be considered to try and explain why these sections are connected in this cycle. The link between these two passages will then rather seem to be a result of literary and rhetorical indicators such as the questions that verse 18 uses to emphasise the point that, to be regarded as a true prophet, such a person has to stand in the council of Yahweh. Verses 23 and 24 similarly use questions to promote a specific idea concerning Yahweh's presence. What is further noticeable is that Yahweh is the first person singular speaker in verses 21 and 22, as well as in verses 23 and 24. When, however, one looks at the BHS, then it seems that verses 23 and 24 should not be linked to verses 16–22, but to verse 25 and further. The BHS has a break in the text after verse 22 with the inclusion of a setuma.

There are those who prefer to link verses 23 and 24 to the section that follows in verse 25 and further. It is, however, difficult to see the obvious connection between these two passages. First and foremost both verses 23 and 24 and 25–32

should be regarded as separate units that probably at some stage existed separately (Carroll 1986:449–450). If one argues that those who collected these various oracles concerning the prophets had a reason why they structured the cycle the way it is, then it will necessitate further investigation. On a literary level one can perhaps argue that verse 25 continues with the first person singular speaker, namely Yahweh, as is the case in verses 23 and 24.

Another rhetorical indicator that shows some correspondence between the two passages under investigation is the use of questions to emphasise matters. Questions can be found in verses 26, 27, 28, and 29. Another interesting observation, perhaps an important one, is the frequent use of the affirmation formula 'says Yahweh' (יְהוָה אָמַר). As mentioned earlier, this formula is used in the book of Jeremiah more than in any other books of the Old Testament. What is more remarkable however is the density of appearances of this affirmation formula in verses 23 and 24 and 25–32. The affirmation formula is used three times in verses 23 and 24 and six times in 25–32 (cf. verses 28, 29, 30, 31, and 32 twice). It is perhaps because of these mentioned formal correspondences between the two passages that the BHS and some scholars prefer to read verses 23–32 as a unit.

When one considers the content of the two passages under discussion, then it is not obvious why these passages belong together. Perhaps the use of the affirmation formula might be the clue why these two passages should be related. In the discussion of verses 23 and 24 concerning the issue of space and Yahweh's universal presence in space, it has been argued that the use of יְהוָה אָמַר alludes to oracular space. The implication is that the temple should not be regarded as the only space where prophets could receive oracles from Yahweh, but that any space where prophets are in an intimate relationship with Yahweh can serve as a sacred space to receive the word of Yahweh. If it is true that יְהוָה אָמַר refers to oracular space, then one may argue that it is also true for verses 25–32. This will then be the space where people claim to have dreams as a way of receiving Yahweh's words. The polemic against the prophets in this passage is then that they abuse the sacred space or oracular space by pretending that the dreams they receive are from Yahweh.

## Theological and ideological polemics

From the discussion of the structure it is clear that verse 24a forms the pivotal point in the two verses. The question has been asked whether someone can hide without Yahweh seeing that person. It has also been argued that in the book of Jeremiah the particular interrogative structure is consistently used to confront or oppose another party (Brueggemann 1973:358). It has also been noted that the various oracles of dispute in the cycle in verses 9–40 are followed by announcements of threat or judgement (cf. vv. 12; 15; 19–20; 30–32; and 39–40). When taking all of these into account, it therefore does not seem unrealistic to regard verses 23 and 24 as a threat to opposition prophets who are party to dispute in the mentioned cycle of oracles (Lemke 1981:555). It therefore

seems that verses 23 and 24 following verses 21 and 22 are a concluding threat to prophets who act without a commission from Yahweh. Their pretense to be prophets of Yahweh and their deceitful oracles do not escape Yahweh's knowledge and will result in judgement. At the same time these two verses serve to bridge the following passage in verses 25–32. The argument therefore is that this brief passage links backwards as well as forwards, challenging opposing prophets on their erroneous view of Yahweh's presence and knowledge of their deceitful behaviour.

It seems that the dispute concerns the issue that some prophets have localised Yahweh's presence and emphasised his nearness (cf. Goldingay 2009:772). Schmidt (2013:47–48) makes the point that nearness is associated with salvation, whereas the idea that Yahweh is far has overtones of judgement.<sup>11</sup> This is true, but therein also lies the danger that his nearness can be taken for granted and that he is at their disposal (Lemke 1981:554). All of this probably has to do with the temple and Royal-Zion ideology (cf. Albertz 1994: 135–136). Jeremiah refutes the claim by the establishment prophets of Yahweh's nearness in that his presence in the temple guarantees peace and security (cf. Brueggemann 1998:214–215). The view of Yahweh's nearness results in a false sense of security, but also in complacency. There are numerous examples in the book of Jeremiah, as mentioned before, where a discord has been recorded between claims of being Yahweh's people and his presence amongst them and the disloyalty and disobedience towards Yahweh and the covenant. In this sense Yahweh has become a domesticated god whom they could 'use' or fall back on when needed, but also disregard at will. Jeremiah 23:23–24 therefore relates backwards to the false prophecies of peace (וְשָׁלוֹם - vv. 16–17), accusations of adultery (vv. 10, 14), ungodly behaviour, wickedness, and lies (vv. 11, 14). As a consequence the prophet disputes the view of a domesticated god from whom they can claim to receive peace revelations, but who can also be disregarded at will. The opposing (false) prophets should realise that Yahweh is omnipresent and that nothing escapes his eyes (Goldingay 2009:775). The God whom they claim to be near can also be the God who is far and distant in judgement (cf. Craigie *et al.* 1991:346–347). He will expose them as false prophets because of their lies and deceit of the people.

The threat in verses 23 and 24 that no person can hide from Yahweh's sight also applies to the oracle in verses 25–32. Possible links between these two passages and the emphasis on the oracular nature of the utterances indicated by the use of אָמַר יְהוָה have already been argued. Jeremiah 23:23–24 will then serve as a warning to the people that their abuse of metaphorical sacred space will not escape Yahweh's attention.<sup>12</sup> False prophecy based on self-concocted dreams is nothing less than lies and deceit and therefore abuse of revelatory space. The true words from Yahweh will destroy

11.Schmidt (2013:48) refers to Psalm 22:12, 20; 38:22; Lamentations 3:57; Psalm 119:151; Isaiah 46:12; 55:6; Daniel 4:7; Jeremiah 12:2.

12.See Lemke (1981:549, 551) on the metaphorical use of Yahweh's distance.

false prophecy (cf. 23:29). The problem is not so much dreams as an oracular practice, but as Diamond (2003:576) states 'the issue is the misapplication of oracular assurances within a community that has forfeited presumption of divine support through violation of the Yahwistic moral order'. The problem is with the content of their messages (Overholt 1970:65). In the light of verses 23 and 24, this misapplication will not go unnoticed. As Schmidt (2013:48) remarks 'der alles wahrnehmende, überall gegenwärtige Gott hört auch die Propheten reden', implying the false dreams and deceitful practices addressed in verses 25–32. Sacred space belongs to Yahweh and abuse of this space will result in Yahweh's punishment.

If the inclusion of Jeremiah 23:23–24 in the cycle in verses 9–40 from a later period in history is the result of a rereading of Jeremiah's oracles on false prophecy and a collection and shaping of these oracles, then certainly it promotes the same message that Yahweh's presence cannot be localised. Even if the rereading took place in a context far removed from the temple in Jerusalem, the people should take note that even there nobody can escape the 'seeing' eye of Yahweh (Goldingay 2006:101; cf. also Jonah as an example). Reading this passage as a threat will then imply that dreams and oracles proclaimed by prophets Yahweh have not authorised to do so, is nothing less than deceit and lies that will not go unnoticed and unpunished.

## Conclusion

Although it is difficult at first sight to see the relevance of Jeremiah 23:23–24 to the cycle of oracles against the prophets, close reading opens up some possibilities of relating this passage to the rest of the oracles in the cycle. It seems from inter-texts that this passage can be related to notions on the nearness and distance of Yahweh, irrespective of its inclusion in the cycle on oracles on the false prophets. Its inclusion in this mentioned cycle serves as a threat that Yahweh will act in judgement. He should not be domesticated and regarded as a localised god from whose presence and knowledge they can hide. The implication is that neither false revelations nor deceitful, wicked and disobedient behaviour by the prophets opposing Jeremiah will go unnoticed and unpunished by Yahweh.

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