

Prophet, Poetry And Ethics: A Study of Jeremiah 5:26–29

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ABSTRACT

This article is not just about reading and interpreting a few verses from a prophetic poetic text; instead, the aim is to consider ethical issues raised by the passage in question. The first step is to come to grips with the prophetic message in Jeremiah 5:26–29, and then to relate it to the debate on ethics, the Old Testament and our present-day context. The idea is therefore to relate the biblical text to our context, while realising that there is not a direct correlation between the two. The world of the Bible and our world are in many respects far removed from each other. This implies that many ethical questions we are confronted with will fall outside the scope of the Bible. Indeed, many of the issues that the people of Israel had to face are no longer relevant in our context. The Old Testament therefore cannot be used as precept when it comes to ethics, but it makes a valuable contribution in terms of the examples it offers. In engaging in dialogue with the biblical text, we are not only confronted with an ancient world, but in the process we come face to face with our own world, our own ideas, and the challenges we ourselves have to face.

A INTRODUCTION

Prophets are synonymous with the promotion of social justice, and the plight of the poor and needy (which included widows and orphans) did not escape the attention of the biblical prophets. Their messages were at times harsh and to the point, making people aware of Yahweh's appeal for loyalty, obedience and justice. Yet the question has also been asked whether these prophets were not in fact poets. This question is particularly relevant in the context of Jeremiah 5:26–29, as this passage is recognisably poetic in style. The appeal made by the poet prophet in 5:26–29 must surely have made his audience uneasy, and has had the same effect on audiences and readers of later generations up till the present.

The passage under scrutiny consists of only four verses. Understanding a mere four verses may appear to be a simple task, but the nature of the book of Jeremiah, the time and cultural distance between present-day readers and the text and also the limited access that the text allows us to the world of the people of Judah in Jeremiah's time in fact make it a complicated endeavour. Furthermore, the space allowed here permits only a partial exploration of the relevant issues, as a result of which only some will be dealt with.

This article is not just about reading and interpreting a few verses from a prophetic poetic text; instead, the aim is to consider ethical issues raised by the passage in question. The first step is to come to grips with the prophetic message in Jeremiah 5:26–29, and then to relate it to the debate on ethics, the Old Testament and our present-day context. The idea is therefore to relate the biblical text to our context, while realising that there is not a direct correlation between the two. Such an exercise requires careful hermeneutical consideration (cf. Houston 2006:5–10), but as this article is not the forum for a detailed hermeneutical discussion of that nature, a few remarks will suffice. The text has its own world and its own history, and although we try to gain insight into this world, we nevertheless remain outsiders, and have only glimpses into it. The written text originated amongst the educated people in the society of its day who were able to write – in the case of Jeremiah 5:26–29, those members of society conversant with poetic style. It is not clear whether the oral conveyer of the message and the poet were one and the same person, although the text suggests that the words are those of the prophet himself. It is not even possible to state unequivocally that the written poem as we now have it in the Masoretic text found its way into that collection through the endeavours of the speaker or the writer; it seems more likely that the poem was included by a later generation of people who wished to promote a specific course of action or idea.

B JEREMIAH 5:26–29 IN CONTEXT

Jeremiah 5:26–29 is a strongly worded polemic against prominent members of the prophet's society. This short poem makes it clear that Yahweh is dissatisfied with the moral decay in Judean society, and that he will not tolerate it any longer.

Traditionally Jeremiah is divided into chapters 1–25, 26–45 and 46–51. Jeremiah 1 serves as an introductory chapter, followed by 2:1–25:14 (part 1 of the book Jeremiah), which consists of poems and sermons against Judah and Jerusalem. Within part 1, chapters 2:1–6:30 form a unit containing a preface to a cycle of poems (2:1–3), a collection of material on false cults (2:4–4:4) and a cycle of poems on 'the foe from the north' and other motifs (4:5–6:26; cf. Carroll 1986:86). The section that is of interest for the purposes of this article, Jeremiah 5:26–29, therefore forms part of the cycle of poems on the foe from the north.

The material in Jeremiah 2:1–6:30 was most probably collated at a stage in history when the outcome of things was known, and there was a need to explain why history had taken that particular course. In collating the collection as we have it, the collectors and editors of the Jeremiah material may have had a threefold intention: to explain the course of history; to justify why developments had taken that particular turn; and finally to re-emphasise the importance of the covenant and the obligations it placed on the society to which the collectors or interpreters of the history of the Israelites belonged.

With all of this in mind, our need is to relate something of what we have read and understood to our world and its issues. This requires some knowledge of our own communities and societies, and knowledge of our own worldviews and ideologies. The text is not naïve, and neither are we who interpret and appropriate it. The text cannot therefore be regarded as prescriptive, and dialogue with it is at times surprising and challenging (cf. Scroggs 1995:17–30).

The poetic section in Jeremiah 5:26–29 is very relevant to our own context, dealing as it does with the issues of oppression or lack of freedom, the abuse of power, exploitation of the poor and the orphaned and a lack of justice and fairness towards people. These issues are universal, and merit attention in any society interested in justice and order. The poetic text draws us into the world of ancient Israel and Judah, appeals to our conscience, and challenges our imagination.

1 The cycle Jeremiah 4:5–6:26: Cycle of poems on the ‘foe from the north’ and other motifs

Scholars generally agree that this section anticipates the imminent judgement of Judah by Yahweh (Carroll 1986:160; McKane 1986:90). To achieve this, He will use an enemy from the north. Some of the poetic sections in this collection mention the reasons for this impending disaster, and also reveal the envisioned outcome of events. Brueggemann (1998:53) has summarised the content of this section as follows:

- Anticipation of an invading army dispatched by Yahweh;
- Prophetic ruminations on personal grief and judgement;
- Harsh visions of the end of the human historical process;
- Statements of guilt and punishment, which follow standard prophetic motifs.

The poetic section in Jeremiah 5:26–29 falls within the last point of Brueggemann’s summary. It is a prophetic polemic (cf. Carroll 1986:189) stating the reasons for Yahweh’s disappointment.

2 Text and context: Jeremiah 5:26–31

כִּי־נִמְצָאוּ בַעֲמֵן רָשָׁעִים וְשׁוֹר׳ כְּשֶׁךְ וְקוֹשִׁים הַצִּיבוּ
 מִשְׁחִית אֲנָשִׁים יִלְכְּדוּ
 כְּכִלְוִיב׳ מָלֵא עוֹף כֶּן בְּתִיהֶם מְלֵאִים מִרְמָה עַל־כֵּן נִדְּלוּ
 וַיַּעֲשִׂירוּ:
 שָׁמְנוּ עֲשָׂחוּ גַם עָבְרוּ דְבַר־רָע דִּין לֹא־דָנוּ דִּין יָחוּם
 וַיִּצְלִיחוּ וּמִשְׁפַּט אֲבִיוֹנִים לֹא שָׁפְטוּ:
 תַּעֲלֵ־אֵלֶּה לֹא־אֶפְקֹד נֹאם־יְהוָה אִם בְּנוֹי אֲשֶׁר־כָּזְּבוּ לֹא
 תִּתְנַקֵּם נַפְשִׁי: ס

שָׁמָּה וְשִׁעְרוֹרָה נְהִיחָה בְּאַרְצִי:³⁰

הַנְּבִיאִים נִבְּאוּ בְּשֶׁקֶר וְהַכֹּהֲנִים יָדְדוּ עַל־יְדֵיהֶם וְעַמִּי³¹

אֲהָבוּ כֵן וְמָה־תַּעֲשֶׂהוּ :

²⁶ For scoundrels are found among my people; they take over the goods of others. Like fowlers they set a trap; they catch human beings.¹ ²⁷ Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich,²⁸ they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. ²⁹ Shall I not punish them for these things? says the LORD, and shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this? (NRSV)

Jeremiah 5:26–29 forms part of the larger unit 5:1–31, and describes what went wrong in Judean society, causing Yahweh to act against it. Rudolph (1968:35) suggests the heading '*Warum der Krieg?*' for this chapter, indicative of his understanding of this chapter as an explanation or reason for Yahweh's action.

This chapter also displays evidence of compilation, with separate units having been combined to form a larger unit. The collection was not put together randomly, however. Jeremiah 5:1–9 describes Jeremiah's fruitless search for a righteous person in Jerusalem. Chapter 5:10–19 unveils a false sense of security

¹ There are textual problems in verse 26 with regard to the words יְשׁוּרֵי כְּשֶׁף וְיָקוֹשִׁים. The first of these words is lacking in the Septuagint and in the Syriac versions. Other versions, however, have it as it appears in the Masoretic text, and suggested solutions are therefore necessary. The Vulgate translates it with *insidiates* – 'lying in ambush', therefore showing accommodations of the plural as determined by the syntax of the sentence. The second word is כְּשֶׁף. This word is also lacking in the Septuagint. The Vulgate, however, again maintains it and translates it as 'like fowlers'. The third word is יָקוֹשִׁים (noun, common masculine plural absolute). This word is maintained in the Septuagint. However, it is translated as 'snares,' and the noun is taken as the object of the verb to follow in the Masoretic text. The Vulgate and the Syriac versions have done the same. Others, however, such as the Origen recension, differ. It would appear that the Masoretic text should be retained, the textual problems notwithstanding (cf. De Waard 2003:20–21). It is generally agreed that we should do our best to make sense of the Masoretic text. The only emendation that seems plausible is to read יְשׁוּרֵי as a plural (McKane 1986:133). However De Waard (2003:21) remarks that the singular may serve to 'give a particularizing meaning to the verb: this behavior is not that of the whole society but that of isolated individuals'. This idea will be weighed again in the discussion of the section as a whole.

while a terrible foe is threatening, followed in 5:20–31 by a passage focusing on the foolishness of the people of Judah (cf. Diamond 2003:558).

Each of these three main units can be subdivided into smaller sections, but for the purpose of this article, this will be done only for section three, which includes Jeremiah 5:26–29, the main focus of the present discussion. There is substantiation for the view that 5:1–31 was not simply randomly compiled. The repetition of verse 9 in verse 29 serves as an indicator of intentionality in the sequence of the poetic sections or fragments. The rhetorical question in these two verses draws attention to the fact that Yahweh is or was justified in acting against his people (עַמִּי). The poetic sections appear to be interspersed with verses in prose style for the purposes of either remarking on a particular aspect or introducing a new thought or idea (cf. 5:30–31). The collection in chapter 5 was most probably put together during the exilic or even the post-exilic period to provide an explanation of or possibly a justification for the way Judah's history unfolded.

Besides these two so-called structural markers, or rather theological markers, there are remarkable correlations between Jeremiah 5:1–9 and 5:26–29 in terms of content, which I will briefly highlight.

In Jeremiah 5:1–9 the prophet goes on a search in Jerusalem for people who exercise justice (מִשְׁפָּט), whereas in 5:26–29, verse 28 in particular, failure is described in terms of the non-exercise of justice (מִשְׁפָּט). There is most probably also a correlation between the poor or ordinary people (רְלִיִּם) mentioned in verse 4 and the poor (אֲבִיּוֹנִים) in verse 28.

The perpetrators in verse 26 are referred to as the 'wicked people' (רָשָׁעִים); they are the big (גָּדֹל) or important people, the rich fat-cats. If 5:1–9 is regarded as being related to 5:26–29, then the רָשָׁעִים (wicked people) are probably the opposite of the ordinary people (רְלִיִּם). The reference to big people (גָּדֹלִים) is likely to be a reference to the leaders of the Judean society; this is the most common interpretation.

Another aspect that bears closer attention is the repetition of the concept 'justice' in verses 4 and 5, which contain a reference to the 'justice of Elohim' (מִשְׁפָּט־אֱלֹהִים), whereas the concept is not qualified in the same manner in 5:28. In 5:28, however, reference is made to the lack of justice (מִשְׁפָּט) meted out to the poor and the orphaned (יָתוֹם). In 5:4 and 5 it is twice stated that literally 'knowing the way of Yahweh' (יָדַעַתְּ דֶּרֶךְ יְהוָה) will result in 'doing God's justice'. Failure to treat the poor and the orphaned justly would then, if the argument holds, mean a lack of 'knowing Yahweh's way'. The logical question would then be, what is Yahweh's way, and what is Elohim's justice?

Scholars such as Thompson (1980:238) and Brueggemann (1998:62–63) express the view that we should understand Jeremiah 5:1–6 in terms of covenant obligations, or rather the lack of knowledge about these obligations.

Carroll (1986:176–177) suggests that 'justice' (מִשְׁפָּט) in verse 1 can be considered in two ways. It can be viewed as theologising based on Genesis 18:22–33 (the story of Sodom and Gomorrah), focusing on the important role of the righteous with regard to the city. Alternatively, מִשְׁפָּט in verse 1 could be seen as referring to correct or good religious behaviour rather than to 'justice'. I do not think, however, that Carroll would deny or oppose the view that a covenantal context played a crucial role or provided the frame of reference within which we should understand the prophetic performance and message.

3 Jeremiah 5:26–29 in its immediate context (5:20–31)

Our attention should now shift to Jeremiah 5:26–29, the focus of this article. Diamond (2003:558) accepts the division of chapter 5 into 1–9, 10–19 and 20–31. It is appropriate to begin by determining the place of 5:26–29 within verses 20–31 as a unit, and discuss the connections and relationships of ideas (content) and structure.

Verse 20 acts as an introductory sentence, seemingly in prose, to two different poetical sections in verses 21–25 and 26–29, and also a final section in 30–31. The prophet receives a command to inform Jacob and Judah what Yahweh has to say about them and their behaviour.

In Jeremiah 5:21–25 Yahweh expresses his dissatisfaction with his people (עַמִּי), who are acting ignorantly and disrespectfully and have no reverence for Him. They act this way even though they know He is the Creator and Sustainer of all creation. They are rebellious, and they will bear the consequences of their sins. The fact that they are not prosperous is of their own doing.

A new section, related to the previous one, is introduced in verse 26 by הִנֵּה, followed by a verb in the third person plural. Therefore, the structural indication of the beginning of a new passage in verse 26 is further reinforced by the change from second person plural to third person plural. Jeremiah 5:26–29 is a short poem, constituting a structural unit, which is further borne out by its content: this poetic section focuses on specific wrongdoings in Judean society, which will be discussed in greater depth as we proceed. Furthermore, yet another new unit is introduced in 5:30, where an announcement is made to which Judah should pay attention. It therefore seems fair to regard 5:26–29 as a separate poetic section, although related to the other passages in the context in which it is placed. What follows is a more detailed analysis of the passage.

C ANALYSIS OF JEREMIAH 5:26–29

It is important to examine this passage closely before trying to explain how it fits into the context of the book and a possible historical context. Clarity on the passage would also assist in determining or suggesting the function of this poetic unit.

There are a number of text-critical issues associated with verse 26 (cf. McKane 1986:132-133), but the metaphor is quite clear: people have been robbed of their freedom by a group of people labelled 'the wicked ones' (רָשָׁעִים), who operate amongst their own people (cf. Huey 1993:94), referred to as 'the people of Yahweh' (עַמִּי). These wicked ones set traps to catch people in the same way that fowlers set traps to catch birds (cf. Thompson 1980:249). There are four references to the wicked ones in Jeremiah (5:26; 12:1; 23:19 and 30:23); these references appear to be used as a broad category for those who disobey Yahweh. These are different people in different contexts, but in each case they are those who oppose what Yahweh favours. These references to the 'wicked' are similar to other references in Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The 'wicked ones' are often contrasted with the 'righteous ones' (2 Sam 4:11; Pss 1:16; 3:8; 37:17; 129:4; Prov 10:3, 6, 7, 11, 20; 11–15; 21:12; Eccl 8:14; 29:16; 28:28; Jer 12:1). 'The wicked' in Psalms are comprehensively considered in Prinsloo's discussion of the רָשָׁעִים in Psalm 1 (Prinsloo 2000:7–9). The righteous are those who obey Yahweh and keep his commands, and the wicked are those who disobey the stipulations or are the enemy of God and the people (Pss 3:8; 17:9; 37:20, 38). Psalm 82:4 links the destiny of the poor with the wicked, and Psalm 146:9 links that of the orphaned with the wicked. There are many references to the wicked in Psalms and in the wisdom literature; similarly, there are numerous instances in which the wicked are referred to in the context of their treatment of the poor and the orphaned.

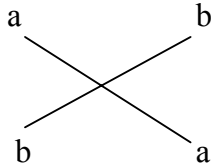
Verse 27 continues the metaphor of the fowler or bird-catcher; just as a bird-catcher fills up his birdcage with birds, the wicked fill their houses with deceit (מִרְמָה; cf. Thompson 1980:250). Following the comparative sentence (כִּי), a sentence introduced by (עַל־כֵּן) provides the reason for their wealth and power (greatness, cf. Oosterhoff 1990:213).

Verse 28 expands on the description of these people. Besides being powerful and rich, they are also fat and sleek. These last two descriptors (fat and sleek) are lacking in the Septuagint translation. Although they seem somewhat superfluous, they emphasise and dramatise, presenting a stereotypical picture of the wicked. Introduced by וְגַם, the description continues, as we are told that 'there are no limits to their wickedness'. Verse 28 continues with two components of the sentence, which are chiastically organised.

They judge not the case of the orphan,

The right of the poor they do not defend.

The pattern is



However, two words disturb the flow of the parallelism: a noun (דִּין), with which the first component commences, and a verb (וַיִּשְׁלִיחוּ), with which the first component ends. The verb is omitted in the Septuagint version; to accept the Septuagint version is therefore the easier way out. One should perhaps read the waw + verb as a consecutive (cf. Oosterhoff 1990:214), meaning ‘therefore they will not prosper’. It is likely that the sentence began with the noun ‘the case’ (דִּין) – the same noun which is repeated later in the sentence for the purposes of emphasis.

Nouns such as ‘the wicked’ (רָשָׁעִים), and ‘the poor’ (אֲבִיּוֹנִים) are often used in conjunction with legal terminology such as justice (מִשְׁפָּט) and judgement (דִּין) (cf. Utzschneider 1980:154). Similar combinations are frequently encountered in the wisdom literature (cf. Job 36:17; Prov 19:28; 21:7; 29:7) and Psalms (cf. Pss 37:28; 82:2; 140: 12). In addition, both the verb (שָׁפַט) and the noun (מִשְׁפָּט) occur in conjunction with the noun ‘orphan’ (יָתוֹם) in Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17; 27:19; Psalms 10:18; 82:3; 146: 9; Isaiah 1:17; 1:23; Jeremiah 5:28; 22:3; and Zechariah 7:9.

It is perhaps not possible to show direct links between these terms in Jeremiah 5:28 and the instances mentioned above, but these references may give an indication of the contexts in which these words were most commonly used – in legal contexts related to the covenant, psalms from cultic circles and practical wisdom (Proverbs, Job).² Vriezen (1974:421) has demonstrated that in addition to having a strict legal meaning, the term מִשְׁפָּט also has to do with interpersonal relationships and their maintenance. This observation is further borne out by

² Fischer (2007:134–136) has noted that Jeremiah or the redaction of the book has made extensive use of the Torah.

Deist (1986:187–189), who is of the view that חכמה should be understood against the background of folk wisdom, that is, practical wisdom arising from observation and experience, which Deist considers in all likelihood to have been the foundation of wisdom literature.

Frick (1995:79–91) has argued that the use of terminology for the poor (six terms³) constitutes evidence of interest in dealing with the issue of poverty in Psalms, the wisdom literature and prophetic literature in the Old Testament. There is a clear lack of interest in dealing with poverty in the Deuteronomistic History (cf. Frick 1995:84–86). Frick's view seems to tie in with my observation above as to which circles showed interest in the plight of the poor and the weak (orphans). If this is true, then one should again ask who was responsible for collecting and editing the poetic material in chapter 5.

Verse 29 concludes this poetic section. This verse is a repetition of chapter 5:9. Yahweh asks whether this atrocious behaviour does not deserve his punishment (עָנֵשׁ), and whether he should not avenge himself on his people. It should be noticed that whereas Yahweh's people were referred to in verse 26 as his people (עַמִּי), in verse 29 they are referred to as 'this nation' (גֵּרִי), this impersonal reference serving to underscore the distance between them and Yahweh.

The chapter ends with 5:30–31 in prose style. It takes the form of an announcement, and therefore forms a separate unit.

The analysis of the poetic section should properly be followed by a synthesis of the results of this unit and an interpretation, both of which are offered in the section that follows.

D SYNTHESIS AND INTERPRETATION OF JEREMIAH 5:26–29

In Jeremiah 5:26 the reference to the 'wicked' is most probably a reference to the upper-class members of the society of the day. They were labelled the 'wicked ones' owing to their oppression and exploitation of the poor and the orphaned in Judean society. Houston (2006:35) cites Dearman, who puts forward a convincing argument that the exploiters in eighth-century Israelite society were the state officials who made decrees to despoil widows and orphans (cf. Is 10:1–3). There is no clear evidence in Jeremiah 5:26–29 that the 'wicked' in this context are indeed state officials, but the mere fact that they acted from positions of power and had legal discretion that affected the lives of the poor and the orphaned seems indeed to indicate this. It would not be far fetched to consider this to be a reference to a 'governing class' (Houston 2006:40). Lemche (1995:119–131) some years earlier suggested that Israelite society was

³ These are: עָנִי, אֲבִיּוֹן, רֵשׁ, דָּל, מַחֲסוֹר, and מַסְכֵּן.

organised according to a patronage system (cf. also Domeris 2007:48-51). He referred to the kings as the patrons and the people as the clients. The patrons were supposed to protect the clients, and were responsible for ensuring that justice and fairness prevailed. The people (clients) at times experienced economic hardship and ended up as hired workers in order to repay their debt. In many instances this led to exploitation and a denial of the formal agreement that existed between patron and client. The prophets in particular condemned the social exploitation of those who had few or no rights and fell victim to a system that was supposed to be to their benefit. Houston (2006:41–46) also puts forward a persuasive argument for a patronage system as the social structure for Israel and Judah, and even goes as far as to say ‘it is likely that everyone in such a society was either a patron or a client or both’ (2006:46). This approach helps us gain some understanding of the society of the day, although we should not oversimplify social conditions. What seems obvious from 5:26–29 is that society in Judah was marked by class differentiation, being divided into those who were privileged and those who were at the mercy of the privileged.

From the context there appears to be a reference to people in positions of power and influence, people with material means (the rich), people living lavishly (the fat and sleek), who are contrasted with the ordinary people, and are criticised for becoming prosperous through oppressing and illegally taking from the less prosperous (cf. Houston 2006:88); the latter are the people who were unable to defend themselves in legal disputes due to their social status, the vulnerable members of society. If the comparison with 5:1–6 is valid and is also taken into account, the wicked are those who have the ability to know the ‘ways of Yahweh’; they are knowledgeable people, people who know the covenant obligations, but do not adhere to them. They are probably educated, with knowledge of the covenant and its requirements, and have the capacity to lead others in society, but disregard their knowledge and relinquish their responsibilities for personal gain and greed.

The issue here appears to be class differentiation in Judean society. It is a matter of the powerful against the powerless, the rich against the poor and the orphaned. It is a case of some being in a position to see that justice prevails for all, especially for the needy and vulnerable, but instead working for their own selfish purposes.

Jeremiah 5:26–29 in this context provides reasons why Yahweh is dissatisfied and why he is about to punish them using the ‘foe from the north’. The view presented here is of a God who expects his people to act according to a certain code of conduct, which emanates from a covenant agreement concluded between Yahweh and a chosen people (Israel). Furthermore, the God of this agreement (covenant) punishes transgressions of the obligations that accompany this agreement (cf. Weiser 1969:49; also Oosterhoff 1990:211); transgressions of this kind are regarded as disloyalty towards him.

It is also clear from this short poem that proponents of the Yahweh covenant (those who worshipped Yahweh alone) had expectations of a society in which justice and fairness would prevail. This was seen as a reflection of commitment to the God of the covenant. The king and his administration were expected to see that the rights of the weak and the poor were safeguarded (this was a reflection of the patron–client relationship). The weak and the poor included widows, orphans and the impoverished, people without legal rights in society. In 5:28, two of these (the poor and the orphaned) are mentioned as victims of oppression and abuse.

The ideals of a theocratic society appear to have been promoted in the society of Jeremiah's day, and also in the society to which the collectors of the Jeremiah material belonged. Some scholars regard chapter 5, which includes the poem in Jeremiah 5:26–29, to be either words from Jeremiah from the latter part of King Josiah's reign (Thompson 1980:249) or words from this period applied to King Jehoiakim and his ministers (Jones 1992:127; also Dempsey 2007:xxiii). According to Huey (1993:80), it is not easy to date the entire section from 4:5–6:30. The content, however, speaks of a foe from the north threatening the people of Judah because of their rebelliousness. Carroll (1986:189) regards this passage to be a late piece, and concurs with Duhm (1901) that it is a post-exilic section dealing with why the people are being addressed as 'my people' and the division of the community into pious and godless people.

The Jeremiah material in 2:1–6:30 was probably collected during the exilic or post-exilic period, but the poetic fragments are probably from the period of Jeremiah's ministry, when the 'foe from the north' was a real threat. The material was probably collected to provide an explanation or even justification to a later community as to why the history of Judah unfolded as it did. Many researchers accept the notion of a Deuteronomistic editor or school involved in shaping the material in the book of Jeremiah. It seems neither possible nor even necessary to pinpoint a specific date. Houston (2006:82) expresses the view that this group most probably formed part of the Shaphan family circle, which was regularly involved in the events of the life of the prophet Jeremiah. My suggestion is somewhat different, as I have tried to illustrate with regard to 5:26–29: this passage seems to have originated in wisdom and cultic circles rather than in Deuteronomistic circles. This suggestion is supported by Frick's (1995:79–92) observation regarding the Deuteronomists' lack of interest in the plight of the poor.

Diamond (2003:555) echoes the opinion of many other scholars in suggesting that the 'foe from the north' was probably the Babylonian forces threatening Judah. Later editors and readers would have without any hesitation connected these references to the invasions of 597 and 586 B.C.E., when Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed. The poem in Jeremiah 5:26–29 may have originated from Jeremiah's early ministry, but the possibility of its being created

much later in poetic format from memory of that period should not be excluded. The content of this poetic section is of such a nature that it would appeal to communities throughout the ages, including our own.

E PROPHETS, POETRY AND ETHICS

It is one thing to analyse a text, and quite another to use the text to derive ethical guidelines. Scholars have suggested models for doing this, but not all of these are convincing. Anderson (2007:37–49) has written an article in which, from the vantage point of the marginalised, she challenges three approaches suggested by Janzen, Wright and Barton. To accommodate the marginalised, she suggests an ‘ethics of obligation’. Her argument incorporates two ideas put forward by Levinas, whom she sees (2007:47) as acknowledging ‘that the “Other” exists, and that ethics is conceived of “within a fundamental relationality with the Other”’ as well as believing that ‘ethics also involves addressing societal conditions beyond just one’s relationship to the Other, thereby “creating the necessity for talking about justice for other human beings and the world”’. This implies that an obligation to the ‘Other’ and to other human beings would shape our understanding of the biblical text and the way in which we would respond to people in our societies. This approach to ethics therefore requires a commitment to becoming involved.

The world of the Bible and our world are in many respects far removed from each other. This implies that many ethical questions we are confronted with will fall outside the scope of the Bible. Indeed, many of the issues that the people of Israel had to face are no longer relevant in our context. Rogerson (2001:37) is therefore correct in saying that the Old Testament cannot be used as precept when it comes to ethics, but that it makes a valuable contribution in terms of the examples it offers. We certainly can learn a great deal by studying examples of ethical issues in the Old Testament as they relate to their time and context. We can benefit by engaging in critical dialogue with the text of the Old Testament when resolving ethical problems in our various contexts (cf. Davies 2006:750). At times we are surprised by the rhetorical power of the biblical text to mould our ideas and change our convictions. Brueggemann (cf. 1998; also 2006:148) is a strong advocate of the rhetorical power of the text to engage us in the formation of ethical ideas and the identification of solutions that will serve the needs of our communities. The poetic nature of Jeremiah 5:26–29 is an excellent example of the rhetorical power of the text.

The passage under discussion unquestionably raises a number of ethical issues that require consideration. Unfortunately a detailed investigation falls outside the scope of this article, but it is important to identify these issues and stimulate discussion in other specially created forums. These issues include oppression or lack of freedom, the abuse of power, exploitation of the poor and

the orphaned and of a lack of justice and fairness towards people. In light of the exposition of Jeremiah 5:26–29, these issues relate to the following:

- The question of a theocratic society and ethical implications for society.
- The rights and protection of the poor and the weak.
- The role of leaders and the educated in working for the creation of a free and fair society.
- History as a reflection of God's interaction with believers in terms of punishment and blessing.
- The question of the ethical basis for appealing to people in our communities to take responsibility for our societal challenges, and whether the Old Testament can still serve as an appeal to the conscience of people in present-day society. The authority of the Bible over people and its appeal to people has diminished, yet we are inescapably confronted by the cry of the marginalised and the poor.
- The question of the abuse of power for personal gain is also an ethical issue that needs to be considered in all societies.
- Do we still have a prophetic task (ethical responsibility), and is prophetic poetry a suitable means of appeal to a social conscience?

It is clear that it is easier to raise issues than to suggest possible answers.

The ideal of a theocratic society is no longer tenable in our society, and we must ask whether such a society should be idealised in our day and age. Although it was an ideal for the Yahwistic proponents in the Israelite and Judean societies, it was never fully achieved (cf. Gerstenberger 2002 and Albertz 1994). We live in secularised and pluralistic societies. However, the precise nature of the role and responsibility of believers in modern-day societies remains a fair question. We are still faced with the reality of poverty in the world, particularly in Africa. In South Africa we live in a society marked by an unhealthy division in social classes, with the elite growing further and further away from the poor masses. We also have an unequal division of resources, with the rich growing richer and the poor growing poorer. It is much easier for prosperous people to acquire the best legal representation, something the poor and the orphaned cannot afford. The poor and weak (widows and orphans) continue to need legal protection, and the question remains what our responsibilities are in this regard.

The notion of history as a reflection of God's interaction with believers in terms of punishment and blessing was identified earlier. Surely we have learnt from life that cause and effect is too simplistic a concept. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament, in particular Ecclesiastes and Job as forms of protest literature, offers a different outlook on life. It is also true, however, that faith in God is based on a particular relationship with the God we choose to relate to. That relationship does not have to be a legalistic one, as demanded by the covenant of the Old Testament; instead, a relationship based on loyalty, love and

reverence can challenge people to live responsibly in relation to God, their neighbours and their societies. Examining our own reasons for entering into such a relationship may shed light on why we feel the obligation to take care of the needs of others in our community and society at large.

For many people the Bible has lost its authority and its appeal has diminished. Truth of the matter however is, we are inescapably confronted by the cry of the marginalised and the poor. We must consider on what ethical grounds an appeal can be made to people in our communities to take care of and be responsible for our societal challenges. We must also consider whether the Old Testament can continue to serve as an appeal to the conscience of people in our societies in the light of the diminishing authority of the Bible over people today. The discussion of the passage in Jeremiah suggests that the use of legal terminology may have links to practical wisdom. Wisdom literature comes from experience of daily living, observation and the need to live in harmony with the created order. The appeal made by the prophets to care for the needs of the poor and the orphaned, to protect their rights and to ensure that their cases are judged fairly, is therefore just as applicable to us as it was to Judean society. It is a call to adhere to the practical need for order in societies, and the practical establishment of that order. A sound legal system is therefore the responsibility of the leaders and the educated for the good of all. Jeremiah does not have anything against the fact that poverty and wealth both exist in societies, but he opposes and condemns the acquisition of wealth through oppressing people and depriving them of what is legally theirs (cf. Houston 2006:96). Jeremiah's condemnation of such abusive practices serves the purpose of calling societies to examine and deal with this issue, since it is a universal one. His condemnation is not to be regarded as prescriptive in any way, but as an appeal to a social conscience.

The question was also asked whether we still have a prophetic task and whether prophetic poetry is perhaps a means of appeal to a social conscience. I am particularly drawn to the potential of artistic expression as means of social expression and criticism. The powerful possibilities of appealing to people's imagination by poetic means of expression are endless. Huey (1993:80) comments that the language of the poetic passage we have been discussing (5:26–29) is 'dramatic, and the description of the impending judgment graphic'. We live in an age of the visual, and metaphors and other stylistic devices can therefore be useful tools in making people responsive to social issues and demands. Poetic licence allows word artists to express themselves in resourceful and influential ways. The prophetic literature of the Old Testament provides strong evidence in support of this mode of expression, and we can surely learn from and even imitate it.

F CONCLUSION

There is a vast difference between our world and the world of the text. To ask modern-day ethical questions with the Old Testament text in mind is a difficult task. Yet examining a text and the society or societies in which it was created is very enlightening, as in doing so we learn a great deal about the issues and questions the members of that society or societies had to struggle with. In engaging in dialogue with the biblical text, we are not only confronted with an ancient world, but in the process we come to face to face with our own world, our own ideas, and the challenges we ourselves have to face. We then realise that we have to take responsibility and search for our own solutions, and not hide behind the biblical text.

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