

## PROPHET VERSUS PROPHET IN THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH: IN SEARCH OF THE TRUE PROPHETS

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this article is to examine the collection of oracles against the prophets in Jeremiah 23:9–40, with special focus on verses 16–17 and 18–22. The questions to which answers will be sought are: Who were the prophets opposing Jeremiah, and why are they called false prophets? What were the reasons for the conflict, and what criteria are applied to judge the opponents? It seems that the collectors of the Jeremiah oracles had their own ideas about what constitutes a true prophet, and were using Jeremiah's oracles to serve their own purpose. We have learnt that the opposing prophets were part of the power structures in Jerusalem and significant contributors to the moral depravity in Judah. We are dealing with a Jerusalem-based prophetic group close to the power base in Jerusalem. They are blamed for transgressions similar to those committed by the kings of Judah, and were therefore as guilty as everyone else in violating the covenant stipulations. Their deception of the people, however, extended further in that they falsely prophesied under the pretence of speaking on behalf of Yahweh. The people of Judah and its leaders, as a consequence of Yahweh's punishment, would be exiled to Babylonia.*

### A INTRODUCTION

It was through my interest in the kings of the Israelite and Judean societies that I became aware of other leaders in the society of the day, such as the prophets and the priests, and was thus drawn to explore the present topic. From the time of the inauguration of the kings of Israel and Judah, prophets played a very prominent role in relation to them. Many prophets fulfilled the function of criticising or reprimanding the kings. In numerous instances the kings depended on the prophets for guidance and supernatural intervention. At times the kings surrounded themselves with prophets who would support them in their decisions to go into battle. In these instances the prophets formed part of the king's administration and acted as court prophets. Some prophets, however, did not have such strong affiliations to the reigning monarch, and insisted on having the freedom to follow among prophets themselves. One of the best-known prophets in this category is Jeremiah. Jeremiah, according to the text, kept his distance from the kings and treasured his freedom to speak according to direction from Yahweh. He acted as prophet in the last years of the existence of kingship in

the Southern Kingdom before the Babylonian exile, and his disagreements with the kings, in particular king Jehoiakim, were numerous.

According to the text, Jeremiah clashed repeatedly with leading figures in the society of his day. His most significant confrontations were with the kings in the final days of the monarchy in Judah. Many of these clashes are recorded in the cycle on the kings in Jeremiah 21:1–23:8. However, Jeremiah clashed not only with the kings, but also with other prophets and even with some priests: evidence of this is recorded in passages such as Jeremiah 20:1–6 (Jeremiah’s prophecy after the priest Pashhur put him in a block) and Jeremiah 27–28 (a case of two prophets - Jeremiah and Hananiah – in conflict with one another). These passages appear to indicate that Jeremiah was at odds with both the civil and religious leaders of the time (cf. Perdue 2007:274).

It is clear from the book of Jeremiah that all of these leaders wanted the people in their societies to follow them as upholders of the truth. However, Jeremiah is presented by the tradition that collected and compiled the content of the book of Jeremiah as the person to whom Yahweh entrusted the truth. This truth was disputed by most of the leaders of the society of the day, who were uncomfortable with Jeremiah’s oracles of doom; they did their best to influence the ordinary people, and dismissed Jeremiah’s message of a bleak future. Both these leaders and Jeremiah claimed to have special knowledge conferred by Yahweh.

My interest is not simply in the competing views of the prophets and Jeremiah, but also in what Brueggemann<sup>1</sup> terms “the authority that lies behind and justifies those competing announcements.” In this article I intend to examine the collection of oracles against the prophets in Jeremiah 23:9–40, with special focus on vv. 23:16–17 and vv. 18–22. The questions to which answers will be sought are: Who were the prophets opposing Jeremiah, and why are they called false prophets? What were the reasons for the conflict, and what criteria are applied to judge the opponents? I suspect that the collectors of the Jeremiah oracles had their own ideas about what constitutes a true prophet, and were using Jeremiah’s oracles to serve their own purpose.

It is obvious that Jeremiah 23:9–40 is a collection of oracles structured and shaped by tradition. It would therefore be logical to examine the purpose served by this text collection dealing with the prophets, for surely there is purpose in the sequence and combination of these texts, and the text should therefore be studied with this in mind. However, a further aspect of the text is also of interest. The people and events described in the text clearly pre-date the collection by many years; they are historically situated and reflect a reality of that time in history. Nevertheless, this so-called textual reflection of a period in

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, W. *A Commentary on Jeremiah. Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), Page 212.

history and people of that time is coloured by the views, convictions and ideologies of the author. Texts reflect views on reality and not reality itself; we therefore have to read text consciously with that in mind, and we must also bear in mind the baggage we bear with us in the reading process (cf. Carroll 1986:33-37; Domeris 1999:244–248). There are therefore two levels on which this text selection will be viewed. There are arguments both for and against the viability or even the possibility of such an approach, but it nevertheless appears to be a worthwhile endeavour.

## **B WORDS AGAINST THE PROPHETS**

The book of Jeremiah is a collection of a variety of material attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. Besides the broad division of the book into chapters 1–25, 26–45 and 46–52, many other smaller groupings of texts are possible. Two such collections of prophetic oracles are the cycle of oracles against the kings in Jeremiah 21:1–23:8, followed by 23:9–40, a collection of prophetic words against the so-called false prophets (cf. Brueggemann 1998:208). It is in this last collection of prophetic oracles that we are interested here. The section starting at 23:9 is introduced by means of a heading reading לְנִבְאִים. It is followed later in the collection by another indication (cf. v. 15) that this is a collection of words from Yahweh against prophets (כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת עַל־הַנְּבִאִים (לְנִבְּיָן)).

However, this section that clearly deals with Jeremiah's dissatisfaction with opposing prophets, is not the only passage highlighting the conflict between him and other prophets. Jeremiah's difference of opinion with other prophets is also evident in chapters 14:11–16; 20:1–6 and 27–29. Due to the limited scope of this article, however, the discussion will not focus on these chapters. In the context of the present article, the two passages Jeremiah 23:16–17 and 18–22 will hopefully contribute to a more comprehensive reflection of Jeremiah's encounters with other prophets. These two passages form part of the collection in 23:9–40, and therefore the immediate context will be taken into account.

## **C STRUCTURE AND CONTEXT OF JEREMIAH 23:9–40**

Jeremiah 23:9–40 forms part of the literary unit 21:1–24:10. This unit announces the final days of the kingship in Judah and consists of four units, namely 21:1–10; 21:11–23:8; 23:9–40 and 24:1–10 (cf. Stulman 2005:204).

Jeremiah 21:1–24:10 consists of a collection of utterances gathered over a period of time. In all likelihood the prophet's pronouncements about the kings and prophets were initially a series of disconnected sayings that were later elucidated and explained by means of comments in prose. This collection was by no means composed and arranged haphazardly: it was deliberately planned so as to highlight certain sentiments of the compilers, to explain situations and

achieve didactic purposes (Wessels 2004:470–483; Stulman 1995:72; 1998:51; Collins 1993:112). A recent study by Job (2006) deals with the kingship cycle in the Book of Jeremiah (Jr 21:1–24:10). Like previous studies of Jeremiah, it attempts a graphically portrayable reconstruction of the redactional history of the book. Job focuses on the kingship cycle in particular, and offers in general terms a fairly convincing portrayal (cf. Job 2006:36–37). The cycle as a whole is the product of redactional involvement in the shaping of the Jeremiah tradition (cf. Job 2006:51–52; also Sweeney 2007:311, 320).

As a collection on oracles about the kings in the final days of kingship in Judah, the cycle introduced at 21:1–10 and concluded in 24:1–10 makes sense in terms of the focus on Zedekiah as the final disappointment as king of Judah. The question, however, is why 23:9–40, a section concerning the prophets, is included in this literary unit. A possible logical explanation is that kings and prophets are interconnected throughout the existence of the monarchy in Judah (Stulman 2005:222). The monarchy reached its dismal end due to the misguided truth conveyed to the kings by some prophets and the refusal of the kings to really hear what Yahweh had to say by mouth of the “true” prophet.

The section on the prophets in 23:9–40 consists of six poetic and prose sections, namely 23:9b–12; 13–15; 16–17; 18–22; 23–32 and 33–40.

The first passage commences with an emotional statement by Jeremiah regarding how Yahweh’s holy words affect him in person. He trembles to his very bones, and his body reacts like that of a person who is drunk; he is overwhelmed by Yahweh’s words. In the subsequent verses he describes the ethical demise in the land and the resulting disastrous consequences for the physical condition of the land and nature. Largely responsible for this disaster were the prophets, who through their moral depravity and abuse of power had left the righteous path. To punish them, Yahweh will bring calamity.

The second pericope, consisting of 23:13–15, is another indictment (cf. Fretheim 2002:331). It explicitly states the transgressions of the prophets in Jerusalem: they are adulterers who lie and cheat, and assist people to do wrong, as a result of which they are drifting away from Yahweh. A comparison is drawn between the people in Jerusalem and the adulterous inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19). This terrible state of affairs will cause the prophets to have experiences such as eating bitter food and drinking poisoned water. The prophets of Jerusalem are blamed for the fact that their ungodliness had contaminated all of Judah.

This section is followed by the two passages forming the subject of this article. These verses are poetic in style. Jeremiah 23:16–17 is a prophetic admonition to the people not to pay attention to these prophets, who are false and no real messengers of Yahweh. Following the false prophets will draw down

Yahweh's anger, which will be like a hurricane, for He has not commissioned them to be his prophets (Jer 23:18–22).

The fifth passage in prose consists of Jer 23:23–32 (Fretheim 2002:331). In the first person singular, Yahweh declares his presence and inescapable eye on everyone. He then explains his dissatisfaction with the false prophets, who act in their own capacity and pretend to have dreams. These prophets are criticised for not acting for the benefit of the people of Yahweh; their actions are nothing but lies and pretence.

The final passage in 23:33–40 is a statement by Yahweh to the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is instructed to convey a judgement oracle to the people, priests and prophets. Yahweh will not answer them – in fact, He will ignore them as though they do not exist. He will instead humiliate them, and they will experience perpetual disgrace and shame, which no one will ever forget.

The passage in Jer 23:9–40 contributes to the heightening tension implicit in the message that the end is near for the monarchy and that the leadership in Judah is to blame for this. Both kings and prophets have failed. The entire leadership structure in Judah, consisting of the kings, prophets and priests, has failed the people of Judah and Jerusalem; furthermore, they have failed Yahweh, their God.

## D EXPOSITION OF JEREMIAH 23:16–22

Jeremiah 23:16–22<sup>2</sup> seems to consist of two main sections, vv. 16–17 and vv. 18–22 (Lundbom 2004:189–193). The entire passage is poetic in style (Thompson 1980:496; Craigie, Kelly & Drinkard 1991:342). The first of these passages, vv. 16–17, is introduced by the messenger formula (כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת),<sup>3</sup> an indication that a new section commences with this verse. The messenger formula is then followed by a command (אֲלֵה־תִּשְׁמְעוּ)<sup>4</sup> jussive form of the verb)

<sup>2</sup> This section is regarded as a highly edited unit, consisting, according to R. P. Carroll, *Jeremiah. A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1986:459), of a Deuteronomistically shaped statement in v. 17–18, a floating oracle in v. 19–20 and a wisdom saying about the council of Yahweh in v. 18. H-J. Hermisson, “Kriterien >>wahrer<< und >>falsher<< Prophetie im Alten Testament. Zur Auslegung von Jeremia 23,16–22 und Jeremia 28,8–9,” *ZThK* 92/2 (1995): 125–130, argues for several Deuteronomistic editorial traces in the text. It is true that the oracles in 23:9–40 were collected and shaped due to editorial involvement, but the traces are too vague for any attribution to specific editors such as the Deuteronomistic editors (cf. W. Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 1–25* (WMANT 41. Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 250–252.

<sup>3</sup> Jer 6:6, 9; 7:3, 21; 9:6, 14, 16; 11:22; 16:9; 19:3, 11, 15; 23:15; 25:8, 27, 32; 26:18; 27:4, 19, 21; 28:2, 14; 29:4, 8, 17, 21, 25; 31:23; 32:14; 33:12; 35:13, 18; 39:16; 42:15, 18; 43:10; 44:2, 11, 25; 48:1; 49:7, 35; 50:18, 33; 51:33, 58.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Kgs 18:31; Isa 36:16; Jer 23:16; 27:9, 16f.

from Yahweh not to listen to the words of the prophets, those who act as prophets to the people. The reason given for this is that these so-called prophets deceived the people (הבל<sup>5</sup> verb *Hiphil* participle masculine plural absolute) by speaking of visions originating in their own minds (literally ‘from their own hearts’ לִבָּם לְהִזְיוֹן).<sup>6</sup> These visions did not come from the mouth of Yahweh (יְהוָה) (לֹא מִפִּי).<sup>7</sup>

Verse 17 continues the theme of the falseness of these prophets. They deliver optimistic oracles to people who act disrespectfully<sup>8</sup> towards Yahweh (לְ participle preposition נֹאֵ verb *Piel* participle masculine plural construct suffix first person common singular), yet nevertheless claim that the oracles come from Yahweh. According to the prophets, Yahweh promises peace to these people. The keyword in the promise is שָׁלוֹם. These prophets assure those who continue in the stubbornness of their hearts<sup>9</sup> that no calamity will befall them. In reality we have two parallel lines here:

- For those who *act disrespectfully* towards Yahweh ... *peace* be amongst them
- For those who *continue with stubborn hearts* ... *no calamity* over them

Through this parallelism, the author of Jeremiah emphasises the discrepancy between the two components in each of these sentences.

Jeremiah 23:18 is regarded by commentators as the first verse of the new section 23:18–22 (cf. Stulman 2005:215–217). Verse 18, however, seems to be a stand-alone verse asking particular questions not directed to anyone specific. The link between verse 18 and the next verses is made by means of the “council” motif (cf. v. 18 and 22). Lundbom (2004:193) regards verses 18 and 21–22 as a “self-standing” poem, an indictment speech. Another self-standing poem (v. 19–20), a judgement oracle, was inserted between verses 18 and 21–22. The idea of a council seems to indicate “the circle of those who are privy to the deep purposes of Yahweh and are in his confidence” (Thompson

<sup>5</sup> The basic form of the root means “to cause to become empty, vain,” referring to the “empty” words these prophets deliver to the people (Craigie, P. C, Kelly, P. H. & Drinkard, J. F. Jr, *Jeremiah 1–25* [Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991], 343).

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah only twice refers to “visions” with regard to prophets, and in both instances the connotation is negative (cf. Jer 14:14; 23:16, 17; cf. G. Auld 1996:31).

<sup>7</sup> The phrase “from the mouth of Yahweh” appears only in 2 Chr 36:12 and Jer 23:16 – in both instances, there is a reference to Jeremiah as true prophet.

<sup>8</sup> In a text critical note in BHS the Septuagint reads “to those who despise the word of Yahweh”. It however seems best to follow the MT (cf. J. de Waard, *A Handbook on Jeremiah* [Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2003], 101-102; also J. R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21–36* [New York: Doubleday, 2004], 191).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Deut 29:18; Jer 7:24; 13:10; 23:17.

1980:497).<sup>10</sup> Verse 18 is introduced by כִּי, a causal clause, which therefore links the verse to the visionary claims in the previous verse. This is followed by verbs emphasising the use of all the senses necessary to acquire the word of Yahweh. These verbs are “see” (רָאָה), and “hear” (שָׁמַע) the word (דְּבָרֵי) of Yahweh. It is furthermore followed by the verbs “pay attention” and “listen”- whoever paid attention to (בִּי-הִקְשִׁיב) and listened to (שָׁמַע) his word (דְּבָרֵי). In the Masoretic text a setuma (ס) stands at the end of verse 18.

The next two verses, vv. 19–20, belong together. Verse 19<sup>11</sup> is introduced by הִנֵּה (particle interjection), calling for attention to what is about to follow. Attention is focussed on the anger of Yahweh, which will come forth like a gale (סַעֲרַת יְהוָה), a whirling hurricane that will burst upon the heads of the wicked (רָשָׁעִים). In verse 20<sup>12</sup> the gale of Yahweh in verse 18 is qualified as referring to his anger (Schreiner 1981:140). His anger will not subside until he has done (“executed” – עָשָׂה) and accomplished what he intended or planned to do (literally “the deliberation of his heart”). The sentence ends with an affirmation that ultimately (literally “in the end” – אַחֲרַיִת) a time will come (הַיָּמִים) when they will clearly understand what has happened.<sup>13</sup> These two verses were most probably floating verses that might have had another context (cf. Jer 30:23–24, a duplicate of these two verses) or contexts before being placed in their current location. As McKane (1986:579) has indicated, scholars differ as to whether these two verses in fact belong here (Rudolph 1968:151–152), or whether they fit better in the context of Jer 30:23–24 (Duhm 1903:186) or neither of the two (Thiel 1973:251). Be that as it may, Jer 23:9-40 does provide a context for these verses in their current location: the wicked are the false prophets and those whom they have misled by faking the truth. Yahweh’s judgement will descend upon them like a mighty storm of fierce and swirling winds.

In the next two verses (23:21–22), Yahweh is again speaking in the first person singular about the false prophets acting as his messengers. According to

<sup>10</sup> It seems that the idea of the ‘divine council’ is associated with the Southern prophets (cf. H. Lalleman-de Winkel, *Jeremiah in Prophetic Tradition. An Examination of the Book of Jeremiah in the Light of Israel’s Prophetic Tradition* [Leuven: Peeters, 2000], 74-75).

<sup>11</sup> This entire sentence is repeated in Jer 30:23.

<sup>12</sup> This entire sentence is repeated in Jer 30:24.

<sup>13</sup> There seems to be an eschatological tendency in the following verses: Deut 4:30; 31:29; Isa 2:2; Jer 30:24; 48:47; 49:39; Ezek 38:16; Dan 10:14; Hos 3:5; Mic 4:1. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 460–461, is correct in not regarding Jer 23:20 as eschatological, but instead as referring to an event in the near future that will affect the existence of the Judeans; cf. also J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 498 and F. B. Jr. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1993), 216, who are of the opinion that in the context it simply means “afterwards.”

v. 21, Yahweh says he did not send (לֹא־שָׁלַחְתִּי) these prophets, but that they ran (וְהֵם רָצוּ). Furthermore, he did not speak to them (לֹא־דַבַּרְתִּי), yet they prophesied (וְהֵם נִבְּאוּ). Verse 21 consists of two similarly structured lines. Two negatives (Yahweh did not send them and did not speak to them) are followed by two adversative sentences (introduced by וְ) indicating that the opposite action took place (they ran and they prophesied).

Verse 22 commences with two conditional particles, וְ and אִם, in reaction to what was said in the previous verses. Like verse 18, verse 22 refers to standing in Yahweh's council (עֲמֹד בְּסוּד), therefore creating the unity of the vv. 18–22.<sup>14</sup> It is further strengthened through the repetition of the verb “to hear” and the noun “word” (Yahweh's word). The second line of verse 22 (then) responds to the first line (if) by spelling out the consequences of heeding Yahweh's word: a turn away from (מִן), their evil way and from (מִן), the evil of their doings (וּמִרַע מַעֲלֵיהֶם).<sup>15</sup> The section is closed by a setuma (ס) at the end of verse 22.

It is clear from the above analysis of vv. 16–22 that several verbs and nouns are repeated. There are frequent references to “prophets” and the verb “prophesy,” to the noun “word,” the verbs “to hear,” “to see,” “to listen” and “to speak,” and the noun “evil.” Fretheim (2002:331) is correct in his observation that “no progression of thought is evident across the entire section”. However, although the section does not form a structurally close-knit unit, there are sufficient stylistic devices created by the editors to link these verses together. Furthermore, as far as content is concerned, there are definite links created by the repetition of particular verbs and nouns to strengthen the reading of these verses together. This will be further illustrated when the meaning of these verses is discussed.

## E PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

From the beginning of Jer 23:9–40, commencing with the heading: “With regard to the prophets,” it is clear that the passage deals with the issue of the true word of Yahweh. In answer to the question of who received the true word of Yahweh and who should convey it to his people, it is obvious that Jeremiah is the one. Verse 9 leaves the reader in no doubt of this when the prophet describes the powerful physical effect the holy words of Yahweh have on him. The power of Yahweh's word is emphasised in v. 29, where it is described as

<sup>14</sup> The idea of the council of Yahweh should most probably be understood metaphorically, therefore as a literary device (cf. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 462). McKane, *Jeremiah*, 581, supports this meaning of “council”; cf. Ps 111:1; Gen 49:6; Ezek 13:9 and Ps 89:8.

<sup>15</sup> All of the following references are to “evil deeds” that anger Yahweh: cf. Ps 28:4; Jer 11:18; 21:12; 23:22; 26:3; Hos 5:4; 7:2; 9:15; Mic 3:4; 7:13.



being “like a fire” and like a “hammer” able to break rocks. The concept “the word of Yahweh” or “his word” runs like a thread throughout the passage, providing a clear indication of its focus (cf. vv. 9, 17, 18 (2x), 22, 28 (2x), 29, 30, 36 (2x) and 38).<sup>16</sup>

What follows from Jer 23:10 is first a general description of the moral decay of the people, and the resulting curse on the land. The blame is then firmly placed first on the prophets and then the prophets and the priests. It is the religious leaders of Judah who are under fire. The general term used in 23:9-40 to convey the transgressions is a variation on the concept “evil things” (רָעוּת).<sup>17</sup> More specific transgressions mentioned are the misuse of power (v. 10), ungodliness (v. 11), and adultery, lies and deceit (v. 14). The term “lies” (שָׁקֶר) is repeated in verses 14, 25, 26 and 32 to indicate that some prophets speak falsely in Yahweh’s name or on his behalf.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear from the observations above that Jeremiah is regarded as the true messenger of the word of Yahweh.<sup>19</sup> Some of the other prophets do not qualify to be messengers, because they live immoral lives and are unfaithful to Yahweh. A direct connection is therefore made between a prophet as messenger of Yahweh and the moral quality of that prophet’s behaviour. The prophets, according to Jeremiah, are part of the problem of Judah’s unfaithfulness and the dire state of the leadership in Judah. It is in particular the prophets of Jerusalem who are labelled as ungodly and, as v. 15 states, responsible for the spread of ungodliness throughout the country. This will result in Yahweh’s punishing them, no longer listening to them (ignoring them (v. 38) and not remembering them (v. 39), and will cause them to experience everlasting disgrace and shame (v. 40).

In the ensuing discussion of vv. 16–22, these observations will form the backdrop against which these verses will be understood and explained.

## 1 Jeremiah 23:16–17

These two verses are an admonition from Yahweh to the people of Judah not to listen to the prophets who act in their society. From the preceding passage it is clear that the prophets in Jerusalem are the designated group that should not be

<sup>16</sup> L. Stulman, *Jeremiah*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 27–29, discusses the importance of the concept “word of Yahweh.” He mentions that the concept is used in every chapter of Jeremiah except 41 and 52, and that it occurs more than 90 times in the book of Jeremiah.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. 23:10, 11, 12, 14, 17, 22 and 30.

<sup>18</sup> According to Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 456, שָׁקֶר may refer to baalistic tendencies or false beliefs, but its use in a specific context should determine its precise meaning.

<sup>19</sup> One has to keep in mind that this view of Jeremiah is the view of the editors or the collectors of the Jeremiah oracles (cf. also Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 461).

trusted. The reason given is that they deceive the people. The deception is qualified by stipulating that prophets should speak only what comes from the mouth of Yahweh. Anything prophets speak coming from their own minds (literally “hearts”) is regarded as deception. In verse 16 visions which these prophets claim to have had and then conveyed to the people are regarded as self-creations and therefore fictitious.

Verse 17 is an important verse which needs close attention. The so-called false prophets have a clientele described as those who “despise Yahweh” or, if the Septuagint is followed, those who “despise the word of Yahweh.” These “hearers” of the prophecies are further characterised as “stubborn people,” people following their own minds. To them the message of Yahweh, according to these prophets, is one of peace (שָׁלוֹם) and assurance that no calamity will befall them (cf. Collins 2004:340). The question would be: why are these prophets regarded as false prophets, prophets not to be listened to? The answer lies in the fact that Jeremiah prophesied doom to the kings, leaders and people of Judah in these latter days of the existence of the monarchy in Jerusalem. It is quite clear from the book of Jeremiah that the country and the leadership in particular were disloyal to Yahweh and that they had violated the covenant stipulations. The cycle on the kings preceding Jer 23:9–40 stated unequivocally that Yahweh had reached the end of his patience with the leadership: the kingship had failed him, and so also the prophets of Judah. Verse 17 alludes to the underlying Royal-Zion ideology, with its false sense of security and peace.

## 2 Jeremiah 23:18–22

There is not a natural flow from v. 17 to v. 18. Verse 18 consists of several questions which, as they appear in the MT, do not seem to be directed at any particular party. However, if the suggestion in the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) text critical note 18a is followed (“from them” as in verse 22), then the link is more obvious. Who of them, meaning the prophets referred to in verse 17, stood in the council of Yahweh? If so regarded, then the implication of these questions is that none of these prophets stood in the council of Yahweh or have seen and heard his word. Furthermore, none of them have given heed to his word or proclaimed it.<sup>20</sup>

The next two verses, 23:19–20, are similar to Jeremiah 30:23–24. It is difficult to determine the original context of these two verses, but in its current context they serve to express Yahweh’s reaction to the pretence and falseness of the prophets misleading his people. The הִנֵּה has the function of demanding attention to Yahweh’s response to the stated deceit. Yahweh will not tolerate

<sup>20</sup> BHS text critical note 18e suggests that the *Hif'il* form of the verb שָׁמַע should be followed, as is the case in verse 22. Content wise, this suggestion makes sense, although Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 197, argues that the emphasis is on “hearing” and not “preaching.”

this falseness, and his rage will cause the “wicked,” as they are described, to experience something similar to the destructive effect of a hurricane on people and their environment.<sup>21</sup> In all fairness one should state that these prophets did not deliberately act falsely or deceitfully – this is probably the judgement of the author of the text. In their own minds they regarded what they had to say as being as true as any oracle emanating from a prophet claiming to speak on Yahweh’s behalf. McKane (1986:578) says of them, “They are not guilty of a calculated deceit, but they are deluded, for they equate the vividness and strength of their own insights and visions with the word of Yahweh.”

Verse 20 defines this rage as the wrath of Yahweh. Yahweh, according to this verse, has a specific intention with the expression of his wrath and wants to accomplish something by it. He will therefore continue to show his wrath until he has achieved what he had set out to do. This probably refers to the punishment of his people by allowing their Babylonian enemy to take them into exile (cf. McKane 1986:582). It includes the invasion of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple and the fall of the Judean kingship. The sentence “In the latter days you will understand it clearly” is a futuristic, not eschatological expression (cf. Rudolph 1968:153; Weiser 1969: 206; Jones 1992:310), meaning in this context that one day when the people experience something related to Yahweh’s anger, they will realise that this was what he was referring to. If one is to follow Weiser (1969: 206), then verse 20 is not aimed at the *נְבִיאֵי יְהוָה* prophets, but the people of Judah, who could not discern whom to believe, the *נְבִיאֵי יְהוָה* prophets or those proclaiming the word of Yahweh. However, it is not necessary to exclude either of the two parties. At the moment everything seems vague and unrealistic, but the day of understanding will come for both these prophets and the people of Judah.

The next two verses, 21 and 22, belong together. It is difficult to indicate how these two verses relate structurally to the previous verses. The impression one gains is that an editor or editors collected relevant material and somehow linked the different verse units to deal with the issue of false prophecy. Content wise, however, it is not too difficult to relate the various text units to one another, since the issue of true and false prophecy is being discussed.

What is characteristic of these two verses (21 and 22) is Yahweh’s direct speech (first person singular). Verse 21 highlights two important things required of true prophets. First, their commission is from Yahweh: he sends them. Second, a prophet can speak only if Yahweh has spoken to such a person. The mission and the content of the message have to come from one source and one source alone, namely Yahweh. This verse makes it emphatically clear that

<sup>21</sup> The storm imagery is to be found in Jer 4:11–12; 13:24; 18:17 and 25:32. Fretheim (2002:337) expresses the view that this imagery comes from the theophanies, where God is portrayed as a warrior who acts against the wicked enemies.

these so-called false prophets acted on their own authority. Despite receiving no commission, they pretended to be on a mission from Yahweh. Although he did not give them a message to proclaim, they prophesied as though they were real prophets. This attitude bespeaks arrogance, and explains the wrath of Yahweh.

Verse 22 effectively exposes these prophets as false prophets. In this verse the gradual accumulation of arguments against these prophets is presented in order to expose their falseness. If they had been in Yahweh's council (which clearly they were not), and if they had conveyed his words to his people (they clearly had not received these words from Yahweh), this would have been reflected in the actions of the people. They would have abandoned their evil ways and would have ceased doing evil deeds, but this was not the case. The false prophets conveyed a false message to Yahweh's people, and in that sense contributed to their downfall and ensuing misery.

To summarise the ideas emanating from these verses, the following is clear: True prophets receive a commission from Yahweh. He calls them and sends them to his people with a message to proclaim. They receive the message by coming into his council, where they receive the message by hearing, seeing and grasping Yahweh's words to his people. Own ideas, own visions and own messages are regarded as deceit and not from Yahweh. Such actions and pretence cause Yahweh's people to stray from him. This resulted in disloyalty and disobedience, bringing down the wrath of Yahweh. Positively stated, true prophets with a real mission and a message received from Yahweh to proclaim will cause his people to mend their ways and to return to him.

There is a strong resemblance between Jer 23:16–22 and Jer 14:13–16.<sup>22</sup> In the latter passage reference is made to prophets who convey a message of salvation and prosperity to the people of Judah. In 14:13, as in 23:17, they promise the people peace (שָׁלוֹם). Jeremiah in 14:14 announces that Yahweh has told him that these prophets act falsely in his name. He did not send (cf. Jr 14:14; 23:21, 32; 27:15; 29:9) or commission them; he did not even speak to them. The visions they claim to have had and speak about are their own creations and nothing less than deceit. This is similar to what 23:16 has to say about these false prophets. As was stated in 23:19 and 20, Yahweh will not tolerate this pretence and falseness. In more explicit terms than in Jer 23:20, the verdict in Jer 14:15–16 concerning these prophets and the people who followed them is harsh: they will die as a result of wars and famine, and there will be no one to bury them.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. also Deut 18:15–20 on the question of true prophecy. The emphasis here is on speaking in Yahweh's name and on his command. Furthermore, a true prophet's words will come to pass. There is therefore some resemblance with between Jer 23:9–40 and Deut 18:15–22.

The idea of what a true prophet is according to 14:13–16 is similar to what is stated in 23:9–40. The same requirements are stated in Jer 27:14–15, with the exception that the notion of the exile as a result of the deceit is made explicit.<sup>23</sup> Yahweh commissions a person to be a prophet and sends that person with a message to his people. A prophet can only convey what Yahweh has revealed in a vision or given as words to the prophet. In the context of Jeremiah's society, that message cannot be one of salvation or prosperity, but only doom and destruction.<sup>24</sup>

## **F FUNCTION OF JEREMIAH 23:9–40 WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON 23:16–22**

Jeremiah 21–24, with its two cycles on the Judean kings and the prophets, aims to focus on the failed leadership in Judah. This failure resulted in the Babylonian exile. The kings in general failed to exercise justice and righteousness, which resulted in a society lacking moral and ethical fibre. The lack of justice implied that the covenant with Yahweh their God was neglected, and the relationship it safeguarded damaged. The political and civil leadership have failed, but according to Jer 23:9–40, the religious leadership has likewise failed (cf. Diamond 2003:575). Priests and prophets were branded as ungodly people. Verses 9–40 in particular has shown the false pretence under which some prophets operated. All of this contributed to the downfall of the monarchy, the destruction of the temple and the Babylonian exile (cf. Stulman 2005:206).

The view has been raised by Domeris (1999:248–259), closely following Carroll (1986), that Jeremiah 23:9–40, in addition to other texts from the book,<sup>25</sup> should be viewed as an endeavour to legitimise Jeremiah's authority as prophet. The argument put forward is that the true authority lies with Yahweh, who reveals his word to Jeremiah. I concur with this in terms of what the tradition needed Jeremiah to be, but the mere fact that Jeremiah, according to the text, claims to be the true representative of Yahweh is not enough. The initial uttering and writing down of the individual oracles that we now have as a collection had nothing to do with legitimising the prophet. These were oracles from a concerned person speaking from the conviction that Yahweh demanded

<sup>23</sup> Chapters 27–29 are all about true and false prophecy. Whereas the passages 14:13–16 and 23:9–40 speak in general terms about true and false prophecy, chapters 27–29 reveal the conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah and the matter of the Babylonian exile as a reality for the leadership and people of Judah (cf. J. J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004], 341).

<sup>24</sup> Hermisson, "Kriterien," 126, says of the proclamation of salvation (peace in 23:17) "Es ging ja bei Jeremia wahrlich nicht um die Zusage neuen Heils nach dem Gericht und auch nicht um die Gnadenzusage an bussfertige Sunder, sondern um die Heilsverkündigung an die, die in ihrer Sunde verharren ... un insofern ware damit zwar kein Generalschlussel, aber doch ein Mass gewonne."

<sup>25</sup> Jer 1:4–19; 14:10–16; 16:1–9 and 20:7–13.

him to do so. They were unpopular oracles from an unattached and unpopular individual with a divine calling and mission, as he is presented in the book of Jeremiah. His legitimacy lies not in his claim, but in Yahweh's vindicating his message of doom and destruction. Claiming "I am the true prophet of Yahweh because I speak only what He ordered me to do, and you have no such sanction," serves no purpose, because the other prophets did exactly the same. Verse 20 states in this regard, "In the latter days you will understand it clearly," meaning that only once disaster in terms of the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple and the Babylonian exile had struck Judah, would the people come to realise that Jeremiah was the true prophet. The matter of legitimation really comes into play only when the Jeremiah supporters in the tradition needed him for polemical purposes in their own time and context. The issue when Jeremiah first uttered these oracles was not his legitimation as prophet, but his message. It was important that people should heed the message of doom and judgement coming from Yahweh. Domeris (2002) and Carroll (1986) create the impression that the focus of Jer 23:9–40 is the legitimation of the person Jeremiah, but the point is that, together with the kings, the prophets are to be blamed for Judah's downfall and the exile, because they refused to listen to Jeremiah's judgement message. False prophets mislead people who want to hear the "voice of Yahweh." The result is disobedience and unfaithfulness to Yahweh, resulting in his wrath and the punishment he metes out.

In the current collection of the Jeremiah oracles, in order to explain that a failed civil and religious leadership caused the exile, it is necessary that the prophet Jeremiah be regarded as a legitimate prophet. This is also necessary for the purpose of dealing with false prophecy and its destructive consequences.

It is clear from the analysis of both these cycles on the leaders that a variety of oracles on kings and prophets were collected at some stage in history and then grouped together to form these literary collections.<sup>26</sup> These probably served to explain the exile as the result of failed civil and religious leadership (cf. Carroll 1986:404).

Besides the explanation offered above for a failed leadership in Judah, another aspect to consider would be a context in which the subject of true and false prophets and prophecy were in contention or disputed. A reading of 2 Chronicles 36:12 reveals that in the circles from which the Chronistic History originated, the prophet Jeremiah was highly regarded as a true prophet. The following verses in 2 Chronicles refer to the prophet Jeremiah:

- <sup>NRS</sup> **2 Chronicles 35:25** Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah, and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a custom in Israel; they are recorded in the Laments.

<sup>26</sup> T. E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 331, refers to this collection of oracles on the prophets as a "kind of collage".

- <sup>NRS</sup> **2 Chronicles 36:12** He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. He did not humble himself before the prophet Jeremiah who spoke from the mouth of the LORD.
- <sup>NRS</sup> **2 Chronicles 36:21** to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years.
- <sup>NRS</sup> **2 Chronicles 36:22** In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfilment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict:

Three of the four verses quoted here emphasise that Jeremiah was a true prophet and that the word he spoke came from the “mouth of Yahweh.” It is important to note not only that Jeremiah spoke words that Yahweh gave him, but also that what he prophesied came to pass.

What was the historical context in which the chronicler operated, and can that perhaps be the circle responsible for collecting and preserving the Jeremiah oracles?

## G CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the introduction to this article, the following questions were raised: Who were the prophets opposing Jeremiah and why are they called false prophets? What were the underlying reasons for the conflict and what criteria are applied to judge the opponents? A consideration of Jer 23:9–40 revealed certain clues that might assist in the inquiry and lead to possible answers to these questions.

I have already mentioned that v. 9 seems to be a key verse, with the focus on the word of Yahweh and Jeremiah’s experience of it. Jeremiah is presented as the true prophet whose entire life is affected by Yahweh’s word (cf. also Jer 20:9; 23:29). As Stulman (2005:216) observes, “This emotional involvement not only reveals aspects of the prophetic psychology, but also, more important, validates the divine authority of Jeremiah’s prophecy.” Although Carroll (1986:452) holds the view that the speaker cannot be identified, he agrees that it provides “a sense of Yahweh’s awful majesty shaking the speaker.” The prophet Jeremiah is presented here in opposition to other prophets active in his time and society.

There are several indications in Jer 23:9–40 that the opposing prophets are the prophets of Jerusalem (cf. vv. 14, 15). Verse 11 reinforces this by referring to the house of Yahweh, the temple, as one of the places where these prophets practised their wickedness. What is further of importance is that these prophets were associated with might or power (גְּבוּרָה). Clearly, the way in which they exercised their power was wrong and associated with evil (רָעָה).

Further substantiating the idea that these prophets were associated with power, v. 15 reports that their influence went out from Jerusalem and spread throughout the land. Unfortunately, theirs was a negative influence, and their ungodliness contaminated the whole land. It therefore does not seem unreasonable to assume that these prophets were part of the power structures in Jerusalem, where the king and the temple were situated. These prophets are regarded as evil people, who have failed to comply with Yahweh's covenantal stipulations, and their ways and deeds are described as "evil doings" (וּמַרְעַ מַעַלְלֵיהֶם). In Jer 21:12, which focus on the kings and the monarchy, the reference to "evil" have the connotation of a lack of justice and righteousness. This was one of the main reasons why the leadership in Jerusalem was considered a failure. The prophets of Jerusalem were part of this failed leadership. Interestingly, v. 14 states clearly that these prophets "strengthened the hands of the evildoers." They are labelled adulterers and people who "walk in lies" – dishonest people. This kind of language levelled at the opposing prophets is "antilanguage," and is a product of antisocietal views expressed (cf. Domeris 2002:251–256).

What we have learnt so far is that these prophets were part of the power structures in Jerusalem and significant contributors to the moral depravity in Judah. They even transgressed in the temple of Yahweh. We are not therefore dealing with an unspecified group of prophets in the community at loggerheads with another group of prophets, as some would have it (Carroll 1986:460), but a Jerusalem-based prophetic group close to the power base in Jerusalem. They were blamed for transgressions similar to those committed by the kings of Judah, and were therefore as guilty as everyone else in violating the covenant stipulations. Their deception of the people, however, extended further in that they falsely prophesied under the pretence of speaking on behalf of Yahweh. The people of Judah and its leaders, as a consequence of Yahweh's punishment, would be exiled to Babylonia. As Yahweh says in Jer 23:40, "I will lift you up and cast you away from my presence": they would be uprooted and taken into exile.

The view presented here of Jeremiah is one of a prophet out of harmony with the established and dominant cult prophets in Jerusalem. If a "home" for Jeremiah is to be suggested, Yahweh-alone groups or parties would be the closest. These groups in all probability relate well with the picture presented of Jeremiah as the champion of the covenant and the covenant law and as one who upheld the conviction that the covenant relationship is not unconditional. The same applies to the dynasty of King David. There are ethical demands that need to be acknowledged and met. Yahweh alone should be worshipped, and He demands loyalty, justice and righteousness (Jer 7:1–15; 22:1–5, 13–17; cf. Maier 2002:48–63, 225–248).

Research has shown that it was typical of these Jerusalem prophets to proclaim salvation to people and state. It was typical of institutional prophets to



speak of peace and salvation (Jones 1992:309), and as they frequently supported the political systems in place in Judean society, these prophets constituted a significant component of the Royal-Zion ideology, lending divine support to a flawed system. This is clear from Jer 23:17, where it is stated that they opposed a prophet like Jeremiah, who prophesied doom for Judah and its people. Instead of issuing warnings, they proclaimed peace to people who despised Yahweh's word. They furthermore reassured the people of Judah and their arrogant leaders, assuring them that no calamity would befall them. Jeremiah, with his message of doom and imminent exile at the hand of the Babylonians, therefore seemed to be wrong. With the temple intact, it seemed clear that God was still living among them. With the king on the throne in the palace in Zion, the city of God, what could possibly happen to them? As Thompson (1980:498–499) puts it, these people “were strong adherents of the doctrine of the inviolability of Israel, the temple, and Jerusalem.” Why are these prophets regarded as false prophets? They supported a false ideology and sustained a false sense of security. They were blinded by their belief in “an unconditional guarantee that their ecclesiastical and political institutions are immune from historical accident or disturbance, and that their territorial integrity will always be maintained” (McKane 1986:579). Therefore, if the kings deserved the wrath of Yahweh, then so also did the prophets for supporting such a lie and doing so in the name of Yahweh. Although I have indicated that these prophets might not have deliberately lied to the people, they nevertheless displayed a degree of arrogance and stubbornness. They were over-confident, probably as a result of the blinding effect an ideology can have on people. As Nicholson (1970:75) observes, they had confused patriotism and nationalism with Yahwism. There is, however, no excuse for their ethical misconduct and abuse of their power and position.

The question remains whether it is possible to make the judgement that these prophets were wrong and that Jeremiah was the true prophet at a time when both of these parties acted in Jerusalem. As Grabbe (1995:114) notes, “we have no way of knowing whether their experience of the divine was any different from [Jeremiah's]. We do not have their side of the story; they may have loitered around Yhwh's council as much as Jeremiah.” It is always easier in hindsight to judge which prophecies were true and which false. It is clear from the analysis of the cycle of oracles on the prophets that they were compiled after the events they reported had actually taken place. It is also important to acknowledge that the editors or collectors of Jeremiah's oracles were not without ideological motivations themselves. The selection of the oracles and their placement in the text as it now stands were carried out with purpose and intent. It is safe to assume that it was the tradition or the collectors of the Jeremiah oracles who promoted Jeremiah as the true prophet; they knew that the exile did take place as Jeremiah proclaimed it would (Brueggemann 1998:208).

It is also possible that the tradition that held Jeremiah in high regard as prophet could have used the collection for didactical purposes or to solve a dispute concerning the issue of true and false prophets in their society. The oracles provided excellent material to show the importance of the relationship between a moral life and being a prophet, the relationship with Yahweh, a word from Him and a commission to speak as his mouthpiece. As the Chronicler has stated, Jeremiah is a true prophet who only spoke words that came from the “mouth of Yahweh”. History is the witness that this was the case.

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