"My Word is Like Fire": The Consuming Power of YHWH's Word

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ABSTRACT

The concept "Word of YHWH" is an important one to many of the prophets of the Old Testament. It is no different in the Book of Jeremiah. Two particular instances in Jeremiah are of interest for the purpose of this article. The first instance is in one of the laments of Jeremiah in 20:9 and the other in Jeremiah 23:29. The author/authors of the two passages in Jeremiah bridge the divide between the two domains: the divine and the natural, by using a metaphor in which the "Word of YHWH" and the image of "fire" are juxtaposed. The metaphor under discussion here therefore serves the purpose of creating a better understanding of the power of YHWH's word as it impacted both the life of the prophet Jeremiah, and the lives of the people who should hear these words (cf. 20:9). In 23:29 the same metaphor has the function of expressing the power of YHWH's word to destroy deceitful words and to safeguard the true prophetic word.

A   INTRODUCTION

The book of Jeremiah has intrigued many scholars for centuries. The nature of the book is not such that you can select a passage and simply apply your exegetical tools. Questions of composition and redaction are always begging for attention, and the poetry-prose question is always lurking in the background. The book addresses a definite period in the history of Judah, and the key figure of the prophet Jeremiah is personally prominent in almost all facets of the book. It is not difficult to work with the notion of a real prophet in a real period of the history of the people of Judah and Jerusalem.[1] At the same time I am aware that this prophet is here presented in a comprehensive document clearly showing the signs of redactional involvement in the process of collecting and arranging the compiled oracles. It is therefore quite understandable that the focus has shifted to the book of Jeremiah in which Jeremiah is the major role player.[2] Since, in history, the memory of Jeremiah was kept alive and his oracles regarded as ever relevant, there was a need and a drive to collect these prophetic utterances and use them to tell the story of Judah and its people in the

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[1]   Cf. Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah Closer up: The Prophet and the Book* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), x.

[2]   Cf. Louis Stulman & Huyn Chul Paul Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 98-99; 265.

days before the calamity of the Babylonian exile.[3] The collection of material we now call the book of Jeremiah is therefore the story of God's messenger and his role in conveying the word of Yahweh during a crucial period in the history of the people of Judah. In the memory of YHWH's people, Jeremiah was called and burdened to speak YHWH's word not only to the people of Judah, but also to the nations. History has shown the prophet to be a truthful servant of YHWH, both in his personal commitment and in his service as messenger of the living word of God. In this article I will regard Jeremiah as he is presented in the book of Jeremiah as a person not only with a message, but with feelings and emotions, deeply involved in the message he was constrained to convey.

In the prophetic tradition of Israel, prophets were known for acts that had significance, both real and symbolic. In particular, however, they were known for their words or messages in the form of oracles. Prophets are associated with conveying the "Word of YHWH", but in the book of Jeremiah the matter of the word of YHWH receives significant focus. Because of this, the person of Jeremiah is closely related to the concept of the "Word of YHWH."

The concept "Word of YHWH" is an important concept to many of the prophets of the Old Testament. It is no different in the Book of Jeremiah. Two particular instances in Jeremiah are of interest for the purpose of this article. The first instance is in one of the laments of Jeremiah in 20:9 where the prophet states:

> If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." (NRS)

The other instance is in Jeremiah 23:29 which reads as follows:

> "Is not my word like fire", says the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (NRS)

The image of fire occurs in both the above two quotations. An overview of the references to fire in the Bible provides some interesting insights. Fire is often associated with the wrath of YHWH and to express his judgement.[4] Besides wrath and judgement, fire can also denote purging. In his book *The consuming fire: a Christian guide to the Old Testament*, Duggan lists the following verses: "The appearance of YHWH's glory was like a consuming fire…" (Exod 24:17); "For YHWH your God is a consuming fire" (Deut 4:24); "Is my word not like fire?" (Jer 23:29); "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the

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3   Lundbom, *Jeremiah Closer up*, ix-x argues for a recording and preservation of the Jeremiah oracles in the days of the prophet and dismisses the idea of a long period of oral transmission of the oracles of Jeremiah as romantic.

4   Cf. Pss 83:15; 118:12; Isa 9:17; 30:27; Jer 4:4; 5:14; 21:12; Lam 2:3, 4; Hos 7:6; Amos 5:6; Nahum 1:6.

road and explained the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32); and "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29). In the New Testament the outpouring and work of the Holy Spirit is often depicted in terms of fire (cf. Acts 2).[5]

In this article the purpose and use of the fire metaphor[6] with regard to the prophet's commission to proclaim YHWH's word (cf. Jer 20:9) will be explored. An additional aim is to discuss the link between the concept, "the Word of YHWH", and the metaphor of "fire" in Jeremiah (cf. 23:29). The question this article wishes to address is what the function of the fire metaphor in the two selected passages is. My postulation is that the metaphor of fire is functionally applied to give expression to the power of YHWH's word. In the first passage in Jeremiah 20:9, it expresses the overwhelming power of YHWH's word in obligating the prophet to speak the word he has received while, in the second instance in Jeremiah 23:29, it shows the power of YHWH's word in terms of the truth of the word. This implies that if a prophet truly speaks words received from YHWH, then those words are powerful. The use of metaphors seems to be an effective means to describe things of an abstract nature in terms of more natural phenomena and thus contribute to better understanding of and insight into such matters.

With regard to the methodology applied in this article to address the question articulated above, the following procedures are followed. First an attempt is made to profile the literary contexts of both the passages under discussion. This is followed by an analysis of the designated texts: the passages are analysed as individual text units in terms of their genre, structure and composition. An additional aspect which I regard as of particular importance is paying attention to the rhetoric of the passages, since it plays an essential role in assisting readers or hearers to grasp the meaning of the passages.[7] This is

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[5]   Michael W. Duggan, *The Consuming Fire: A Christian Guide to the Old Testament* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2010), 6.

[6]   A metaphor is a stylistic device applied to understood or describe one thing in terms of another. The two components or elements compared are from different conceptual domains. In a metaphor the link made between the two components is direct (e.g. men are pigs). When the connection between the two components is less direct (e.g. men are like pigs), the type of metaphor is called a simile (Cf. Job Y. Jindo, *Biblical Metaphor Reconsidered: A Cognitive Approach to Poetic Prophecy in Jeremiah 1-24* [Boston: Harvard Semitic Museum Publications, 64, 2010], xiii-xv.) In the strict sense of the word, the use of the fire metaphor in both the selected passages creates similes (word is like fire), but I will use the term "metaphor" in the generic sense of the word, since both the passages belong to the same category of metaphors.

[7]   For a short description of rhetorical criticism, see John F. Sawyer, *A Concise Dictionary of the Bible and its Reception* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 225. See also the discussion by Margaret, M. Mitchell, "Rhetorical and New Literary Criticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* (eds. John W. Rogerson & Judith M. Lieu; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 615-633.

especially true in the case of the Jeremiah 20 passage. To do justice to the rhetoric of a text, Mitchell states that "a close reading of the exact wording and inner wording of the text" is essential as well as "an understanding of the text as in some sense dynamic rather than static or fixed."[8] Besides analysing the literary and rhetorical aspects of the two passages, I shall also address the function of the fire metaphor as a focus of the research. Finally, I shall attempt to argue that the research question has merit and that the fire metaphor did indeed serve the function of expressing the power of Yhwh's word.

In the discussion to follow each of the two nominated passages will be analysed and summarising observations will be drawn from the discussions presented.

B   FIRE IN MY BONES

1   Jeremiah 20:9 in the context of 20:7-13

Jeremiah 20 consists of a prose section in 20:1-6, followed by 20:7-18 which is essentially poetic. Some scholars regard 20:1-6 as part of the preceding passage in 19:1-15, which places the prophet at the temple.[9] The poetry section, 20:7-18, is subdivided into 7-13[10] and 14-18. My immediate interest therefore is in 20:7-13. It is important to observe that chapter 20:7-18 forms part of a collection of "Confessions of Jeremiah" spread throughout the first twenty chapters of the book Jeremiah. These "confessions" occur in 11:18-20; 12:1-4; 15:10, 15-18; 17:14-18; 18:18-23 and 20:7-13, 14-18. They resemble the psalms or laments we find in the book of Psalms in the Old Testament. The "confessions" in the book of Jeremiah have been widely discussed and are well documented.[11]

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8   Mitchell, "Rhetorical and New Literary Criticism," 617.

9   Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelly & Joel F. Drinkard, Jr. *Jeremiah 1-25* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991), 263-268.

10   For a consideration of the unity of 20:7-13, the discussion of S. (Fanie) D. Snyman, "(Dis-)unity in Jeremiah 20:7-13?" *Old Testament Essays* 12/3 (1999): 579-590 is significant.

11   Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002), 187-202; 242-245. David J. A. Clines & David M. Gunn, "'You Tried to Persuade Me' and 'Violence! Outrage!' in Jeremiah XX 7-8." *Vetus Testamentum* 28/1 (1978): 20-27. Pete A. R. Diamond, "Jeremiah's Confessions in the LXX and MT: A Witness to Developing Canonical Function?" *Vetus Testamentum* 40/1 (1990): 33-50. Pete A. R. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of Prophetic Drama* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987). Erhard Gerstenberger, "Jeremiah's Complaints: Observations on Jer 15:10-21," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82/4 (1963): 393-408. Ellen Davis Lewin, "Arguing for Authority: A Rhetorical Study of Jeremiah 1:4-19 and 20:7-18," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32 (1985): 105-119. Kathleen M. O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988). S. (Fanie) D. Snyman, "(Dis-)unity in Jeremiah 20:7-13?"*Old Testament Essays* 12/3 October

The first passage for discussion in this article is therefore 20:7-13, an individual lament.[12]

Chapter 20 contains the last two laments in of the collection in Jeremiah. In the literary context of the book, the laments in Jeremiah 20 follow on the humiliating experience of the prophet at the hands of Pashhur in the temple. At this strategic location, Jeremiah once again proclaimed a condemning message which made him such a hated person and caused him so much personal distress. The literary context therefore creates a scenario similar to the experience of the prophet Elijah who had a triumph on Carmel, only to collapse in despair the next moment and wanting to die in the desert.

As is ever the case when working with the Jeremiah text, there is a wide range of opinions on matters. The passage in Jeremiah 20:7-13 confirms this observation, and therefore one's presuppositions and preferences play a deciding role in the interpretation offered.[13] On the far extreme are those who work with the prophet Jeremiah as a literary invention[14] and therefore almost always as a motif or a symbolic representation of a certain group of people. The laments in 20:7-20 therefore suit their approach particularly well.[15] Carroll has a problem with regarding the lament as coming from Jeremiah because, according to him, it lacks a redactional formula ascribing it to Jeremiah. He concludes by saying, "hence the redactors did not read (or intend?) the poems to be read as Jeremiah's utterances."[16] Nonetheless, the very opposite seems to be the case. On the contrary, it appears more likely, that the redactors wanted readers of the text to link the laments to Jeremiah, and have therefore juxtaposed the laments and the passage, 20:1-6.[17] This passage concerns Jeremiah and his suffering at the hands of Pashhur. Moreover, it relates the renaming of the priest Pashhur to "terror all round" which, in turn, links up with verse 10 where this phrase is repeated.

(1999):579-590. S. (Fanie) D Snyman, "A Note on pth and ykl in Jeremiah XX 7-13." *Vetus Testamentum* 48/4 (1998): 559-563. Ignatius Swart, "'Because Every Time I Speak, I Must Shout It out, I Cry – "Violence and Oppression!"' The Polyvalent Meaning of 'gamas asod' in Jeremiah 20:8." *Old Testament Essays* 7/2 (1994):193-204.

[12]   Clines & Gunn, "You Tried to Persuade Me," 20-27.
[13]   Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah. A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM, 1986), 397 admits that this is the case and presents his reading as one of many.
[14]   Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 55-64.
[15]   Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 397, regards these verses as an individual lament "of a spokesman representing the pious in the post-exilic community."
[16]   Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 401.
[17]   Cf. Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 229.

Two aspects should serve as guidelines for the interpretation of 20:7-13. The literary context created by the collectors or editors is crucial to interpreting this passage and for that matter all other passages. Jeremiah 20:1-6 places the prophet at the temple, where he suffers. At this very location Jeremiah proclaims judgment to Pashhur and his followers. This sets the stage for understanding the lament passage–with Jeremiah and his deep emotional experiences because of his calling, as subject. The second guideline that needs to be considered is the rhetoric of the particular passage. The rhetoric has the purpose of depicting the experience of a prophet as a real human being overburdened by the gravity of his task as messenger of Yhwh. These two guidelines bring the freedom to read the lament as coming from an individual consumed by the message he has to proclaim.

The lament in 20:7-13 draws the listener/reader into the inner experience of a prophet whose calling and mission are not to be separated from his person. In this article I will argue that the aim of the poetic discourse is to illustrate how powerful the burden of "speaking Yhwh's word" is to the prophet. His calling pushes his personal anxiety and inner conflict aside in favour of placing the focus on the power of Yhwh's word. The rhetoric of the passage has the function of making precisely this point. The lament in 20:7-13 is structured as follows: in v. 7 a+b the prophet addresses Yhwh. In v. 7c he commences his reasoning as to why he is so unhappy. The description of the misery he experiences continues right up to verse 10.[18] The mood of the lament changes in v. 11 where the prophet starts confessing his trust in Yhwh, and continues to v. 12. The lament is completed with a call to praise yhwh and a confession of trust in his ability to come to the rescue of the weak and needy.

Jeremiah 20:7 commences with the prophet addressing Yhwh and sets the tone for the lament. It reads: "you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed" (NRS). The verb פתה is used twice in v. 7, first in the Pi'el, then in the Nip'al and again in v. 10 in the Pual form. It is a difficult word to translate in the current context and opinions on the matter differ.[19] The NIV translates the word "you have deceived me," whilst the NLT's choice is "you have misled me"–to mention but two examples.

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[18] Craigie, Kelly & Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 270, discuss the various suggestions about dividing 20:7-18. Many regard vss. 7-13 and 14-18 as two separate laments. Jeremiah 20:7-13 is subdivided into 7-9 and 10-13 by many, but I agree with Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 851-853, who makes the divide after v. 10 on the grounds of a change of tone between vv. 10 and 11, the repetition of key words in vv. 7-10 and finally an inclusion between 20:7 and 20:10.

[19] Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 291, prefers the meaning "deceive." Samuel E. Balentine, "Jeremiah, Prophet of Prayer," *Review & Expositor* 78 (1981): 338, entertains the idea of seduction and therefore reads it as having a sexual connotation, but O'Connor, *The*

Not only has YHWH enticed (misled/deceived) the prophet, he has also overpowered him and prevailed. The prophet is depicted as being over-whelmed, overpowered and outlasted by YHWH–at least this is what the prophet is experiencing. This experience is part of the reason for his lament. In addition to this, he laments because he is the laughing stock of everybody. It is interesting to note how the rhetoric is deliberately employed to exaggerate the emotional state of mind of the prophet, resulting in lament. His experience is that it happens "all day long" (כָּל־הַיּוֹם) and that "everyone mocks me." Verse 8 contributes even more to the lamenting, emotional state of the prophet by stating why he is so disliked by the people. If he opens his mouth, what emerge are words of condemnation and judgment. I disagree with Carroll who regards the outcry "Violence! Outrage!" as "a conventional outcry of distress signaling [sic] oppression and violence being suffered by the complainant."[20] Instead, these outcries should be regarded as expressions of frustration by the prophet who is burning to proclaim judgment to others.[21] Instead of hope and words of encouragement, all he speaks are negative and destructive words. His message is that "violence and destruction"[22] will come the way of the people of Judah. Jeremiah is insulted and scorned because his words cause discomfort amongst the people and because they do not distinguish between the content of the message and the messenger. Again it is as if the experience occurs every moment of the day, emphasising the severity of the negative feelings he is experiencing.[23] The most important aspect of this verse is the reference to the phrase, "Word of YHWH" (דְבַר־יְהֹוָה). This, as mentioned, is the main aspect in focus in this passage and a central point of the book of Jeremiah. From the outset, in chapter 1 of Jeremiah, the core of the prophet's calling was to be a messenger to the people of Judah, as well as to the nations. The content would be "to pluck up" and "breakdown" in the one instance, but also "to build" and "to plant" in the other instance (cf. Jer 1:10). This implies proclamation of doom and salvation, of judgment and salvation.

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confessions of Jeremiah, 70, argues that the context must determine whether the verb has a sexual undertone and she is not convinced that this is the case in 20:7. See also Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context*, 110. Cf. the discussion offered by Swart, "Because Every Time I Speak," 198-199.

[20] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 399.

[21] I find support for this view from Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 856, where he says "but the words appear rather to refer to proclaiming a message more than he wants."

[22] The combination of the words "violence and destruction (oppression)" also occurs in Jer 6:7, Ezek 45:9 and Amos 3:10.

[23] Swart, "Because Every Time I Speak," 199 refers to the dual meaning of words "violence and oppression." Firstly, when he announces YHWH's word to the people, they respond with violence and oppression against him but, secondly, the prophet experiences the message he has to convey as violent and oppressive. Swart views the way YHWH forces the prophet to speak as giving an ironic twist to this expression.

An aspect that needs attention for the purpose of the article is the personal appeal to the life of the individual. In v. 8 the prophet states that the "Word of Yʜwʜ" affects him personally (לִי) in the sense that it brings insult and scorn into his life. This aspect in particular is addressed in greater detail in the next verse.

Jeremiah 20:9 is the focus of this section of the article. It is clear from the previous verses that the prophet is in distress because of the condemning "Word of Yʜwʜ" he has to convey to this people. Verse 9 takes it a step further by expressing the prophet's personal reflection on his confrontation with Yʜwʜ and his word. His first person self-talk reveals that, at times, he has thought of wiping Yʜwʜ from his memory or refusing to speak in his name any longer.[24]

In an effort to describe his experience of being under an obligation to speak Yʜwʜ's word, he uses the image of fire compressed in his body as one component of the metaphor. The two components which form the metaphor in this passage are the "Word of Yʜwʜ" and "fire." The fire component refers (back) to the previous verse (v. 8) where the prophet says that the "Word of Yʜwʜ" causes him embarrassment, followed by the references in vs 9 to "speaking in his name." It is therefore clear that the "Word of Yʜwʜ" is the first component of the metaphor which should be understood in terms of the second component, fire. The component "Word of Yʜwʜ" forms part of the divine domain, whereas fire comes from the domain of natural phenomena. This implies that the concept "Word of Yʜwʜ" should be understood in terms of a natural phenomenon such as fire. It seems to me that the intention of the author of this lament is to use the metaphor not only as a poetic device, but also as a deliberate attempt to initiate a cognitive process in which the listener or reader is prompted to reflect on the first component in the light of what the second component creates.[25] The image fire can have different meanings to different people depending on their knowledge of it, but also depending on their previous experience of this phenomenon. As a natural phenomenon it will evoke general notions of burning and heat and the usefulness of fire in our lives. But, no doubt, it will also call to mind the destructive power that fire has to consume and devour things. In the context of the passage in 20:7-13, the function of the metaphor seems to be to focus on the power aspect. Just as it is impossible to resist the heat of fire without being burnt or harmed by it, or to contain fire in a confined area or restricted space, so it is impossible for the prophet to contain the fire in the confined space of his body, especially in his bones. There is just no way can he keep the word of Yʜwʜ confined within his person and refrain

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[24] This is an issue that is addressed in chapter 23:9-40 because, to speak in Yʜwʜ's name, is a criterion of a true prophet. Also cf. Jer 11:21; 26:9, 16; 29:23; 44:16; and Deut 18:19, 20, 22.
[25] Cf. Cornelis W. Notebaart, *Metallurgical Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible* (Ph.D. diss., Utrecht: Kampen University, 2010), 19-20.

from speaking the divine words revealed to him. The word of YHWH which belongs to the divine domain is metaphorically linked in v. 9 to the image of fire which forms part of the natural domain. In this way human beings can relate cognitively to the divine realm and grasp the powerful nature of the word of YHWH because it enables them to make various connections with the power inherent in fire. This not only creates a better understanding of the divine or supernatural domain, but also makes a more powerful emotional appeal to humans who find it easier to relate to what forms part of the natural domain.[26]

The word is like fire burning in the prophet's heart, like fire in his bones. One can compare the sensation to inflammation in a person's body and bones. All human effort to keep the word contained in his person has proved to be exhausting and unsuccessful. The word must be proclaimed; it consumes his whole person and there is nothing he can do about it. The power of the word and the obligation to proclaim YHWH's word cannot be contained by the prophet.

In v. 10 the prophet continues to spell out his misery by referring to the people in his society, and even more than that, to the people close to him who seek his downfall. They whisper to each other about his unwanted proclamation of the terror that surrounds[27] them, threatening that, if he speaks out, they will report him. They keep an eye on his every move, hoping he will make a mistake so that they can take revenge. The prophet laments the fact the he lives in an environment where he is under suspicion and people are hostile to him for speaking the word of YHWH. They eagerly wait for him to make a mistake so that they will have the opportunity to pounce on him.

In the next three verses (11-13) the mood changes with the focus shifting to YHWH as the source of the prophet's trust and survival.[28] As in the case of many of the laments in the Psalter, the prophet expresses his trust that YHWH has the ability to take care of his enemies and will come to his rescue. Verse 13 concludes with a doxology to YHWH, using the stereotypical language of the Psalm collection.

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[26]   In her recent book Ellen van Wolde makes a strong case for a cognitive linguistic approach to biblical studies. She encourages researchers to follow a cognitive methodology to analyse biblical texts, to think conceptually and to determine the domains to which words belong. Cf. Ellen van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition and Context* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 17-19, 201-205.

[27]   The expression occurs in Jer 6:25; 20:3; 20:10; 46:5; 49:29 and in only one other book in the Old Testament, i.e. in Ps 31:14.

[28]   Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah. Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 182-183.

2   Summarising observations

It seems from the discussion above that the author of the lament in 20:7-13 has utilised the fire metaphor functionally not only to create a cognitive bridge between the divine and the natural domains, but also to involve his listeners and readers emotionally in the process. The word of YHWH is powerful, as powerful as fire.

The use of the fire metaphor in this passage is closely related to the prophet Jeremiah and his personal experience the word of YHWH. Although it relates chiefly to the prophet, the receivers of the word of YHWH are also affected by the appeal of the fire metaphor has for them. They also realise that the word of YHWH is powerful and concerns them too. In this lament a picture is painted of a person consumed by his life's mission, which is to convey the word of YHWH to people. He is burdened by his inescapable commission to be a spokesperson. At times he has contemplated opting out – only to realise that this is impossible. This obligation to speak is powerfully illustrated by the metaphor of a fire burning in his body. He cannot refuse to speak, because the inner conviction and urge to speak is far stronger than his personal preferences or comfort. To be unwilling to speak YHWH's word, and therefore be disobedient, is more painful than to bear the consequences of proclaiming judgment to his people.[29] Just as it is impossible to contain a fire in one's body, so is it impossible to refuse to speak YHWH's word. Commenting on this, Schreiber says of Jeremiah "it is clear he is in great pain, and rather than turn his back on God he tells God exactly how he feels without losing any of his faith and without stopping for a moment to act like a prophet."[30] Finally the prophet turns to YHWH as his only source of trust and survival (20:11-13).

The tradition has preserved a picture of a prophet who embodied the message he had to proclaim in his very person. As so well argued by Ellington,[31] the suffering of the prophet embodies the suffering of YHWH over his unfaithful people. To quote Ellington[32]

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[29]   Brueggemann, *Exile and Homecoming*, 182 has a similar understanding of the dilemma the prophet is experiencing. He finds himself in a quandary, but the obligation to speak exceeds his personal discomfort.

[30]   Mordecai Schreiber, *The Man Who Knew God: Decoding Jeremiah* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010), 63.

[31]   Scott A. Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series; Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 130-153, gives a very enlightening discussion of the laments in the book of Jeremiah, the relationship between YHWH and the prophet, the prophet and the divine message and his inner tension and conflict because of his mission. In his discussion he covers the opinions of most of the prominent researchers on the laments in Jeremiah such as Fretheim, *Jeremiah*; Brueggemann, *Exile and Homecoming*; Balentine, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Prayer*; Diamond, *Jeremiah's Confessions in the LXX*

> Jeremiah takes up the suffering of another. He finds himself abused and abandoned precisely because he accepted the calling to up God's offense and weep with him. Jeremiah stands in a new place, heretofore only hinted at in the Psalter. The pain that brings a protest to Jeremiah's lips is the pain of God. It is this burden that shapes the prophetic lament.

At the same time the prophet suffers not only because of the judgment message he has to convey, but also because of the consequences of the judgement message for his people, of whom he is an integral part.[33] What we have here is a person who, despite being torn apart by his loyalties, painfully serves the higher purpose of his calling and mission. Disobedience and disloyalty resulted in a broken covenant, which caused severe pain to YHWH as well as to his faithful servant Jeremiah. The fact that he was a prophet did not detract from his humanity or elevate him above other human beings. He had to deal with all the conflicting emotions others had to deal with–such as feelings of betrayal and of being deprived of the protection of YHWH. He had to cope with strong feelings similar to those of many people in Judah, like wanting to detach himself from the covenant God who deals so harshly with his people. And yet he has decided to remain loyal to YHWH and surrender to the power of YHWH's word. Jeremiah is therefore hailed as symbol of suffering, endurance, loyalty and obedience to the overpowering word of YHWH has consumed his life. By his own testimony, he is obliged to speak and act as prophet, because of the fire in his heart and bones.

C   MY WORD IS LIKE FIRE

1   Jeremiah 23:29 in the context of 23:25-32

The second metaphor featuring the image of fire in combination with "the Word of YHWH" is in Jeremiah 23:29 and reads as follows:

> Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? (NRS)

This particular verse forms part of the passage Jeremiah 23:25-32. The broader context is Jeremiah 23:9-40, a cycle of oracles concerning so-called false prophets.

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and MT; Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context* and O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah*, to mention but a few.
[32]   Ellington, *Risking Truth*, 143.
[33]   Swart, "'Because Every Time I Speak,'" 199.

2   Brief analysis of Jeremiah 23:25-32[34]

The passage Jeremiah 23:25-32[35] forms a unit and follows a freestanding unit consisting of 23:23-24.[36] Jeremiah 23:25-28a appears to be a polemic against lying dreams, followed in 28b-29 by a section on YHWH's powerful and true words and then judgment pronouncements on prophets in 23:30-32.[37] The oracular nature of this passage (23:25-32) is emphasised by the frequent use in the passage of the affirmation formula – "says YHWH"– [38] נְאֻם־יְהֹוָה. It appears no less than eight times.[39] The first person singular speaker from v. 25 continues to the end of the passage in v. 32. A new section commences in 23:33, addressing the prophet Jeremiah in direct speech.

The section 23:25-32 consists of poetic verses in verses 28-29, enclosed by 25-27 and 30-32 written in prose style.[40] In 23:25-32 several key words and

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[34]   Some details in the footnotes correspond to the main text of an article focusing on the passage 23:25-32 alone, which will soon to be published in *Verbum et Ecclesia* (2011). The focus of the current article is different, but I consider the detail necessary for the purpose of clarity and reference.

[35]   There are some text difficulties particularly in verse 25 (Cf. John A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 499-500. Wilhelm Rudolph, *Jeremia* [3. verbesserde Aufl.; Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1968], 154. William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 213-214]) but, in general, it is possible to grasp what the text wants to communicate.

[36]   For a discussion of and possible relevance of these two verses to 23:25-32, see Werner E. Lemke, "The Near and the Distant God: A Study of Jer 23:23-24 in its Biblical Theological Context," *JBL* 100/4 (1981): 541-555; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 499-501; and Brueggemann, *Exile and Homecoming*, 213-214, who regard 23:23-24 as part of 23:25-32.

[37]   Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2004): 203. Craigie, Kelly & Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 348. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, 211 views the time of the early reign of King Zedekiah, 597 to 594 B.C.E., as a likely date for the raging conflict between Jeremiah and other prophets.

[38]   D. Vetter, "'נְאֻם neʾum Ausspruch'," THAT: 2.

[39]   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 *'neʾum YHWH'* 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.

[40]   Some regard 23:28-29 to be from Jeremiah, with the prose sections as additions by a person or persons belonging to the Deuteronomistic movement in the exilic period (Ernest W. Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles: A Study of the Prose Tradition in the Book of Jeremiah* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970], 102). However, the tendency to ascribe sections that do not seem to fit, as in the case above, to editorial involvement is at times the easy way out.

phrases are repeated, creating some form of coherence in the passage. These repetitions also contribute to the progressive development of the argument presented in the passage, which climaxes in 23:32. An analysis of the passage under discussion reveals the following aspects:

Prophets are addressed by YHWH in v. 25.[41] They claim to have had dreams, but these dreams are dismissed as prophesying lies (שֶׁקֶר) in YHWH's name. Verse 26 continues blaming the prophets for prophesying lies and deceit. Verse 27 once more focuses on dreams, regarding them as a means of distracting the ordinary people from YHWH. The complaint is that dreams do the same as Baal did to their ancestors–they make them forget about YHWH.[42]

In Jeremiah 23:28 the issue of dreams is once again addressed. The initial impression created is that if the dreams are real and not fabrications, then they are an acceptable mode of receiving divine revelation. What is of importance in this verse is the shift in focus to the "Word of YHWH" and the requirement for this word: it should be spoken faithfully (אֱמֶת). A very significant contrast is drawn between straw (chaff) and grain (wheat). Straw has no substance whereas wheat is useful as food.[43]

In Jeremiah 23:29 and 30 the theme of the "Word of YHWH" continues. Two rhetorical questions are asked in verse 29 with regard to the "Word of YHWH.". In the first question the power of the "Word of YHWH" is emphasised by comparing it to fire and, in the second question, his "word" is compared to a hammer that breaks mountain rocks.

Jeremiah 23:30 and 31 is introduced in similar fashion. Both verses are introduced by לָכֵן[44] followed by a demonstrative particle "behold" and נְאֻם־יְהוָה. In 23:30 the so-called false prophets are blamed for stealing YHWH's words from each other. In v. 31 the accusation against these prophets is that

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[41]   Verse 25 commences with a first person singular verb, introducing the concerns about prophets who are in the wrong. The first person singular refers to YHWH who is making known his dissatisfaction with how some of the prophets have acted.

[42]   In an interesting article on the use of language in the book of Jeremiah, titled "Vilification of his opponents," William R. Domeris ("When Metaphor Becomes Myth: A Socio-linguistic Reading of Jeremiah," in *Troubling Jeremiah* (ed. Pete A. R. Diamond, Kathleen O'Connor & Louis Stulman [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999], 259) refers to 23:27 to illustrate how association can be employed effectively. In this verse the prophets are accused of letting their dreams have the effect of causing people to forget about YHWH–as happened previously to the ancestors who forgot his name in favour of that of Baal. Domeris says, "The force of the comparison makes the present prophets appear guilty of Baal worship, although that is not actually said. Yet, through effective use of association, Jeremiah leaves the reader with that impression."

[43]   Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 339.

[44]   According to McKane, *Jeremiah*, 593, the particle לָכֵן "introduces a series of threats against prophets who are imposters."

they pretend to speak what YHWH declares, but it is their own tongues that speak.

Everything culminates in v. 32 and it almost seems like a summary of 23:25-31.[45] The sentence is introduced in the same way as in vv. 30 and 31 with the demonstrative particle and the accusation against the prophets,[46] but this time the false speaking and the dreams are combined as "those who prophesy lying or false (שֶׁקֶר) dreams," followed by נְאֻם־יְהוָה. The sentence proceeds with a second mention of the lies (שֶׁקֶר) the prophets tell and their detrimental consequences to the people of Judah.[47] An important phrase to note is YHWH's dismissal of the lying prophets: "I did not send them or appoint them." This phrase is repeated in Jeremiah 14:14, 15; 23:21; 27:15 and 29:9. They are illegitimate prophets; YHWH has not commissioned them (cf. Deut 18:20).

Verse 32 concludes that these prophets did not profit or benefit the people of Judah at all.[48] What these prophets communicate will have a damaging and corrupting effect on the people of Judah.[49]

3   Summarising observations on 23:25-32

It is clear that the passage in Jeremiah 23:25-32 concerns "the Word of YHWH." The issue in dispute between the prophets (Jeremiah versus the "false prophets") is who has the true revelation of his word. What complicates matters is

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[45]   McKane, *Jeremiah*, 595.
[46]   The phrase "I am against the prophets" is repeated three times in vv. 30, 31 and 32: "*I am against those prophets* who steal words from another person;" "*I am against those prophets* who use their own tongues to say, says YHWH;" "*I am against those …* who prophesy lying dreams." Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press 2005), 217-218 calls this repetition "a haunting threefold declaration" against the prophets.
[47]   The word is used no less than four times in the passage 23:25-32.
[48]   The verb "profit" (יעל) in its Hif'il form occurs five times in the book of Jeremiah. In 2:8 and 2:11 the non-profit of people has to do with what gods or idols have to offer (cf. also Hab 2:18; Isa 44:9 and 44:10.) In Jeremiah 7:8 the people are blamed for trusting in deceptive words—with devastating consequences. In this passage Jeremiah objects to the Royal/Zion ideology that deceived the people into having a false sense of security. They cannot unconditionally believe in these symbols without disobeying the covenant requirements. By listening to these deceptive messages, they will not benefit at all, but will face calamity. In this respect, 7:8 is similar to the deceptive dreams and words of the false prophets.
[49]   McKane, *Jeremiah*, 595, regards the concluding statement at the end of v. 32 as an application of the device of *litotes* (understatement). He refers to cases where it was applied to idols (2:8, 11; 16:19). He says, "to say that these prophets do nothing useful or helpful for people is tantamount to saying that their effect is altogether damaging and corrupting".

that several people make the claim to speak "in the name of YHWH." In this particular passage the mode of revelation is the point of dispute. Not everyone can regard themselves as messengers of YHWH.

In vv. 28-30 the concept, "my word" (YHWH's word), is repeated four times. Verse 28 is important in this passage since, in this verse, the emphasis shifts from dreams to "YHWH's Word."[50] The verse reads as follows:

> Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. (NRS)

As mentioned before, at first it seems as if room is made for dreams,[51] but then it becomes clear that it is actually a dismissal of dreams as being insignificant. The parallel sentence to follow with the reference to straw gives backing to this view [dreams (a)-my word (b): straw (a)-wheat (b)]. To paraphrase this view is to say: let the dreamers keep on dreaming and tell those dreams, however they are as lightweight and worthless as straw. The contrast drawn alludes to the fact that the dreams of these so-called prophets are similar to straw, whereas the "Word of YHWH" is like wheat, of great value[52]. The real matter of substance is the "Word of YHWH" which is like wheat.[53] Wheat is nutritious and essential for subsistence. The "Word of YHWH" is however qualified: it should be conveyed truthfully (אֱמֶת). Just as straw and wheat have nothing in common, so it is with dreams and "truthful words of YHWH."

4   Jeremiah 23:29: An emphasis on the powerful nature of "YHWH's Word"

In v. 29 a description of the nature of YHWH's words, is depicted. This verse is the focus of the second passage selected for this article. It reads:

> Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? (NRS)

In this verse the "Word of YHWH" is compared to fire. However, this time the two components of the metaphor are more directly linked than was the case in 20:8-9. Again the metaphor serves the function of relating the domain of the divine or the supernatural to the natural domain. The image fire which forms

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[50]   According to Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 472, the poetic section in verses 28b-29 disrupts the flow of the passage and brings an ideological juxtaposition of "dreams" and "word" into play.

[51]   Craigie, Kelly & Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 349, hold the view that dreams are not denounced as such, but that they should be carefully and truthfully conveyed. The noun אֱמֶת therefore, according to them, applies to both the dreams and the word.

[52]   Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 502. McKane, *Jeremiah*, 593. Rudolph, *Jeremia*, 155.

[53]   Craigie, Kelly & Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 349, regard the rhetorical question referring to straw and wheat as a proverb.

part of the natural domain, serves as a cognitive bridge for understanding the divine in terms of the natural. The comparison is extended by comparing the "word" to a hammer that breaks rocks. The hammer image belongs to the cognitive domain of implements (tools), familiar to humans. In this way, the author succeeds in building a mental picture which will appeal to humans and assist them to understand the divine communication with them.[54] The context in which the fire metaphor is applied here strongly urges listeners or readers of the biblical text to take note of the devouring power of Yhwh's word.[55] It devours chaff (false prophecies); it is as destructive as the power of a hammer. It therefore implies that the "Word of Yhwh" is much more powerful than the dreams of the prophets who are in opposition to Jeremiah. The fire image in conjunction with the second part of the sentence in v. 29 that views the "Word of Yhwh" as a hammer that breaks rocks, accentuates the destructive power of the Yhwh's word. What is presented here is a synonymous parallelism in which fire and a hammer express the power of Yhwh's words. Inherent in both the fire and the hammer images is a warning that nothing will surpass or outdo the true "Word of Yhwh". False revelations, falsely speaking in Yhwh's name, "stealing" revelations from others on the pretence of having received it from Yhwh and giving false direction to Yhwh's people will and giving false direction to Yhwh's people will stand the test of time. The truth (אֱמֶת) will devour (fire- אֵשׁ) all false dreams, untruthful words and forms of deception (שֶׁקֶר). More detailed exploration of the similes of fire and a hammer shows that fire not only devours, but also refines and purifies.

As regards a hammer, it is a destructive implement that breaks a hard rock into pieces, but it can also be a crafter's tool to create something new like a sculpture.[56] In the current context, however, the emphasis is on the power of the word to devour the false means of revelation, in this case, dreams. The falseness of the dream revelations will not withstand the destructive power of a hammer. The prophet probably holds it against the prophets that they falsely proclaim peace (*shalom*- cf. 23:17) while the imminent threat of an enemy is a reality.[57] Besides the false proclamation of peace, the falseness also means that Yhwh's name is forgotten (v. 27), his word has been fabricated (v. 31) – a reckless attitude which will harm Yhwh's people (v. 32).[58]

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[54] Cf. Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies*, 203.

[55] Julia M. O' Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor: Theology and Ideology in the Prophets* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2008), xvi-xvii, argues that metaphors are strategically important tools prophets use to persuade their audiences. Metaphors create mental pictures that involve people who hear or read them, with a view to getting them to respond.

[56] Craigie, Kelly & Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 350.

[57] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 472, entertains the same idea.

[58] Brueggemann, *Exile and Homecoming*, 214.

If we read 23:28-29 in conjunction with 23:30-32, receiving and speaking the truthful "Word of Yhwh" is linked with being sent and appointed by Yhwh, the source of true revelation. Only this will benefit the people of Yhwh (v. 32) and not lead them astray and eventually to their downfall.

It is probably correct to read vv. 28-29 in the context of addressing issues dating from the time when this proclamation was made.[59] The leadership which included both the rulers and the prophets in the final years before the Babylonian exile has failed the people of Judah. Most of Jeremiah's prophecies were judgment proclamations elicited by the disobedience and disloyalty of Judah and Israel. The function of the fire and hammer images is therefore to communicate judgment.

D   CONCLUSION

This article stemmed from the observation that, in two instances in the book of Jeremiah, Yhwh's word is referred to in combination with the image of fire. This gave rise to the question as to what would be the function of juxtaposing the concept "Word of Yhwh" and the image of fire. In the exploration and analyses of the two passages in book of Jeremiah which contained the "Word of Yhwh" concept and "fire" image, it became clear that the metaphor comprising the mentioned components is functionally applied to give expression to the power of Yhwh's word. In the first passage in Jeremiah 20:9, it expresses the overwhelming power of Yhwh's word which compels the prophet Jeremiah to speak the word of Yhwh. At the same time the metaphor in 20:9 serves the function of involving and impacting the very existence of everyone who relates to Jeremiah and hears or reads the word of Yhwh. The metaphor of fire serves to engage the people not only on a cognitive level, but also emotionally in order to persuade them to take the word of Yhwh seriously.[60]

In the second instance in Jeremiah 23:29 where the metaphor consisting of the components of "Yhwh's word" and "fire" appears, it serves the function of illustrating the power of Yhwh's word in terms of the truth of the word. In this passage the metaphor demonstrates how devastating and devouring Yhwh's word can be if deceit opposes the truth of the word. By means of a metaphor, the authors of both passages individually succeeded in relating the domain of the divine or supernatural to the domain of the natural which is easier for humans to relate to and understand. The word of Yhwh is not only a fire within, but also a fire that destroys falseness and untruth.

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[59]   Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 339, emphasises the point that the images of fire and a hammer in this context "may not be revealing of a general understanding of the word of God, but of the particular word that Jeremiah has been speaking, namely, the devastating word of judgment."

[60]   Cf. O' Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor*, xvii.

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