I've Had it with You: Jeremiah 23:33-40 as Culmination of YHWH's Frustration

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ABSTRACT

Jeremiah 23:9-40 is a collection of oracles that negatively reflect on the actions of prophets in Judah. This cycle on the prophets consists of the following oracles: 23:9-15; 16-22; 23-24; 25-32 and 33-40. The section of interest for this article is 23:33-40, the final oracle in the cycle. The key issue in this passage is the expression maśśā' YHWH *which occurs no less than seven times. Of significance are the different translations English versions of the Bible offer, namely "the burden of YHWH" and "the message of YHWH." It is the aim of this article to investigate the meaning of this expression in terms of the wordplay implied in its use, but also in terms of its inclusion in the collection of oracles concerning the prophets which contributes to the interpretation of this expression. Besides paying attention to the structure of the passage, the noticeable use of negative verbs and nouns will also be a point of discussion. Within the literary context created by this collection of oracles on the prophets composed in the Jeremiah tradition, this final passage (23:33-40) seems to express the culmination of frustration with the prophets and the people of Judah. The cycle commences by condemning the adulterous conduct of the prophets, followed by criticism of their flawed theology. Further criticism comprised the fact that they acted as prophets without divine sanction, as well as their dubious modes of receiving their messages (dreams). In the final passage the criticism climaxes in the rejection of the prophets in particular for disobeying a direct order from YHWH not to say* maśśā' YHWH. *The prophets have gravely overstepped their boundaries by doing so, with dire consequences for them, the city and the people of Judah.*

A INTRODUCTION

The book of Jeremiah has intrigued many researchers, and the issues to solve seem never ending. One such issue of interest is the turbulent relationship between Jeremiah and some opposing prophetic personalities and groups. Much attention has been given in Jer 27-28 to the conflict between the prophet Jeremiah and Hananiah. The matter of true and false prophets also surfaces in 23:9-40, but this collection of oracles has attracted much less attention from scholars. In this article this particular cycle is of interest, in particular the last passage 23:33-40 where the key issue revolves around the concept *maśśā'* YHWH. The aim of this article is to look into this concept within the context of this last passage, but also into the role and function of this passage as the last

oracle of the cycle on false prophets and prophecy in 23:33-40. First of all the structure of this passage will be attended to and then an analysis of the eight verses will follow. Special attention will be giving to the concept mentioned in the context of the passage, but also to its uses in other prophetic passages. Jeremiah 23:33-40 will then be studied as part of the collection of oracles on false prophets. The intention is to show that within 23:33-40 there is a growing tension, but also that this passage is a fitting finale for the cycle as a whole. Note will also be taken of the two cycles 21:11-23:6 and 23:9-40 within the framework of 21:1-10 and 24:1-10. The reading of the text will be done with an awareness of conflicting ideas and notions present in the late pre-exilic Judean society. This article will however not venture into the issue of the context of the redaction of the prophetic cycle in Jer 23:9-40.[1]

B STRUCTURE AND TEXTUAL MATTERS

The key issue in this last passage is clearly the expression *maśśā'* YHWH. This expression occurs no less than seven times.

A study of the structure of these verses shows a relation between vv. 33 and 39 and again between vv. 35 and 37. In both vv. 33 and 39 the phrase "I will cast you off" appears. Verse 35 relates to v. 37 because of the words "this (*kō*) shall you say." The verb "to say" is in the plural in v. 35, but in the singular in v. 37.Both verses also repeat the combination of words "What has the LORD answered?" or "What has the LORD spoken?" From analysis of the passage, the focus seems to be v. 36, highlighting the real issue at stake in the passage, but also in the cycle Jer 23:9-32. The problem highlighted is that everyone presents his/her own words as if they are YHWH's words. This false pretence is condemned because it "perverts the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts." It is nothing less than deception.

A matter to note is the change of addressees in the various verses. In 23:33-34 a masculine singular person is addressed, but in 23:35-36 those addressed are masculine plural followed in v. 37 by a masculine singular person. In vv. 38-40 the addressees are masculine plural. The assumption is that the masculine singular person refers to the prophet Jeremiah, though never identified as such in the cycle, and the masculine plural to the opposing prophets, priests and the people.[2]

Interestingly in v. 33 the people, the prophet and the priest are said to have enquired from the prophet about YHWH's *maśśā'*. This is repeated in v. 34

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1 This aspect justifies an article on its own.

2 Cf. Peter C. Craigie, H. Kelly Page & Joel F. Drinkard Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25* (WBC; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1991), 352.

in the sequence of the prophet, the priest and then the people.[3] However in v. 37, the prophet alone is addressed.[4] YHWH's command was that prophets should not speak the *maśśā'* YHWH, but they have pretended to do so, therefore they and the people will suffer the consequences. The word "therefore" (*lakēn*) appears both in vv. 38 and 39, with v. 39 introducing the consequences of the disobedience. At first in v. 33, but in particular from v. 38 onwards, YHWH in the first person is depicted as the acting party that will exercise his punishment on the prophets, the people and the city. One should take note of all the verbs and nouns with a negative tone in this short passage: vv. 33 and 34: "I will cast you off" and "I will punish"; vv. 39 and 40: "I will lift you up," "I will cast you away"; "I will bring disgrace" and "I will bring shame." These negative verbs and nouns clearly set the tone of this passage. It is also noticeable that from v. 33 onwards there is a progression in tension and intensity, climaxing in vv. 39 and 40 with no less than four condemning images.

There are two text critical notes that should be considered. The first is in v. 33which is quite important to address, since it has direct consequences for the interpretation of the whole section. The phrase "what (*ma*) is the *maśśā*?" occurs twice in this sentence. In the first instance it is connected with YHWH asking the question "what is the *maśśā'* (oracle, message or burden) of YHWH?" It is the second instance that needs further consideration. It is not linked with the name of YHWH and as it stands in the Masoretic text (MT) should read: "What message?" Both the Septuagint (LXX) and the Vulgate however read: "You are the *maśśā'*." To arrive at this meaning, the Hebrew consonants have to be reshuffled from אֶת־מַה־מַּשָּׂא to אֶתם המַּשָּׂא. If the MT is maintained, then the word "oracle" seems a fitting translation for *maśśā'*. In terms of wordplay and sense however, the LXX option seems very attractive and should perhaps be followed.[5]

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[3] Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 214 argues that 23:33-40 consists of two discourses, the first in vv. 33-34 and the second in 35-40. Verses 33-34 are linked together by means of the chiasm the addressees in the two verses form: people (a)-prophet and priest (b) over against prophet and priest (b)- people (a).

[4] According to Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36,* 218 תֹאמַר(2nd person singular imperfect) should here be regarded as an impersonal directive, meaning "one shall say to the prophet."

[5] A detailed discussion of the matter is done by Jan de Waard, *A Handbook on Jeremiah* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 103-104.

The second text critical matter that should be considered is 23:39. There seems to be no support for the use of the verb נשׂה in the MT. Most modern translations opt for the verb נשׂא instead, with the meaning "to lift up."[6]

C THE CONCEPT *MAŚŚĀ'*

Before commencing with the exegesis and interpretation of Jer 23:33-40, a brief look at the various uses and possible meanings of the concept *maśśā'* are necessary. In many instances in the OT "*maśśā*'" has the meaning of a burden of something people carry (cf. 2 Kgs 5:17; 8:9; 2 Chr 20:25; 35:3; Neh 13:15, 19; Isa 46:1, 2; Jer 17:21, 22, 24, 27). There are however quite a number of instances particularly with regard to the oracles against the nations where the meaning "oracle of YHWH" seems appropriate (cf. Isa 13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 11, 13; 22:1; 23:1; Nah 1:1; Zech 9:1; 12:1; Mal 1:1). In 2 Kgs 9:25 Jehu speaks of a "*maśśā*'" (an oracle) on the death of Joram and the term is used again in 2 Chr 24:27 in the negatives sense of oracles against king Joash. It is important to note that besides Jeremiah (23:33-40) where "*maśśā'*" is used meaning oracle against people of Judah, in Ezek 12:10 , Zech 12:1 and Mal 1:1 this term is used as an "oracle" against the people of Israel. Furthermore only in Prov 31:1 "*maśśā*'" has the meaning of "oracles," something Lemuel's mother has taught him. An interesting and perhaps important occurrence of the plural form of (מַשְׂאוֹת) is in Lam 2:14 which reads as follows: "Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen oracles for you that are false and misleading" (NRS). This verse ties in neatly with Jer 23:33-40 where the use of the term "*maśśā*'"is forbidden. But more than this, the consequences of ignoring this command are also spelled out in this passage in Jeremiah. Lam 2 as well as the whole book of Lamentations testify to the consequences of disobeying the prohibition of using the term "*maśśā*'" and falsely pretending it to be an oracle from YHWH.

In a rather extensive discussion of determining the meaning of *maśśā*', Michael Floyd[7] gives an overview of etymological attempts to explain the meaning. Some regard *maśśā'* as a noun deriving from the root *nśa*, whilst others express the meaning that it is derived from "lifting one's voice," indicating a pronouncement or proclamation. Floyd however follows the line of thinking of Richard Weis who suggested a definition deriving from the rhetoric of the passage where the term was used. With this approach in mind Floyd reads *maśśā'* as a prophetic *genre.* Weis has distinguished from his research three

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6 De Waard, *A Handbook on Jeremiah,* 105 again gives an extensive discussion in support of the reading in the manuscripts and not the MT reading; also Lundbom, *Jeremiah,* 219.

7 Michael H. Floyd, "The מַשָּׂא *(maśśā')* as a Type of Prophetic Book," *JBL* 121/3 (2002): 401-422.

aspects of note to consider when working with *maśśā'* passages. The first are assertions about YHWH's involvement, followed secondly by clarification of prior revelations from YHWH alluded to in the passage under scrutiny, and thirdly insights on how all of the previous two points will influence matters and the consequences they hold for the future. Floyd successfully applies these insights to some of the Minor prophets, branding *maśśā'* as a type of prophetic book. He however does not discuss the Isaiah occurrences of *maśśā',* and also not Jer 23:33-40. It does not seem that Floyd's conclusion will solve the debate on the meaning of *maśśā'* in 23:33-40, one reason being the passage is too short and only the first two aspects of YHWH's involvement and the future outcome of events would be applicable. The best way of determining the meaning of *maśśā'* still would be to read it in conjunction with the foregoing oracles in the cycle of oracles on prophets in 23:9-32.

D EXEGESIS AND INTERPRETATION

In Jer 23:33 a new prose section consisting of eight verses commences. The passage 23:33-40 is the last oracle in the collection of oracles against the false prophets. Some scholars[8] view this passage as a later addition to the cycle on the prophets, but others[9]regard it as part and parcel of the collection. If the idea is tenable that we have a collection of a number of oracles in some or other way related to or linked to Jeremiah, then it does not matter that 23:33-40 is regarded as a later addition. It is in any case not possible to determine when the individual oracles became part of the collection, but at some stage some people in an editorial role grouped these oracles together under the heading "with regard to the prophets."

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[8] Walter Brueggemann, *A commentary on Jeremiah: Exile & Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), calls 23:33-40 an appendix to the cycle concerning false prophets. Cf. also Armin Lange, *Vom prophetischen Wort zur prophetischen Tradition. Studien zur Traditions- und Redaktionsgeschichte innerprophetischer Konflikte in der Hebräischen Bibel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 278. Lange regards 23:34-40 as "midrashartige Auslegung" of v. 33, dating from the Persian time. The prohibition against using the idiom "maśśā' YHWH" applies, according to Lange, to all contemporary (Persian time) and future prophecies (p. 290).

[9] Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36,* 213-214 is convinced that there is enough evidence to conclude that 23:33-40 is not out of touch with some of the other literature we find in the book of Jeremiah. See also Douglas R. Jones, *Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 315 who defends the prophetic nature of this passage. He sees it as the work of Jeremiah or a prophet in the tradition. Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 272 remarks "there seems to be no good reason for not regarding this prose unit as a reminiscence of an experience of Jeremiah." He regards 23:33-40 as an oracle of disaster intertwined with material with a question-and-answer style.

From the context it seems that Jeremiah[10] receives a word from YHWH which he has to convey to people. What is interesting in v. 33 is the fact that the prophets are not primarily in focus, but the prophets in combination with other people.[11] The sequence of people addressed is "this people, the prophet and a priest." The reference "this people" refers to the people of Judah, and they together with the prophet and a priest are asking about a *maśśā'* of YHWH. The concern is what YHWH has to communicate to the people of Judah in general, but in particular to the prophets and priests as religious functionaries instrumental in conveying what YHWH has to say. A fitting translation for *maśśā'* would therefore seem to be "an oracle" coming from YHWH. Allen[12] offers an attractive suggestion by translating *maśśā'* as "burdensome pronouncement." The concern is what YHWH's revelation to his people is. The answer given clearly sets the tone of this last passage. What is to follow is negative and not what the people wanted to hear. The answer is that the people, including their religious leaders, are nothing but a burden to YHWH, a burden he wants to get rid of, for he will cast them off. As was argued, the intention of the oracle is to play on words, utilising the possible double meaning the word *maśśā'* can have.[13] One gets a sense of irritation and impatience from YHWH in the way these people are answered.

Pete Diamond[14] offers two possible ways of reading v. 33. The first is whether the question the people ask about the *maśśā'* of YHWH is sincere or whether they satirically ask the question to undermine the prophet's role as doom prophet.[15] This should be understood against the background of Jeremiah proclaiming doom and other prophets more inclined to pronounce hope for the future. If this is a possible way of reading v. 33, the harsh response of branding

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[10] Cf. A. R. Pete Diamond, "Jeremiah" *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (ed. James D. G. Dunn and Johm W. Rogerson; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 576. Also Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36,* 214.

[11] Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM, 1986), 476 is of the opinion that the question and answer style employed is between the people and the speaker and that the inclusion of the prophet and priest is secondary. It is the easy way out to declare matters that do not seem to fit as secondary. Perhaps the intention of this last passage is to show that the consequences of prophetic misconduct have detrimental results for all people of Judah. In the end it is the people who suffer because of the failed leadership the prophets supplied.

[12] Allen, *Jeremiah*, 272.

[13] Diamond, "Jeremiah," 576 supports the idea of a pun or wordplay in this prose section as part of the "force of the parody." Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, "The Priests and the Temple Cult in the Book of Jeremiah," in *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (ed. Hans M. Barstad and Reinhard G. Kratz; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 241 regards v. 33 as an ironic utterance.

[14] Diamond, "Jeremiah," 576.

[15] Cf. Georg Fischer, *Jeremia 1-25. Übersetzt und ausgelegt* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 705-706 also mentions the idea of satire in this regard.

the people, priests and prophets as a burden deserving rejection would be fitting. There is support for this view from Lundbom[16] who says, "So we are not talking here about a serious request for a divine oracle, such as Zedekiah made during the final siege of Jerusalem (21:2; 37:3, 17) …but rather a statement by people, prophets, and priests deriding Jeremiah's prophecies of doom or mocking their nonfulfillment."[17]Although one has appreciation for the creative suggestion of understanding the text, I would not read it in this manner, since the response is not from the prophet but from YHWH. In the context of the passage as a whole it does not seem that Jeremiah is trying to defend himself and therefore retaliates with harsh words of condemnation.

Diamond's second suggestion of a possible reading of v. 33 entails that the question the people ask, is regarded as sincere. The question would thus imply that the people of Judah are seeking assurance from YHWH that he will settle matters with the foreign nation threatening them as the oracle against the nations within the prophetic tradition says He would. The people are searching for an oracle against their enemy, but the harsh response to the people is that they are a burden (*maśśā'*) to YHWH. This second proposal seems to be more in line with the meaning of *maśśā'* as "oracle," since the use of the term in the prophets is almost always related to doom. The doom they want for the oppres-

[16] Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, 216. John Hill, "The Book of Jeremiah (MT) and its Early Second Temple Background," in *Uprooting and Planting: Essays on Jeremiah for Leslie Allen* (ed. J. Goldingay; New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 164 sees the use of *maśśā'* as "denoting contempt for the prophet and his oracles." Hill however regards 23:33-40 as a passage composed in the Persian period and as such a passage reflecting conflict with views on prophecy of this period (see his reference to Zech 13:2-6). He states the point that the use of *maśśā'* in Jer 23:33, where this term is forbidden, is at odds with its use in the Persian period where *maśśā'* is "commonly used to introduce new oracles or new sections of a prophetic book (eg. Isa 13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; Zech 9:1; 12:1 Mal 1:1)" (p. 164). However there seems to be a contradiction in Hill's argument, since he states that "authentic prophets and prophecy now belong to the past, not the present" (p. 165). If this is the case, why then would new oracles using the term *maśśā'* be accepted? If one reads the use of *maśśā'* as having meaning and relevance for the time in which Jeremiah acted as prophet, then Hill's argument needs to be reconsidered. This is not to deny that Hill is most probably correct in assuming a Persian date for the composition of some of the written versions of Jeremiah's prophecies. This might be the case for the cycle on the prophets under discussion in this article.

[17] Allen, *Jeremiah,* 273 is of the opinion that the question posed to Jeremiah in v. 33 is derogatory in nature asking what unnecessary burden he now again wants to impose on them. Lange, *Vom prophetischen Wort zur prophetischen Tradition,* 280 remarks about v. 33, "wäre dann…. vor dem Hintergrund einer ironischen Polemik gegen Jeremias Unheilsprophetie zu verstehen. Entweder Jeremia selbst oder ein Schüler reagieren mit polemischer Umkehr auf die ironische Frage, was die Last JHWHs sei: 'ihr seid die Last JHWHs, und ich werde euch fallen lassen – Spruch des Herrn'".

sive nation will be reversed and will apply to them as the people of Judah. This will not only have implications for the religious leaders consisting of the prophets and the priests, but for the people of Judah as a whole.

Verse 34 continues the tone set in v. 33 by again addressing the same group of people, with the exception that the prophets are now addressed first and the people last. In parallel fashion as in v. 33 ("I will cast you off"), it is stated that the message should be clear that the person who dares to say "the *maśśā'* of YHWH" will be punished. But to enhance the ever growing anger of YHWH, not only the individual will suffer the punishment of YHWH, but his household will be included in the act of punishment. If understood correctly, the implication is highlighted that disobedience has consequences not only for the individual, but for the community related to that individual.

From the discussion of the structure it is clear that v. 35 has the purpose of directing the conversation to the pivotal point in v. 36. It is fine for people to talk amongst themselves asking about YHWH's answers and what He has spoken. It is only natural for people who are in some or other relationship with YHWH to ask these kinds of questions, but that is as far as they should go. Verse 36 makes it clear when people will be regarded to have overstepped boundaries when it comes to YHWH talk. According to both vv. 35 and 37 the acceptable way to enquire about what YHWH has revealed to the prophets is to ask "what has YHWH answered?" or "what has YHWH spoken?"[18] People should not raise the issue of the "*maśśā'* of YHWH." Diamond[19] refers to this phrase as an "oracular formula" (v. 33) and says that "that old language has become a tainted symbol" (v. 36). The reason for this taboo seems to be that "the burden is every man's own word."[20] Some people pretend what they say is

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[18] Fischer, *Jeremia 1-25*, 707 relates this question to the Bileam story in Num 23:17 where Balak asks Bileam, "What has the Lord spoken?" Like Balak the person in Jer 23:34 has to be willing to accept the Word of YHWH even if it is an unwelcome word or undesirable word.

[19] Diamond, "Jeremiah," 576. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36,* 220 refers to "*maśśā'* YHWH" as a "tired expression."

[20] In this verse זכר has the meaning of "mention" and not "remember." Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, 218 finds the reference לְאִישׁ דְּבָרוֹ difficult, but supports the view that "his words" refers to a prophet pretending to speak YHWH's words whilst it is actually his own words. He says, "Reference then is not to genuine prophecy but prophecy that misconstrues words of the living God" (218). See Jones, *Jeremiah*, 316 who regards this as an idiomatic expression saying "for the burden is (restricted) to the man of his (the Lord's) word." Fischer, *Jeremia 1-25*, 708 mentions that the double meaning the word *maśśā'* opens up the possibility of seeing irony in this reference to "his word." He says "Das eigene Reden kann den Angesprochenen auch zur Belastung werden." Craigie et al, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 353 supports the view that people present their own words as if they are an oracle from YHWH, but adds that, as

the true revelation of YHWH. By doing this, the authentic words of YHWH are being abused. This is however not the truth, but false claims.[21] Instead of revealing the true revelation from YHWH, they pretend to have special knowledge and therefore lie and mislead the people. This is nothing less than the abuse of the words of the living God.[22] But more than that, what they do "is to pervert the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts, our God" (English Standard Version). As will be argued, this is the key issue in the conflict between the various factions of prophets, but also with other parties practicing forms of divination.

Whereas in v. 35 ordinary people were asking the questions "What has the LORD answered?" or "What has the LORD spoken?" in v. 37 the same questions are repeated but the prophet is addressed this time ("What has the LORD answered you?" or "What has the LORD spoken?"). The difference with v. 35 is that the question is directly to the prophet – "What has the Lord answered ***you***?"[23]

Verse 38 seems to superfluously and almost clumsily repeat the concept the "*maśśā'* of YHWH." This expression occurs three times in this one verse. The people have been continuously saying this is the "*maśśā'* of YHWH" and that in spite of the fact that YHWH has ordered them not do so. The repetitive way of using the expression surely has the function of emphasising that this practice is the root of YHWH's frustration with the people and the prophets. It also serves the purpose of contributing to the rise in tension. It is one thing to pretend to speak words coming from YHWH or pretend to have a dream-revelation, but it is totally unacceptable to dare to pretend to reveal a "*maśśā'* from YHWH." To pretend to have a "*maśśā'* of YHWH" is overstepping a boundary, a transgression that will result in punishment.[24] This is spelled out in vv. 39 and 40.

Following on highlighting the transgression that enraged YHWH, v. 39 is introduced with "therefore" (*lakēn*) as well as a call for attention, behold/look! (*hinněni*) followed by verbs in the first person singular. This is an indication that YHWH is the One who will put the punishment into effect. He will lift them

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Fischer has indicated, in terms of the wordplay, this "word" becomes a burden to that person.

[21] Cf. Thomas W. Overholt, *The Threat to Falsehood: A Study in the Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (London: SCM, 1970), 68-71.

[22] Fischer, *Jeremia 1-25*, 708.

[23] The verb is often used in the book of Jeremiah for revelations from YHWH as is clear from 10:1; 11:17; 13:15; 16:10; 26:13, 19; 27:13 and 30:4.

[24] Brueggemann, *Exile and Homecoming,* 216 regards the attempt by prophets and priests to answer for God presumptuous. He continues by saying that "religious leadership stands under indictment for attempting to curtail and control God's free and full sovereignty."

up and cast them away from his presence. This is a clear indication of rejection of the people and the prophets, but also of the city which YHWH has given to their ancestors and they have inherited. If the argument presented in v. 33 holds water that there is a wordplay between *maśśā'* as an oracle and *maśśā'* as a burden, then it is perhaps not far-fetched to see the same wordplay here in the sense that YHWH will cast them away like a burden one is getting rid of –"I will get rid of you in similar fashion as I will get rid of a burden, I will toss you away."[25]As mentioned before in v. 33, the same verb "to cast away," is used in v. 39.[26] This strengthens the idea of wordplay and the message to the people that YHWH had enough and is rejecting them. There can be no greater rejection than to be cast away from the presence of YHWH and left in the darkness of alienation from YHWH.

But if rejection is not enough, v. 40 announces that YHWH will bring everlasting disgrace to them and shame that will never come to an end and which people will not forget. They will be rejected and be ashamed as a people, because of their disobedience and false pretence. Verse 40 is the culmination of the frustration of YHWH because his word did not benefit the people and because the people of Judah did not receive the true words from Him.

The fact that the expression "*maśśā'* YHWH" occurs seven times in eight verses clearly puts it in the center of discussion. However there is also another concept in this passage that demands attention and that is "the word." The whole issue is about "the word of YHWH." In v. 35 the search is for "what has YHWH answered and what has he spoken?" These questions are repeated in v. 37.In the pivotal verse (v. 36) the concern is about some person's word over against the "word of YHWH." To emphasise the stark contrast between the self-created words of humans over against the true words of YHWH, an extended reference to YHWH is made ("the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts, our God").

A view was presented that within the passage 23:33-40 there is a growing negativity in words and concepts resulting in four negative outcomes in vv. 39 and 40: from "I will cast you off" (v. 33) and "I will punish that man and his household" (v. 34) to "I will surely lift you up" and "I will cast you away from my presence" (v. 39) and "I will bring upon you everlasting disgrace and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten" (v. 40). In vv. 33 and 34 mainly individuals were addressed, whereas in vv. 39 and 40 collectives such as the people and the city are the objects of YHWH's punishment. The growing tension and negativity finally result in rejection of the people of Judah from the

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25 Cf. Carroll, *Jeremiah,* 404, 478.

26 William McKane, *A Critical Commentary on Jeremiah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 602 suggests that the verb נטשׁ in v. 39 should, when it comes to the city Jerusalem, be understood as meaning "abandon."

presence of YHWH, including the city Jerusalem, the place where the temple and the palace were located. YHWH has had it with his people, so much so that it sounds like total rejection and the end of a chapter in Judah's history. The covenant people have been rejected by YHWH, the covenant God.[27]

E JEREMIAH 23:33-40 IN RELATION TO 23:9-32 and 21:11-23:6

When it comes to the composition of the book of Jeremiah, besides a great variety of types of literature, several collections are also to be found. Two such clearly demarcated collections are the cycle on the kings of Judah (22:11-23:6) and the cycle on the prophets (23:9-40). The interest of the present article is first and foremost the cycle on the prophets. This cycle on the prophets consists of the following oracles: 23:9-15; 16-22; 23-24; 25-32 and 33-40.[28] Views differ on how and when this collection was made, but the fact of the matter is it is clearly a topical collection. As is always the case, views differ whether the various oracles are related to each other and whether there is progression in the presentation of the oracles.[29] It does not seem possible to argue for progression in the sense of a systematic development of a theme. However there is a common issue of concern running through the cycle of oracles, and that is the "true word of YHWH." This is perhaps not so strange because prophets are recognised as people of the word. Each one of the oracles takes issue with the fact that the "word of YHWH" did not benefit the people because of certain prophets that are blamed for hampering or obstructing the truth. If it is not the adulterous conduct of prophets which is highlighted (23:9-15), then it is a flawed shalom theology that is on the spot (23:16-22). In Jeremiah 23:25-32 false dreams and acting as prophets without being commissioned to do so obstruct the "word of YHWH" from benefiting the people of Judah. The actions of these prophets are

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[27] Carroll, *Jeremiah,* 478 regards it as incongruent that people are destroyed because of the use of a forbidden cliché. But if this passage is interpreted as proposed and argued, that YHWH has reached the end of his patience with the disregard for the severity of uttering "an oracle from YHWH" falsely and the disobedience of his expressed will, then it is not incongruent. This view is strengthened by the reasoning that if this passage is read in context of the cycle as a whole, a case can be argued that there was a build up in tension from the previous oracles up to the final one in 23:33-40.

[28] Lange, *Vom prophetischen Wort zur prophetischen Tradition,* 285 supports the point that 23:33-40 should be understood and interpreted in terms of the polemic reflected in the cycle of oracles in 23:9-32. There *waw* in v. 33 has the purpose of linking 23:33-40 to the section 23:9-32.

[29] Cf. Carroll *Jeremiah*, 450 does not regard this cycle as a set of criteria for authentic prophecy, but "a collection of discrete elements." However an observation was made that the phrase "word of YHWH" runs through all of these oracles or pieces as Carroll calls them and links them together.

typified as lies (*šĕqĕr*).[30] Although a clear-cut argument cannot be presented for a progression or a continuous development of a case, the theme of "YHWH's word" runs likes a thread through these different oracles.

There is also a line of thinking one can trace throughout the cycle that the deceitful actions of false prophets and other religious functionaries (priests) cause hardship for all the people in Judah. What these religious functionaries do, influence people and have deadly consequences for those who follow their "so-called" divine revelations. Prophecy is not something private, but it is out there in the public domain impacting the lives of ordinary people. The following are examples from the cycle on the prophets to illustrate the point. Quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version and the cursive highlighting is for emphasis:

> **Jer 23:13:** In the prophets of Samaria I saw a disgusting thing: they prophesied by Baal and *led my people Israel astray.*
>
> **Jer 23:15:**…for from the prophets of Jerusalem *ungodliness has spread throughout the land.*
>
> **Jer 23:16:** Thus says the LORD of hosts: Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you; *they are deluding you.* They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.
>
> **Jer 23:17:** They keep saying to those who despise the word of the LORD, *"It shall be well with you"; and to all who stubbornly follow their own stubborn hearts, they say, "No calamity shall come upon you."*
>
> **Jer 23:27:** *They plan to make my people forget my name* by their dreams that they tell one another.
>
> **Jer 23:32:** See, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, says the LORD, and who tell them, *and who lead my people astray* by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or appoint them; *so they do not profit this people at all, says the LORD.*
>
> **Jer 23:34:** And as for the prophet, priest, or the people who say, "The burden of the LORD," *I will punish them and their households.*
>
> **Jer 23:39:** therefore, *I will surely lift you up and cast you away from my presence, you and the city that I gave to you and your ancestors.*

[30] From several passages in the cycle on the prophets it is clear that Jeremiah is blaming his opponents for being deceitful cf. 23:14, 16, 25, 26, 30, 32 and 36.

> **Jer 23:40:** *And I will bring upon you everlasting disgrace and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten.*

It is evident when reading the various oracles in this cycle on the prophets that a harsh tone of condemnation of the actions of a group of prophets is present. Underlying each of these oracles is a strong sense of growing impatience with the falseness of prophets who pretend to hear from YHWH and speak on his behalf. This boils over in 23:33-40. The argument promoted in the present article is that in this last passage in the cycle as we now have it, YHWH is depicted as one who had enough and has reached the end of his patience. It was argued that within 23:33-40 there is a growing line of tension resulting in the rejection of not only the prophets, but also the people of Judah and the city (Jerusalem). Besides the growing tension in the passage itself, Jer 23:33-40 is also the culmination of YHWH's frustration of the cycle as a whole. Jeremiah 23:33-40 brings the cycle on the prophets to a climactic end. The argument put forward here is that this was done purposefully to show that the religious leadership has failed the people of Judah with far-reaching consequences.[31]

If this argument holds true, then it corresponds with the idea that the leadership as a whole in Judah has failed. It was argued in a previous study on the cycle on the kings of Judah (21:11-23:6), that there were signs of tension growing from one oracle to the next, with the vocabulary of the prophet getting harsher and his frustration reaching its peak in Jer 22:24-30.[32] In this last mentioned passage the impression is created that the end of the monarchy is announced with the exile of Jehoiachin and his mother and the announcement that there will be no sons to sit on the throne of David. It therefore seems that there is a parallel case of rejection of the kings as civil leaders and the prophets as religious leaders. The tendency in the two cycles is therefore similar – leadership in Judah has failed YHWH and the people of Judah.[33]

What the text reflects in the kingship cycle are signs of conflict between people holding opposing views and convictions on what will determine the future. The question to be asked is: who is really speaking the "true" words of YHWH? The historical backdrop or setting against which these oracles are placed is the last days before the fall of Judah into the hands of the Babylonians. Sections in the book of Jeremiah signify the prophet Jeremiah as an

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[31] Tiemeyer, The Priests and the Temple Cult in the Book of Jeremiah, 241-242 supports the idea of failed leadership.

[32] Wilhelm J. Wessels, "Jeremiah 22,24-30: A Proposed Ideological Reading," *ZAW* 2 (1989): 246-248. The comparison between 22:24-30 and 23:33-40 should be investigated further to determine whether it has any significance. Both these passages are prose passages following on a series of oracles in both passages in poetic style. Another matter to take note of is the emphasis on land in 22:24-30, but on the city and people in 23:33-40.

[33] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 404, 449-450.

inspired patron of the covenant over against people of the establishment in power defending their interests with the support of religious functionaries such as prophets and priests. The clash is therefore between two sets of convictions on matters such as security, revelations and how to negotiate the future as the people of YHWH.[34] In the cycle 21:11-23:6 the conflict was between Jeremiah and the kings on issues relating to justice, fairness and power. The opposing parties had different views because they understood and interpreted crucial issues such as Davidic kingship, Zion theology and conditions of YHWH's presence in the temple differently. These matters to a great extent determined the opposing positions the parties took on how the future of Judah would turn out or be secured.

In the cycle on the prophets in 23:9-40 the same underlying issues are present, but the arena in which the conflict is displayed is the religious sphere of society. We find opposing views between prophets and occasionally priests on matters of revelation and gaining access to knowledge of YHWH that will determine the future of the people of Judah. The argument in this article is that behind the oracles we have in this collection, a divergence of views exists between religious functionaries about how to inform people on what YHWH has to say.

It would have been easy to simply read these oracles as historical accounts informing us about the last days before the fall of Jerusalem, but the situation is much more complex. The first matter one has to keep in mind is the fact that this is a collection of oracles brought together by an unknown person or group of people. There are no specific historical details surfacing in these oracles and even the name of the prophet Jeremiah, who supposedly is the key figure of these oracles, is not mentioned. It seems clear that these oracles were gathered with a specific purpose in mind, it is however left to us to deliberate, not to say speculate, what this purpose is. We should also acknowledge the fact that what we have in this collection is one side of the story and only by reading it searching for clues that can inform us about the opposing parties, can some suggestions be made about them. As Diamond has indicated, the historical certainties escape researchers all the time. One can therefore only suggest possible scenarios for the compilation and redaction of this collection of oracles.[35]

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[34] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 479 holds the conflict to be between parties over prophetic authority. Cf. also Diamond, "Jeremiah," 576-577 speaks of conflicting groups which he labels as the "Zedekian remnant" on the one side and the "Jeconiah group" on the other side. The framing of the two cycles 21:11-23:6 and 23:9-40 by 21:1-10 and 24:1-10 are indications that such conflict between these "parties" is raging.

[35] Terrence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 340 expresses the view that this passage comes from a time when prophetic voices seemed suspect. He does not pinpoint this period, but hints that it might fit the postexilic period referring to Zech 13:2-6. He is not the first to bring Zech 13:2-6 into play,

F CONCLUSION

In the final instance, the question remains: what does Jer 23:33-40 communicate, taking into account that there are traces of conflict in the passage? The key issue is the perversion of the "words of the living God, the Lord of hosts our God" (v. 36). From the perspective of the dominant view reflected in the text, the words of YHWH are tainted by false claims to have these words.In 23:33-40 the audacity of the people to want a doom oracle (*maśśā'* YHWH) that will guarantee that YHWH is on their side and will settle the score with the enemy, is harshly rejected. There are no limits to the audacity of the religious functionaries who falsely offer their words as a *maśśā'* from YHWH. All of this will result in the rejection of the people and the abandonment of Jerusalem. YHWH has had it with the people, prophets and priests for wanting a *maśśā'* of YHWH for dubious reasons and for falsely pretending to have such knowledge (a *maśśā'*). To pretend to have the word of YHWH is nothing less than deceit and YHWH will not tolerate such deceit. He will act against those who hamper his true words to reach his people. He will punish these wicked people, but also those who follow their false proclamations.

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Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 480 has also done so. Gerald T. Sheppard, "True and False Prophecy Within Scripture," in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation* (ed. Gene M. Tucker, David L. Petersen, and Robert R. Wilson; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 277 also suggest a postexilic dating. He argues that the technical expression *maśśā'* (burden) "became a problem in the postexilic period because of its identification with the prophecies of the last classical prophets, especially those of Malachi (cf. Mal 1:1) and Zechariah (Zech 9:1; 12:1; cf. Nah 1:1)." Lange, *Vom prophetischen Wort zur prophetischen Tradition,* 286-287 as mentioned before, works with a possible dating in the Persian period for 23:33-40. Cf. also Hill, "The book of Jeremiah (MT) and its Early Second Temple Background," 164-167.

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