‘So they do not profit this people at all’ (Jr 23:32). A critique of prophecy

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Dates:
Received: 24 Sept. 2010
Accepted: 05 Apr. 2011
Published: 26 Aug. 2011

How to cite this article:
Wessels, W.J., 2011,’”So they do not profit this people at all” (Jr 23:32). A critique of prophecy’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32(1), Art. #464, 8 pages. doi: 10.4102/ve.v32i1.464

Jeremiah 23:9–40 is a section of the Bible that is dedicated to the issue of true and false prophets. This section follows the cycle of the kings in Jeremiah 21:1–23:8. Both these cycles form part of an editorial unit 21:1–24:10. The kings and the prophets, along with the priests constituted the leadership in Israelite society. The view presented in 21:1–23:40 is that of a failed leadership and the result was the Babylonian exile. In this article the focus is on the prophets who are regarded as false. Jeremiah 23:9–40 is a collection of oracles ascribed to Jeremiah by tradition. In most instances the oracles are of a general nature and lack contextual concreteness. The literary context created by the compilers of 21:1–23:40 is essential to the argument presented in this article. According to Jeremiah 23:32 the false prophets ‘… do not profit the people at all’ (New Revised Standard Version of the Bible [NRSV]). The line of reasoning in this article will be that, as religious leaders, prophets should benefit the people. In the context of 21:1–23:40 they had failed to do this. If the prophets had been in proper communication with Yahweh, they would not have misled the people. From the point of view of the collectors, most probably in an exilic context, the message is clear: the prophets have failed the people, the exile is a reality, and there is no longer any room for false prophets. Jeremiah 23:25–32 makes it clear that, if prophetic words do not profit Yahweh’s people, they should be regarded as false and misleading.

The passage for discussion in this article is Jeremiah 23:25–32. The very last sentence in this passage (v. 32) seems to be the culminating point of the complaint against the opposing prophets: ‘so they do not profit this people at all’. The purpose of this article is to address this issue of prophets benefiting the ordinary people. From this final sentence one can conclude that one of the marks of a true prophet is that ordinary people should benefit from his performance as a prophet. The question will be, ‘What can a prophet contribute to society that will benefit the people?’ If we ask this question in the current context, the highlighting of the negative aspect of the prophets will guide us to what the expectation of the writer (prophet) was. Prophets, according to the classical definition of their function, are supposed to communicate to people the messages they receive from Yahweh (Redditt 2008:6; cf. also Blenkinsopp 1996:28–30).[1] In verse 28 of the passage under discussion Yahweh says: ‘… let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully’ (NRSV). The role of the prophets is to act as channels of communication between Yahweh and the people. Yahweh sends his messages to his covenant people through the prophets he has commissioned for this purpose.

An analysis of Jeremiah 23:25–32

The aforementioned passage[2] forms a unit that should be distinguished from the previous section (23:23–24)[2] that seems to be a freestanding unit. Jeremiah 23:25–28a appears to be a polemic against lying dreams, followed in 28b–29 by a section on Yahweh’s powerful and true words and then judgement pronouncements on prophets in 23:30–32 (Lundbom 2004:203; Craigie, Kelly & Drinkard 1991:348).[3] 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 Yahweh who is making his dissatisfaction with how some of the prophets acted known. The oracular nature of this passage (23:25–32) is emphasised by the frequent use of the affirmation formula (*Jahwespruchformel* according to Vetter 1976:2) says Yahweh [נְאֻם־יהוה]’. It is used no less than eight times in this passage.[4] The first person singular speaker continues to the end of the passage

1.See Blenkinsopp (1995:115–165) for an extensive discussion of the definition, roles, location and other relevant issues regarding the prophets in ancient Israel.

2.For a discussion and possible relevance of these two verses to 23:25–32, see Lemke (1981:541–555). See also Thompson (1980:499–501) and Brueggemann (1998:213–214) who regard 23:23-24 as part of 23:25–32.

3.Lundbom (2004:211) views the time of the early reign of King Zedekiah, 597 to 594 BCE, as a likely date for the raging conflict between Jeremiah and other prophets.

4.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 ‘[נְאֻם־יהוה] says Yahweh’ 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.

in verse 32. A new section commences in 23:33 with a direct speech sentence addressing the prophet Jeremiah.

Section 23:25–32 seems to consist of poetic verses in verses 28–29, with 25–27 and 30–32 in prose. Some regard 23:28–29 as the words of Jeremiah, with the prose sections as additions by a traditionalist (belonging to the Deuteronomistic movement) in the exilic period (cf. Nicholson 1970:102). However, the tendency to ascribe sections that do not seem to fit, as in the aforementioned case, to editorial involvement is at times the easy way out. The passage in 23:25–32 shows some coherence with repetition of key words and phrases and the progressive development of thought to the climax in 23:32. An analysis of the passage under discussion reveals the following aspects.

Yahweh addresses the prophets in verse 25. They claim to have had dreams, but these are dismissed as prophesying lies [שֶׁקֶר] in Yahweh's name. The key words are: 'prophets', 'dreams' and 'lies' [שֶׁקֶר]. Verse 26 continues, again blaming the prophets for lies and deceit. Verse 27 once more focuses on dreams as a means of distracting the people of Judah from Yahweh. The dreams do the same thing that Baal did to their ancestors – they make them forget about Yahweh.[5]

The next verse, 23:28, again raises the issue of dreams. It seems that real dreams, which are not fabrications of the prophets' imaginations, are acceptable. An important aspect is brought into the discussion with the 'false' prophets, and that is the 'word of Yahweh'. There is a requirement for this word: it should be spoken faithfully [אֱמֶת]. An interesting contrast is drawn between straw (chaff) and grain (wheat). Straw has no substance whereas wheat is useful as food (Fretheim 2002:339). The dreams these so-called prophets produce are like straw, whereas the 'word of Yahweh' is powerful and, like wheat, of great value (cf. Thompson 1980:502; McKane 1986:593; Rudolph 1968:155). The key words in this verse are: 'prophets', 'dreams', 'my word' and 'says Yahweh' [נְאֻם־יהוה].

In Jeremiah 23:29 the theme of the 'word of Yahweh' continues. Two rhetorical questions are asked with regard to the 'words of Yahweh'. The power of the word 'Yahweh' is emphasised by comparing it to fire and to a hammer that breaks mountain rocks. The key words are: 'words of Yahweh' and 'נְאֻם־יהוה' [*says Yahweh*].

Verse 30 continues with the theme of Yahweh's word. This verse is introduced by לָכֵן[6] [*therefore*] followed by a demonstrative particle 'behold' and 'נְאֻם־יהוה' [*says Yahweh*]. The word used against the prophets is a word for 'stealing': stealing Yahweh's words from each other. Key words are therefore: 'prophets', 'my words' and 'נְאֻם־יהוה' [*says Yahweh*].

In the next verse, verse 31, the sentence is introduced in the same way as in verse 30 with a demonstrative particle 'behold' and 'נְאֻם־יהוה' [*says Yahweh*], followed by an accusation against the prophets. They are under scrutiny for pretending to speak what Yahweh declares, but it is their own tongues that speak.

Everything expressed in the previous verses culminates in verse 32. In a sense, it is a summary of verses 23:25–31 (McKane 1986:595). The sentence is introduced in the same way as in verses 30 and 31 with the demonstrative particle and the accusation against the prophets,[7] but this time the false speaking and the dreams are combined as 'those who prophesy lying or false [שֶׁקֶר] dreams', followed by 'נְאֻם־יהוה' [*says Yahweh*]. The sentence proceeds with a second mention of the lies [שֶׁקֶר] the prophets tell and the effect they have on the people. The key words are again: 'prophet', 'dreams', 'lies' [twice שֶׁקֶר], 'נְאֻם־יהוה'(repeated twice). An important phrase is used here to emphasise the real issue held against these 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, Yahweh has not commissioned them (cf. Dt 18:20).

The concluding sentence, 'so they do not profit this people at all', which is the topic of this article, explains that these prophets did not profit or benefit the people of Judah at all. We find the verb 'profit' [יעל] in its *hif'il* form 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; Is 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 or 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. The people will definitely not benefit from what these prophets communicate; on the contrary, it will have a damaging and corrupting effect on the people of Judah (cf. McKane 1986:595).[8]

The analysis has shown that verses 25 and 32 correspond directly and form an *inclusio* (Craigie *et al.* 1991:348). Verse 25 raises the issues of the critique of prophets who tell lies or speak falsely in Yahweh's name and their claim to have had dreams. Jeremiah 23:26 continues with the reference to prophets prophesying lies. This verse refers to the 'deception of their hearts'. There is a close parallel to this verse in

5.In an interesting article on the use of language in the book of Jeremiah, under the heading of Vilification of his Opponents, Domeris (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 Yahweh – as happened previously to the ancestors who forgot his name in favour of that of Baal. He 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'.

6.According to McKane (1986:593), the particle, לָכֵן [therefore] (Jr 23:30 WTT), 'introduces a series of threats against prophets who are imposters'.

7.The sentence 'I am against the prophets …' is repeated three times in verses 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 Yahweh; 'I am against those …' who prophecy lying dreams. Stulman (2005:217–218) calls this repetition 'a haunting threefold declaration' against the prophets.

8.McKane (1986:595) regards the concluding statement at the end of verse 32 as an application of the device of litotes [understatement]. He refers to cases where it was applied to idols (v. 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'.

Jeremiah 14:14 which refers to the 'delusion or deceit of their hearts', 'they are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds' (NRSV). The context is important because verse 14:13 explains that the deception emanating from these prophets is to assure the people of peace. They are under threat from the enemy but these prophets refuse to see the reality and preach a false security (cf. Overholt 1970:67).

Verse 27 focuses on dreams whereas verse 28 refers to both true dreams and true words from Yahweh. Verses 28–30 emphasise the importance of the word of Yahweh, its truth and the power of his word. Verse 31 again shifts the focus to the lie of pretending to speak what Yahweh has said. This leads to the next verse, the culminating verse (v. 32) or the summary of the passage where prophets, dreams, lies, and commission as prophets all come together. The victims of the lies and deceit are the people of Judah who get nothing constructive or beneficial out of the deal.

In the passage under discussion several key words and phrases appear which highlight what the concern of Yahweh with the false prophets is. One of these words is the concept of deceit or falseness [שֶׁקֶר]. Another key word is the concept 'the word' of Yahweh. A third concept repeated four times in the passage is the matter of dreams. A fourth matter that needs mentioning is the reference to 'my name *or* in my name' and a fifth is the repetition of נְאֻם־יהוה [*says Yahweh*].

The focus in this passage is on false communication by those who are not commissioned to represent Yahweh. They claim their revelation is through 'dreams'.

Discussion of the key words in Jeremiah 23:25–32

Certain key words were mentioned in the earlier section of this article. In this section of the article these words will be discussed.

שֶׁקֶר [*Lies* or *deception*]

The first word that needs attention is the word 'lies' or 'falseness' [שֶׁקֶר].[9] In the current context it implies that some prophets are prophesying in Yahweh's name, but what they are conveying are lies. The means by which they claim to have received his word is dreams (23:25). Verse 26 makes it clear that the deceit is in their 'hearts'. It is their own thoughts that they speak; they are the source of the messages – not Yahweh. What they communicate therefore is nothing less than lies and deceit. The passage ends in verse 32, saying that Yahweh is not in favour of these prophets prophesying false dreams. Either the dreams did not occur or they are pretending to have had dreams. Therefore the content cannot be regarded as words from Yahweh. These prophets spreading their false dreams are regarded as reckless or irresponsible for doing so.

9.For a thorough discussion of שֶׁקֶר [*lies or deception*] in the theology of Jeremiah, see Overholt (1970:86–104). Sharp (2003:113) warns that this concept should not be treated in an abstract generalised way, but in the various literary contexts in which it appears.

Because it is not the truth coming from Yahweh, it is causing the people to stray, setting them on a wrong path. This is not to the benefit of the people because it leads them away from Yahweh. Verse 32 makes it perfectly clear that the root of the problem lies in the fact that these prophets were not called to be Yahweh's prophets. Inauthentic prophets can do nothing but communicate inauthentic or false revelations (messages).

In verse 6:13 the word שֶׁקֶר [*lies* or *falseness*] is used in the context of the total depravity of the Judean society. The priests' and the prophets' false conduct of enriching themselves is an inextricable part of the corruption in society (also v. 8:10). Jeremiah 8:8 uses the term in connection with the falsification of the law of Yahweh by the scribes. In 9:2 the word is used in contrast to the word 'truth' and depicts the state of unfaithfulness of the people of Judah to their God. Jeremiah 9:4 uses the word in terms of ordinary Judeans speaking lies to each other in their communities. The term is also used in 10:14 to indicate the folly of making and worshipping false gods (also in v. 16:19; 51:17). The word שֶׁקֶר [*lies*] is used in several places in the book of Jeremiah in contexts similar to the one in chapter 23:9–40 that deal with conflict between factions of prophets. Jeremiah 14:14 has the following to say:

> And the LORD said to me: The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds.
>
> (NRSV)

This verse comes from a context featuring the prophecy that disasters such as drought and wars will take place, but this was countered by opposing prophetic groups as being untrue. The falseness of the messages of these prophets, according to Jeremiah, lies in the fact that they prophesy peace and prosperity. Jeremiah knew that these false prophecies would have disastrous consequences for ordinary Judeans.

The next group of texts focuses on the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah regards the denial of the threat of the Babylonian exile as false prophecy (cf. 27:10, 14, 16). In 28:15 Jeremiah and the prophet Hananiah are in conflict about the yoke of the Babylonian dominance. Jeremiah denounces Hananiah's prophecies to the Judeans as lies. In the same vein 29:21, 23 and 30 all deal with false words regarding the Babylonian exile and the oppression of the people (Overholt 1970:92–96). The use of שֶׁקֶר [*lies*] in 37:14; 40:16 and 40:2 relates to people telling lies and not to prophesying lies.

It is important to take note of Overholt's discussion of this term. He says, 'the term שֶׁקֶר [*lies*] implies the operation of a destructive power, and this is peculiarly applicable to the social, political, and religious situation in which the prophet worked'. In his discussion he refers to the correlative concept אֱמֶת [*truth*]. In a society such as the one in Judah, the concepts of justice and truth presuppose a covenant relationship (Overholt 1970:101–102). The presence of these concepts in a society would testify to the fact that it is a healthy society. A society where these matters were not functional would fall in the category of שֶׁקֶר [*lies*], something, as we have seen,

was often the case according to Jeremiah. Overholt (1970:103) believes that such a broken society can be characterised by the term שֶׁקֶר [*lies*] which 'points to the empty centre of the communal life'.

In the passage under discussion (Jr 23:25–32), we should take note of the use of שֶׁקֶר [*lies*] which is associated with the false prophets in contrast with the word אֱמֶת [*truth*] which is associated with 'Yahweh's word' (23:28). In terms of what Overholt has argued in this regard, the destructive force of שֶׁקֶר [*lies*] should be countered by the powerful truth of 'Yahweh's word'. It is a matter of chaff and wheat (23:28), as was mentioned earlier. The false prophets are therefore not simply telling lies; they are agents of a destructive force in the communal life of Judah. They therefore do not benefit the people of Judah.

From the overview that has been provided, it is clear that the word שֶׁקֶר [*lies*] is often used in the book of Jeremiah to depict the conflict between Jeremiah and opposing prophets. From the perspective of the collectors and editors of the Jeremiah oracles it is clear that the prophet Jeremiah is regarded as the true prophet and the others as false prophets. These false prophets were those who supported the Royal-temple and Zion ideals – those who were giving religious backing to the rulers and people in power to promote and sustain these ideals. Although the oracles in the cycle opposing the prophets (23:9–40) are vague and lack context, it does not seem far-fetched to see the opponents of Jeremiah as those who formed part of the official governing structures. People such as Pashhur (20:1–6) and Hananiah fall in this category of people opposing Jeremiah.

חֲלוֹם [*A dream*]

In terms of the passage under discussion, the falseness of prophets is expressed in terms of fake dreams. Dreams are mentioned in Jeremiah 23:27, 28, 32; 27:9 and 29:8. In Jeremiah 23; however, dreams are not seen in a positive light, but as fabrications of people's minds. Only in verse 28 is there a somewhat positive allusion to dreams; for the rest, dreams are mentioned in the same breath as falseness or deceit. In Jeremiah 27:9 dreamers are rejected as people who carry false messages about the yoke of the Babylonians over the people of Judah. They are mentioned amongst the following people:

> You, therefore, must not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your soothsayers, or your sorcerers, who are saying to you, 'You shall not serve the king of Babylon'.
>
> (NRSV)

In a letter to the exiles in Babel (cf. 29:8), there is the same rejection of dreams as in the previous case. In this context prophets and diviners are seen as those who deceive the people, as Yahweh has not appointed nor sent them.

In the Ancient Near East, dreams were often regarded as authentic ways of gaining access to the will of a deity and the revelation of his or her word. Dreams as a medium of communication are common in the Old Testament (cf. Budd 1975:511–512). Some people regarded dreams as a legitimate way of conveying divine content (Huey 1993:218; cf. Job 33:14–18 and 1 Sm 28:6). At times they were associated with sanctuaries such as Bethel (Gn 28:12ff – Ja), Shiloh (1 Sm 3 – Samuel) and Gibeon (1 Ki 3:4–15 – Solomon). In most instances, the meaning conveyed in dreams was obvious to the dreamer (cf. Gn 20:3; 31:10–13 and 1 Ki 3:4–15). We, however also know of instances where dreams had to be interpreted to the dreamer – as in the cases of Joseph in Egypt (Gn 37 and following chapters) and Daniel for the king of Babel (Dn 2:27–28).

Whereas dreams as such were not regarded negatively and were seen as a means of divine revelation, the Jeremiah tradition as discussed here is more cautious about dreams. In the book of Zechariah (10:2) the prophet warns against the emptiness of dreams. In Deuteronomy 13:2ff a stern warning is issued against prophets or dreamers who want to seduce the people by encouraging them to follow other gods. Accusations against false prophets are seen as serious and Jeremiah's accusations should be regarded in the same light. According to Deuteronomy 18:20 falseness is punishable by death (Wilson 1995:244).

In a short article on dreams, Smith-Christopher (2000:356–357) has shown that there was an early Hebrew ambivalence towards the trustworthiness of dreams. He agrees with the importance of dreams as shown in many instances in the Old Testament but expresses the view that dreams 'were considered among the least trustworthy forms of divining' and should be seen as belonging to the wider category of omens. He regards the prominence of dreams as the influence of the Hellenistic interest in dreams, which places it in the later phases of development of the Old Testament (cf. Daniel). Judging from the Jeremiah 23:25–32 passage, Jeremiah seems to have been one of those who doubted the trustworthiness of dreams.

Dreams should therefore be critically considered and both the authenticity of the dreamer and the contents conveyed in a dream should be questioned. The outcome of dreams should also be viewed in a serious light. In the case of the Jeremiah passages, the authenticity of the prophets was in doubt. The prophet in the cycle on the oracles that oppose the prophets therefore questioned both the commission of the dreaming prophets and the content of their dreams.

In a very enlightening discussion on prophets and dreams, Lester Grabbe (1995:145–148) challenges the idea that dreams were an unimportant means of divine communication. He is probably correct in arguing that sentiments such as the negativity towards prophetic dreams that we find in Jeremiah, should be treated in context and on merit rather than being generalised. He argues that, in many instances, there is little if any difference between visions and dreams (1995:147), and he might be correct in his thinking. However, it is not insignificant that there are so few references to dreams in allusions to prophets in the Old Testament. And, moreover, it is not insignificant that Jeremiah finds the false prophets and their dreams problematic. There is a concentration of references to this in Jeremiah 23:25–32. In line with Grabbe's argument that cases should be treated

on merit, one has to assume that Jeremiah or the speaker or speakers of the oracles in the cycle that is critical of the kings had a specific issue with these prophets and their dreams. A consideration of 23:27 seems to indicate that the effect of the dreams was to cause the people to forget Yahweh, which was detrimental to people in a covenant relationship with him. Perhaps Overholt (1970:66–67) is correct when he says that the problem is not so much with dreams themselves as a form of divine communication, as with the content and effect they had on the people of Jeremiah's society (cf. also Fretheim 2002:338).

The view that Carroll (1986:472) promotes is that we should see the contrast between 'word of Yahweh' and dreams as a difference in ideological position. The ideological view expressed in the text gives preference to the prophetic word and shows disregard for dreams. He is of the opinion that we should not see the passage in 23:25–32 as setting another criterion (in contrast to Weiser 1969:211) for true and false prophesy, but '… as the output of an ideological conflict either between prophetic parties or against prophets' (Carroll 1986:474). This way – in his view – it can help to avoid inconsistencies and contribute to the construction of the tradition. If, however, the focus is not so much on the means of delivery but on the content and the effect of the prophetic revelation, then Carroll's ideological argument is no longer as forceful. The שֶׁקֶר [*false or deceitful*] content of communications of the 'false' prophets resulted in leading the people astray, created a false sense of security and hope and finally made them 'forget' and disregard Yahweh. The outcome was disastrous and the Babylonian exile was the result.

Another factor – raised by Grabbe (1995:145–148) – to keep in mind is the issue of dreams and divination. In a discussion of prophecy and divination, Overholt (1989:145) includes dreams as part of the topic. Smith-Christopher's (2000:357) view that the broader category to which dreams belong is that of omens is in line with the thinking of Overholt. There seem to be elements in the oracles opposing the prophets in Jeremiah, which indicate that we should take note of this view. Firstly, there is the almost 'magic' relationship between the impurity of the prophets – their sin and transgressions – and the devastating effect on the land (23:9–15). Secondly the whole matter of appearing in the council of Yahweh (23:18, 22) has a ring of mythology to it. If one adds dreams as a means of divination (23:25–32) and all the indications are that there is an underlying worldview – not strange to Ancient Near Eastern thought – regarding divine communication that we have to take into account.

בִּשְׁמִי [*In my name*]

In his critique Jeremiah accuses the false prophets of speaking their lies in Yahweh's name. To their audience they pretend it is Yahweh's word they are delivering. The fact that they spoke in the name of Yahweh disturbed Jeremiah. To do something in the name of Yahweh means doing it on His behalf, with His sanction.[10] It is therefore a claim to authenticity. This claim to authenticity is a major issue for Jeremiah and the Jeremiah tradition. It comes down to the question of the legitimacy of the prophets, a matter of concern to Jeremiah, which the tradition wants to rectify. History has proved Jeremiah to be a true prophet. Jeremiah uses the term שֶׁקֶר [*deception*] to typify the false nature of false prophets' messages to the people of Judah.

נְאֻם־יהוה [*Says Yahweh*]

Another aspect that needs attention is the frequent use of נְאֻם־יהוה [*says Yahweh*] in the passage in Jeremiah 23:25–32. Vetter (1976:1–3) gives an overview of how the formula developed over time and also acknowledges its frequent use in the book of Jeremiah.[11] He calls its use by the Old Testament prophets a *Jahwespruchformel* and sees its function 'zur Bekräftigung der im Prophetenwort redenden ersten Person Gottes gebraucht'. About the repetitive use of the formula in 23:23–32 Jones says the following:

> Jeremiah by this means affirms that the true prophet alone can use this solemn expression. In his view the others dare not let it pass their lips. In contrast, their dreams, which they claimed to be divine communication by means of the phrase נְאֻם־יהוה, are but the figment of their scheming imaginations.
>
> (Jones 1992:312)

In Jeremiah 23:32 the main criterion for being a prophet of Yahweh is that Yahweh commissions and appoints people to be prophets. In the instance under discussion, Jeremiah denies that these so-called false prophets were sent and appointed by Yahweh.

To some of the prophets, we know from the prophetic tradition in the Old Testament, mention of their calling was important. Examples are Isaiah's calling in Isaiah 6 and others: Jeremiah 1, Amos 3:8, Micah 3:8 to name but a few. This was necessary so that they could have divine sanction to function and speak as prophets.

My people did not benefit: Preliminary conclusion

When looking at the oracle in 23:25–32 in the light of the critique that the people do not benefit from these prophets, we can conclude the following.

As stated before, it seems that the oracles in the cycle on the prophets first existed separately, before they had been assembled to form a collection. The occasion for the oracle in 23:25–32 is not clear,[12] but we can still deduce some ideas that are worth noting. The obvious answer to the question (What would benefit the people of Judah?) posed in verse 32 would be to receive the true words from Yahweh. What the people need to hear from a prophet are revelatory words

10.Thompson (1980:501) regards the reference to the 'name' of Yahweh as a reference to 'the essential character of Yahweh' (cf. Ex 3:13–14; Is 9:6).

11.Carroll (1986:470) ascribes the 'liberally sprinkled' use of this for phrase to the redaction of the cycle.

12.Most commentators relate the oracles to a time before the fall of Jerusalem but, as Carroll (1986:449–450) has indicated, if the conflict with the prophets in Jeremiah 27–29 is taken into account, then a date between 597 and 587 seems plausible. Carroll also refers to the anti-prophetic conflict in Zech 13:2–6 as a possible time to date the oracles, thus a post-exilic date (cf. also Werner 1997:205). If taken or calculated from the view of the collection of the oracles into a cycle on false prophets as part of the idea of failed leadership, then an exilic date seems more likely (see Nicholson 1979:103 with regard to a possible exilic date; also Holladay 1986:642).

from Yahweh. Jeremiah reluctantly concedes that dreams might serve the purpose, but the general tone of the passage suggests that he has serious doubts about the effect of the dreams – even more so if the dreams are either self-created fake dreams or dreams taken over from somebody else. These are judged to be lies that come from deceitful prophets. To conclude, the people of Judah will only benefit from divine words communicated by true prophets sanctioned and appointed by Yahweh (cf. Carroll 1986:470).

The people do not benefit from these lies because they will not reveal to them what Yahweh has to communicate regarding the way they are living and decisions they are making. The critique of these prophets is that they are false, liars, pretenders – reckless and irresponsible people. They neither have any commission from Yahweh nor did he appoint them (cf. Schreiner 1981:142). The people do not benefit from them because, in the first place, their self-created dreams and words of revelation will lead the people of Judah astray and, secondly, they will cause them to forget the name of Yahweh. If the connection made with 14:1–14 is correct, then the assurance of peace should be regarded as part of the deceitfulness of these prophets, because it has created a false sense of security (cf. Holladay 1986:644).

Jeremiah 23:25–32 in its literary context of 23:9–40

It is clear from the oracles in Jeremiah 23:9–40, as with the whole tradition surrounding the prophets of the Old Testament that the expectation of prophets was to communicate or reveal what Yahweh had to say to his covenant people. These communicators were said to have had to be commissioned by Yahweh to serve as prophets. They could not appoint themselves or authenticate themselves. Yahweh had to send them (cf. 23:21) and to appoint them (cf. 23:32).

Analysis of the book of Jeremiah clearly shows that the cycle of oracles as a collection was purposefully assembled and structured. It was probably performed in order to address issues in the society of the collectors or editors of the text, the nature of which is difficult for us to determine with certainty. If the thesis is correct that the two cycles in 21:1–24:10 are about failed leadership, we should read 23:25–32 in terms of this idea.

The argument at the beginning of this article was that 23:25–32 should be treated as a separate unit. It was also indicated that some scholars regard 23:23–24 as part of the passage 23:23–32. This is important within the context of the cycle because 23:23 suggests that Yahweh is nearby and not far off (v. 23) and assures that he cannot be avoided (v. 24). Commenting on this, Brueggemann (1998:213–214) says that the nearness alludes to the temple ideology, whereas the reference to distance points to his freedom and sovereignty. The implication of this view is that Yahweh is distant from the dominant establishment theology and its advocates in the prophets opposing Jeremiah. Brueggemann therefore regards 23:23–32 as a dispute between two groups of prophets promoting different theological traditions. He proceeds to argue that the real issue therefore is a defense of Yahweh's sovereignty and freedom and that the legitimacy of the false prophets is a secondary issue (Breuggemann 1998:214–215). Brueggemann's thesis is an interesting and informative interpretation of the true-and-false issue and brings the broader theological perspective of the book of Jeremiah into play. However, true as it may be, the emphasis in the passage is on the lies, the deceit and illegitimacy of these prophets who act without being commissioned to be prophets of Yahweh.

The oracles in the cycle also make it clear that the prophets can only speak what they have received from Yahweh. The stipulation is that they should come into the council of Yahweh (cf. 23:18, 22) to receive the words or messages they had to convey to the people. Another means of receiving a message was through a vision [חָזוֹן – cf. 23:16]. From the passage under discussion, it seems that dreams were accepted as a means of receiving revelations from Yahweh (23:28). A condition however is that a dream should be authentic. It should not be a fabrication by a prophet (from his own heart) or from somebody else under the pretence that it is original.

The critique levelled at these 'false' prophets is focused on authenticity, the opposite of lies or falseness [שֶׁקֶר]. Part of this authenticity is for a prophet to be commissioned (appointed and sent by Yahweh), to receive a message or revelation from Yahweh himself (his council or from a dream). In whatever mode or manner they receive their message, if it is authentic, then it is the Word of Yahweh. The requirement is that Yahweh's word should not be fabrications from a prophet's own heart or from a lying tongue. Jeremiah 23:9 speaks of Yahweh's holy words and 23:29 of his powerful words. Furthermore, prophets should speak in the Name of Yahweh and in no other god's name. The prophets themselves should be loyal to Yahweh and his covenant. They should therefore live in obedience to Yahweh's stipulations (cf. 23:9–15) and this, in turn, would set an example to the people of Judah.

The aim of the oracle in 23:25–32 in the context of the cycle of oracles against the prophets would then be to point out that these prophets were self-appointed with no sanction to prophesy in Yahweh's name and that their revelations were not regarded as true words from Yahweh (cf. Diamond 2003:576). Not even their claims to have special revelations through dreams could prove them legitimate. Their lies were part of the reason why the people of Judah had landed up in exile in Babel. The people followed their advice but were, in fact, led astray.[13] This view then entails the notion that the cycle was purposefully created, probably by people in exile, reflecting on why they were dispersed and on what had gone 'theologically' wrong.[14]

Whilst the oracles in Jeremiah 23:9–40 were reflected on, two ways of interpreting them were already being mentioned. One was to treat each of these oracles in the cycle separately as a stand-alone oracle. If they are regarded as reflections

13. Long (1981:45) argues that the conflict between Jeremiah and other prophets was situational. He says 'there must have been ideological disagreements on specific issues, and in the Book of Jeremiah we see these issues by editorial choice circling around the threat of Babylonian conquest and the fate of Jerusalem and its exiles'.

14. McKane (1986:596–597) mentions this possibility but is not convinced that we should entertain the idea of an exilic date. McKane concludes that, in all probability, the oracles do not derive from the prophet Jeremiah.

of the time of Jeremiah, the prophet, as presented to us in the book of Jeremiah, then we should ask what the prophet had in mind for his society. As freestanding oracles, they do not offer much detail or reflect any specific context. They therefore offer more general, essentially negative, views on (the) prophets (cf. Carroll 1986:449–450). The second way of reading the separate oracles such as 23:25–32 is to interpret them in terms of the literary contexts of 23:9–40 and even of 21:1–24:10. A third possibility is to follow the suggestion by Smith-Christopher (2000:356–357) that dreams gained prominence in the Hellenistic period and that the passage under discussion shows that dreams are not a reliable source of divine communication. History proves that the people of Judah did not benefit when prophets offered the people dreams as the word of Yahweh. The growing interest in dreams in this period should therefore be tempered and people should be cautious because, as has been shown, the people of Judah did not benefit from this preoccupation. If this idea is plausible, then, 23:25–32 is a warning against this tendency that was gaining popularity.

All three options are possible ways of approaching the oracles that opposed the false prophets, but the first two options seem less vague than the third one at this stage of the research results.

Conclusion

In the research on the book of Jeremiah, to speak of the prophet Jeremiah as a historical figure seems problematic. It seems an extreme view to regard the prophet exclusively as a literary creation (cf. Carroll 1986:55–64), although we should take note of the fact that the picture we have of the prophet comes from the editors of the Old Testament books and the tradition that preserved these written documents.[15] Jeremiah is presented as a Mosaic prophet in opposition to prophets who were part of the Jerusalem contingent of government (cf. Wilson 1995:343–344). It is likely, as Wilson has indicated, that the oracles opposing the prophets are based on theological differences, as well as on various social and political associations.[16] In this regard, the oracles of Jeremiah served the purpose of discrediting his opponents.

Those who shared Jeremiah's convictions were probably the people who collected and edited his oracles into a cycle. The catastrophe of the exile prompted some people to re-evaluate and represent some of the traditions (Middlemas 2007:7). The fact that the exile became a reality legitimized the position and theology of Jeremiah (Berquist 1989:138). Those who were responsible for preserving the Jeremiah oracles therefore held the leadership structures in Jerusalem responsible for failed leadership (cf. Diamond 2003:576).[17] If they had acted in ways that benefited the people of Judah, the exile could have been avoided. The cycle of oracles against the false prophets vindicates Jeremiah's position in tradition as the true prophet of Yahweh (cf. Berquist 1989:138). The divine word spoken by the true prophet was triumphant over the dreams of the false prophets (cf. Carroll 1986:479).

15.See the view of Diamond (2003:576–577) who speaks of a 'stylized, symbolic, representational imaginative landscape – "Jeremiah"'. He also uses terminology such as 'the fictive arena, "Jeremiah"'.

16.Jeremiah and the people who supported his views, most probably had ideological differences with those prophets they regarded as false. It deserves another investigation to address the issue whether the opposing prophets deliberately lied or whether it was perceived as such because of the ideological bias.

17.It was important for those people who looked back at the exile to understand what went wrong. Israel needed to have a good understanding of their guilt that caused the exile to take place. Such an explanation and understanding would serve the purpose of profiting the people of Israel and Judah.

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