

Jeremiah and the False Prophets

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Prophetic conflicts and disputes are the focus of several passages in the book of Jeremiah. Though these passages are scattered, it is possible to group them into three headings, namely: fragments of oracles against the prophets (Jer 5:12-13, 30-31; 6:13-14 [= 8:10b-11]; 14:13-16); a collection of oracles against prophetic opponents (Jer 23:9-40); and narratives of conflicts with prophetic opponents (Jer 27-29). In these passages, the prophet Jeremiah is in conflict with prophetic opponents whose prophecies he condemns as *false*.

This study examines what the book of Jeremiah offers as criteria for discerning the true and authentic from the false and spurious prophecy.

Fragments of Oracles against the Prophets

The first chapters of the book are considered to belong to the early periods of Jeremiah's prophetic activity.¹ In these chapters,

¹ According to the editorial information (Jer 1:1), Jeremiah began work as a prophet in or around 627 BC, the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign (640-609 BC). It is generally agreed that the oracles in chapters 1-6 belong to the prophet's early years (627-622) prior to Josiah's reform initiative. Many of the prophecies of chapters 7-20, 25-26, and 35-36 are dated to the time of Jehoiakim's reign (609-598 BC). See Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20* (Anchor Bible 21A; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 224; Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 1-3; Barry L. Bandstra,

one can encounter short fragments of sayings directed against the prophets.

1. Jeremiah 5:12-13 is an indictment against prophets who have spoken falsely about Yahweh's oracle (vv. 10-11), announcing the destruction of Judah for its infidelity.

They have spoken falsely of the LORD, and have said, "He will do nothing.

No evil will come upon us, and we shall not see sword or famine."

The prophets are nothing but wind, for the word is not in them.

Thus shall it be done to them!²

They are heard making statements that Jeremiah considers a lie. Instead of being filled with Yahweh's spirit, they are "bags of wind."

2. Jeremiah 5:30-31 equates the "appalling and horrible" happenings in the land to the actions of the prophets who prophesy falsely and of the priests who rule at their direction.

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct;

my people love to have it so,
but what will you do when the end comes?

The term *shamma*, appalling (thing), normally refers to the dreadful event of devastation which is Yahweh's punishment sent against a sinful people.³ Here, it is the behavior of prophets and

Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004), 337, 339.

² Texts are according to the New American Bible, unless otherwise indicated.

³ F. Stolz, "smm to lie deserted," in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. III (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 1374 [Hereafter *TLOT*]. Thomas W. Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood* (London: SCM Press, 1970) concludes: "Thus, the falsehood that the prophets proclaim is itself a destructive force" (73).

priests that is appalling and horrible – prophets are liars and priests follow their directives!

3. Jeremiah 6:13-15 [= 8.10b-12] attacks the general corruption of the people, particularly of the prophets and priests who, greedy for unjust gain, placate the people into a false sense of security.

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy
for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.
They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.
They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;
yet they were not ashamed, they did not know how to blush.
Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;
at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,
says the LORD.

The Hebrew term for "peace" is *shalom*, which means more than an absence of conflict. It signifies personal and community well-being.⁴ The problem here is that certain prophets are talking "well-being" when there is none (cf. Jer 4:10).⁵ Repeated "peace" talk of the prophets (and priests) becomes loathsome when there is no peace.

4. Jeremiah 14:13-16 states that the other prophets are false because, in spite of preaching in the divine name, they have not been sent by Yahweh, nor have they been commanded by him nor has he spoken to them.

Then I said: "Ah, Lord GOD! Here are the prophets saying to them, 'You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you true peace in this place.'" 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.

⁴ G. Gerleman, "slm to have enough," *TLOT*, 1337-48.

⁵ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 431.

Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name though I did not send them, and who say, "Sword and famine shall not come on this land": By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed.

They prophesy lies in the divine name, lies that come from their own deceitful minds.⁶ They will succumb to the very sword and famine they deny.

It should be noted that the verbs *send*, *command*, and *speak* used in this passage have significant connotation in the Jeremiah's commissioning account or call narrative (Jer 1:4-10). The elements of divine sending, commanding and speaking in the narrative are public attestations to his status as a true prophet of Yahweh in contrast to the false prophets who have misled the community.⁷

What obviously comes out from this brief analysis of the fragments of oracles against the prophets from Jeremiah's early career can be summarized in two statements. First, the prophets addressed by Jeremiah's oracles are presented as false prophets because they are not officially commissioned by Yahweh to speak in his name. Consequently, the message they proclaim does not come from God. Secondly, the message of peace they announce is false. The authentic word of Yahweh, which Jeremiah is tasked to preach, bears a message of judgment and doom for the people of Judah.

A Collection of Oracles against Prophetic Opponents

Jeremiah 23:9-40 is considered a complex unit consisting of oracular materials, in both poetry (vv. 9-22) and prose (vv. 23-40), that have the prophets as their subject. These sayings are supposed to be originally separate, but they have been brought together

⁶ Robert P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981) 29-58. The classic study on prophetic commissioning account or call narrative is Norman Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965): 297-323. See also Yehoshua Gitay, "The Projection of the Prophet: A Rhetorical Presentation of the Prophet Jeremiah (According to Jer 1:1-19)," in *Prophecy and Prophets* (SBLSS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 41-56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

because of their common theme. Like the other collections of oracles in Jeremiah, no dates or circumstances are provided for the occasions on which these oracles were preached. It is, therefore, impossible to relate them to specific events, reigns or disputes in the life of the prophet. However, most commentators regard the oracles as genuine utterances of Jeremiah.⁸

In general, this complex unit constitutes Jeremiah's attack on the false prophets whose message he considers *sheqer*, lie or falsehood. This can further be divided into smaller oracular units (vv. 9-12; 13-15; 16-22; 23-32; 33-40).⁹

1. The first section (vv. 9-12) does not directly concern the prophets. It begins with Jeremiah's confession (v. 9) reminiscent of his laments in chapters 11-20, describing the prophet's physical and mental state as he is encountered by the word of God. "My heart is crushed within me, all my bones shake; I have become like a drunkard, like one overcome by wine." What moves him to lamentation is the people's present condition of moral corruption, including both priest and prophet. The term used to describe the conduct of the people is *adultery*.¹⁰ The prophet's confession is followed by Yahweh's oracle of indictment (vv. 10-11) and a second oracle of judgment (v. 12).

"Both prophet and priest are ungodly;¹¹ even in my house I have found their wickedness" (v. 11). The basic idea is that Jerusalem's prophets and priests have defiled themselves and as a

⁸ Ibid., 165; J. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36* (Anchor Bible 21B; New York: Doubleday, 2004), 178-179.

⁹ John Bright, *Jeremiah* (Anchor Bible 21; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 147-155; Overholt, *Threat of Falsehood*, 47-71; Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 330-344.

¹⁰ The use of the term *adultery* is ambiguous. Some scholars (eg. Bright, Lundbom) interpret *adultery* to refer to sexual immorality. However, others (eg. Overholt, Carroll) connect the term with the illicit cultic practices, as earlier prophets used the term (cf. Hosea). The latter interpretation seems more probable due to the affinity between Jeremiah and Hosea in theology and vocabulary. Perhaps, the *adultery* here involves Canaanite rituals of the fertility cult.

¹¹ The verb *hnp* basically means "to be polluted," followed by the Vulgate, "polluti sunt" (Ps 106:38; cf. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, hereafter *BDB*; *TLOT*, 447-448).

result have lost their holiness. This behavior results in a curse that has deeply affected the larger environment: the land mourns and the pastures are dried up. Therefore, judgment will fall upon everyone, but the prophets and priests are especially in view. Their *ra'ah*, wickedness, will result in *ra'ah*, disaster.¹²

2. The second section (vv. 13-15) is a poem in oracular style. The prophets of Jerusalem are described as worse than their counterparts in Samaria who, a century earlier, are said to have led the Ephraimites/Israelites astray resulting to the northern kingdom's invasion by the Assyrians and the people's subsequent deportation around 721 BC. The Jerusalem prophets are accused of positively contributing to the nation's ungodliness. They are the source of encouragement for the corruption of the people, as v. 14b states, "they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness." Thus, their punishment will be likened to the destruction that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah had suffered (Gen 19:1-29; cf. Isa 1:9).¹³

3. The first half of the third section (vv. 16-22) provides the reason for Yahweh's judgment against the prophets. "They are deluding you. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD" (v. 16b). The message of peace that they prophesy is a lie.

Yahweh's word for the moment is one of judgment, and if these fellows had really stood in the heavenly council and heard its deliberations, they would know this, and would attempt to bring the people to repentance. The fact that

¹² T. Fretheim: "The relationship between sin and judgment is conceived in intrinsic rather than forensic terms: disaster breaks out because of the people's wickedness... *ra'ah* issues in *ra'ah*" (34); see Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: The Babylonian and Persian Periods* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 19-21.

¹³ Again, the question of interpreting adultery as sexual immorality surfaces here. The reference to Sodom and Gomorrah is often used to support this interpretation. This understanding, however, implies that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God because of sexual immorality, which is not clearly established by the text. Contra Lundlom et al., 187, it is preferable to interpret the reference to these cities as examples of the manner of God's punishment: total destruction, without any promise of a remnant.

they preach only soothing words proves that they were never sent by Yahweh at all.¹⁴

In fact, by prophesying peace, "It shall be well with you" and "No calamity shall come upon you" (v. 17), they give a false sense of security to those who "despise the word of the LORD". The charges against the prophets are: filling the people with empty hopes, speaking visions out of their own minds, encouraging those who despise Yahweh's word and reassuring the wayward.¹⁵

The second half (vv. 18-22) demonstrates further why the prophets' words are false: they neither stood in the divine council to hear and see what God has to say (see Job 15:8) nor have they proclaimed the word that God has spoken there.

For who has stood in the council of the LORD
so as to see and to hear his word?
Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it?

The council of the Lord is usually understood to be a gathering of divine beings, over whom God presides and with whom God consults regarding earthly affairs.¹⁶ It is attested throughout Scripture (Deut 32:8; 33:2; Ps 89:6-9; Sir 24:2), where such beings assist in Creation and are present when judgment is meted out in Eden and at Babel (Gen 1:26; 3:22; and 11:7).

God did not send the prophets as divine messengers, yet they "ran" as if they were God's personal emissaries. "I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied" (v. 21). God did not speak to them, yet they spoke as if they had a divine commission to do so.¹⁷

4. The fourth section (vv. 23-32) describes Yahweh's relationship to the prophets as remote and separate (the prophet does not stand in his council, cf. v. 18). Thus, if they are removed from

¹⁴ Bright, 155.

¹⁵ Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant*, 168. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, 191-192.

¹⁶ Fretheim, 336.

¹⁷ Fretheim, 336-338; Lundbom, 195-199.

Yahweh, how could they claim their words to be Yahweh's words? They steal oracles from one another, take it upon themselves to speak in Yahweh's name, and prophesy false dreams that lead the people astray (vv. 30-32).

5. The concluding section (vv. 33-40) mentions the prophets only in passing. It hinges on a play on the word, *massa*, which may refer to either a *load* or *burden* carried by a beast (Exod 23:5) or a man (Num 4:15ff), or to an *oracle* of Yahweh (Isa 15.1).

Besides the basic wordplay, there is perhaps further irony in the fact that *massa* often designates a specific kind of oracle, the oracle against a foreign nation. Jeremiah, confronted by the question, "Is there an oracle (against our enemies)?" retorts, "You are the oracle (burden)." That is to say, the oracle, traditionally directed against Judah's enemies, is now directed back upon herself.¹⁸

In this cycle of oracles, Carroll summarizes the charges against the prophets as: (1) some of them prophesied by Baal rather than Yahweh; (2) the prophets were of low moral character; (3) they proclaimed peace rather than doom, thereby encouraged the community in vain hopes; (4) they had not stood in Yahweh's council, so did not know what was going on; and (5) they were guilty of deception by using dreams, stealing each other's oracles and aping genuine prophetic techniques.¹⁹

Conflict with Prophetic Opponents

Chapters 27-29 consist of narratives that focus on Jeremiah's disputes with prophetic opponents. More precisely, in these chapters, Jeremiah confronts the problem of false prophecy both at home and abroad. In chapters 27-28, the setting of the problem is Jerusalem; in chapter 29, among the exiles in Babylon.

There are grounds to assume with plausibility that these conflicts occurred in the period between the two deportations of

¹⁸ Overholt, 70.

¹⁹ Carroll, 180.

Judeans to Babylon (597-587 BC). The mention of Zedekiah as the reigning king of Judah (Jer 27:3, 12) and of the deportation of Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) with other Judeans and a considerable booty, and the existence of an exilic community in Babylon (Jer 27:16ff; 29:2) warrant for this historical assumption.

In Judah, the issue of the prophetic conflict revolves around the question of rebellion against Babylonian rule. It seems that other Palestinian vassal states were convincing Zedekiah to join in an anti-Babylonian alliance to throw off the yoke of the Babylonian overlord, Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Jer 27:2-3). The book suggests that while Zedekiah and the envoys from the other states are in council, Jeremiah, putting on a yoke, delivers several oracles addressed to the envoys, to Zedekiah and all the people (Jer 27:1-11). His message is submission to Babylonian rule. Since Yahweh, who is creator and controller of creation, has handed everything over to Nebuchadnezzar, rebellion against him is rebellion against Yahweh. Thus, whosoever will not submit to his yoke will be punished by sword, famine, and pestilence (Jer 27:5-8). Zedekiah and the envoys of the kings are exhorted not to listen to their prophets who advise against serving Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 27:9-10, 14). These prophets are prophesying a lie, and they are not sent by Yahweh (Jer 27:15).

A related issue concerns the prophets who predict a speedy end to the exile (Jer 27:16-22). Again, Jeremiah exhorts the priests and all the people not to listen to these prophets since they are prophesying a lie (Jer 27:16). Instead, they should serve Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 27:17).

In response to Jeremiah's message, the prophet Hananiah breaks Jeremiah's yoke and pronounces an oracle of Yahweh's divine protection of Jerusalem from the Babylonian threat (Jer 28:10-11).

In the exilic community, the issue of the prophetic conflict focuses on the length of the exile. Jeremiah's message contained in the letter hand-carried to the exiles states that the exile will last seventy years. However, the community's prophets, Zedekiah, Ahab and Shemaiah, respond negatively (Jer 29:15, 26-28). Thus, they are cursed (Zedekiah and Ahab, Jer 29:21-23; Shemaiah, Jer 29:30-32).

Jeremiah vs. Hananiah: A Paradigm of Prophetic Conflict

The confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jer 27-28) is the most celebrated prophetic conflict and can serve as a paradigm for this study. Both prophets use the same basic speech forms for their oracles and employ similar symbolic actions.²⁰ However, they differ in their messages. Jeremiah calls for submission to the Babylonians (Jer 27:1-13), while Hananiah prophesies that Yahweh will protect Jerusalem from the Babylonian threat and that the exiles will soon be allowed to return (Jer 28: 2-4, 10-11). But in spite of these conflicting messages, both prophets are supported by ancient Israelite traditions, namely, the Sinai and Davidic covenants. Yahweh has chosen Israel as his people and has promised him his protection.

On the one hand, Jeremiah, rooted in the Sinai covenant tradition, stressed the contingency of Israel's election on the community's response of obedience to the demands of the Yahweh cult and divine law, enshrined in its sacred traditions. Yahweh's divine protection is not absolute. He is free to punish his chosen people for their sins. The covenant he made with Israel does not restrict his action. In support of this interpretation, Jeremiah cited the example of Shiloh and Samaria which were destroyed as punishment for the people's disobedience of the law and for their impenitence (Jer 7; cf. 2 Kgs 17).

On the other hand, Hananiah, rooted in the Davidic covenant tradition, was convinced that Yahweh will be faithful to his promise and will not let destruction come upon his chosen people and his sanctuary. In his message, he stressed the unconditional character of Yahweh's election of the city and its dynasty, and his promise to dwell forever in Jerusalem (2 Sam 7; cf. Ps 132). In support of his message, he too could cite the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem at the time of Sennacherib's invasion (2 Kgs 18-19; Isa 10, 28-31, 33).

Moreover, it is most likely that Hananiah interpreted the deportation of Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) with other Judeans after

²⁰ Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 78. See his *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 250-251.

Nebuchadnezzar's first assault on the city as the appropriate divine punishment for the sins of the people. The deportation has already cleansed the nation of its sins. The fact that the city was spared from destruction was for Hananiah a confirmation of Yahweh's unconditional protection. Yahweh has punished his people through the deportation of their king with some of their fellow Judeans. However, he has protected the city and his Temple, and has allowed a *remnant*. Thus, those who remained in the city were the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that Yahweh would renew the covenant with the remnant.

Therefore, it is reasonable that Hananiah should preach a message of peace and security under the protection of Yahweh, and that many Judeans should have been convinced by his message.

Faced with two conflicting prophetic messages, how did the original listeners – if this can be historically established – of Jeremiah and Hananiah know who, between the two prophets, was really delivering Yahweh's word? Who has made the right analysis of the socio-political conditions prevailing at the moment the oracles were delivered? What was their criterion in making their judgment for or against one of them? The answer to these questions will depend on how the original audience of Jeremiah and Hananiah appraise and acknowledge their respective prophetic authority.

If socio-political analysis were the sole interpretive (hermeneutic) principle, it would seem that in the here-and-now situation of the original audience, there could be no talk of theological criteria. The original listeners were left to themselves to make up their minds as to whose prophetic authority they wished to acknowledge – Jeremiah's or Hananiah's. The issue at hand seemed to be more socio-political than theological. Thus, what apparently was there to influence their judgment was their political persuasion and the prevailing ideology of the time.

In this interpretive framework, Hananiah could be regarded as a spokesman of the pro-Egyptian party, which, at this point in Judean history, was the most influential in matters of domestic and foreign policies. This party was in control of the central political and religious establishment, which espoused the official royal

Jerusalemite ideology.²¹ For this reason, Hananiah proclaimed a message of peace and security, of Yahweh's unconditional protection of Jerusalem. In like manner, he rightly perceived in Jeremiah's message a threat to the social order and stability of the nation.

On the contrary, Jeremiah's message betrays a political opinion based on his analysis of historical factors. His message was: Surrender the nation and accept the rule of Nebuchadnezzar in order to avert destruction. Jeremiah perceived Babylon to be the present world power against which a small nation like Judah was no match. Naturally, this message, perceived as a political analysis of the prevalent conditions, was highly acceptable to those who belong to the opposition, the pro-Babylonian party. Or perhaps, it is even more probable that Jeremiah himself belonged to this party and functioned as the party's "prophetic voice," who stamped its political position with divine approval and legitimated itself before the people, to counterbalance the prophets of the pro-Egyptian party. This explains the fact that, in spite of the intense opposition he faced from "priests, prophets and all the people of the land," Jeremiah continued to enjoy some form of support.

It seems, therefore, that the actual life-situation conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah (and the other prophets accused of falsehood in the other oracles), if this can be validated historically, was more a conflict of religio-political parties, which at this point in history were struggling for the control of the central government and its domestic and foreign policies.

Consequently, in the immediacy of the prophetic conflict, namely, in its original, historical setting (in as far as it can be determined), it would be impossible to determine objectively who between Jeremiah and Hananiah (and the other prophets) was telling the truth (if both were not actually telling lies). The original listeners had no better way of knowing than be guided by their own political persuasions and analysis of the prevailing socio-

²¹ King Zedekiah's authority was not as stable as it might be. The fact that he was only a regent, on throne in the name of Jehoiachin, the legitimate king, who was deported by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon, added to his weakness in the face of the "landed gentry", the princes who were actually the power behind the throne.

political conditions. Those who shared the analysis of Jeremiah would certainly find Hananiah's message as *sheqer*. Those who shared the views of Hananiah would certainly find Jeremiah's message as *sheqer*. Therefore, when the problem of false prophecy is investigated within the framework of socio-political analysis, there could be no theological criteria.

However, the use of socio-political interpretive principles in the problem of false prophecy is not comprehensive. They do shed light to the further understanding of the dynamics of the socio-political situation in which the problem is issued; but the problem of false prophecy is very much theological, and the search for a valid criterion to discriminate between authentic and false prophets ought to consider the vast theological and prophetic traditions that lay behind the Jeremiah story and are preserved in the sacred books.

The Jeremiah's Criteriology: The True Prophet of Yahweh

In the immediacy of the prophetic conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah, the people, who had to choose as the authentic prophet between the two, were not empty handed, nor were they solely influenced by the political ideology prevalent at that time. They had at their disposal ancient prophetic traditions and beliefs according to which they could base their judgment. It must be remembered that during the time of Jeremiah, Israel have had the experience of the prophetic phenomenon, and the problem of false prophecy, for at least two centuries.

Among several which can be gleaned from the Bible, this study concentrates on three most likely criteria by which the book of Jeremiah resolves the problem of false prophecy. These are the oracle-fulfillment criterion, the allegiance to Yahweh criterion, and the moral criterion. The first two focus on the prophetic message; the third, on the person of the prophet.

Oracle-Fulfillment Criterion. A small section in the book of Deuteronomy deals with biblical laws that govern prophecy (Deut 18:9-22). In verses 21-22, it is written that:

If you say in your heart, How may we know the word which the Lord has not spoken? – when a prophet speaks in the

name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you need not be afraid of him.

Although it is agreed by scholars that this Deuteronomic legislation belongs to a later tradition, the oracle-fulfillment test is widely mentioned in the early traditions of the Old Testament. When Saul was sent by his father, Kish, to look for their lost asses, he consulted a man of God, who "was held in honor because all that he said came true" (1 Sam 9:5-10).

In 1 Kings 13, the same criterion is employed. The oracle of the old prophet in Bethel regarding the death of the man of God from Judah, who has disobeyed Yahweh's commandments, came true. The man of God died and "his body did not come to the tomb of his fathers," as the old prophet had spoken (vv 21-22).²²

Elijah's oracle about the death of Ahaziah came true.

Thus says the Lord, "Behold you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron – is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of his word? – therefore you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone, but you shall surely die" (1 Kgs 1:16).

Verse 17 simply reports that Ahaziah died according to the word of the Lord which Elijah had spoken.

In the confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah, it is recorded that Jeremiah pronounced an oracle regarding Hananiah's death.

And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you shall die because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord" (Jer 28:15-16).

²² For a more detailed appraisal of this story, see D.W. Van Winkle, "1 Kings XIII: True and False Prophecy," *Vetus Testamentum* 29, 1 (1989): 29-43; Cf. James L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971), 39-61 and Simon de Vries, *Prophet Against Prophet* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 59-61.

And the chapter concludes with a report that in that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.

Thus, how does one know in practical terms whether a prophet is, in fact, speaking what Yahweh commanded? Deuteronomy offers the test of fulfillment: If the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that Yahweh has not spoken. If the word comes true, then it is Yahweh's word which the prophet has spoken.

Although the criterion that Deuteronomy offers is practical, its applicability is limited. De Vries expresses the limitation of this test succinctly:

This criterion has little validity except as the test of time. The parenetic consequence drawn from it ("it is not necessary for you to be afraid of him") has little practical relevance since, while the people wait to see whether a particular prophecy will be fulfilled (and often it is long delayed; cf. Hab 2:1ff; Ezek 12:21ff), they must remain in anxious uncertainty. They have to wait all their life to know whether a prophet has spoken for Yahweh – and then it is too late to give him his proper fear.

Therefore, in the immediacy of the prophetic conflict the Deuteronomic criterion of oracle-fulfillment is not applicable. The historical audience in the conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah could not have been aided by this criterion, even if the book reported that Hananiah died in the same year, and that Jeremiah's words have been fulfilled. The people had to decide there and then; they needed a criterion that would be valid and practicable in the immediacy of their situation.

Allegiance to Yahweh. Deuteronomy provides another criterion to distinguish between true and false prophecy. The manner in which it is written gives the impression that it presupposes the first criterion.

If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if says, "Let us go after other gods," which you have not known, "and let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or

of that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deut 13:1-3).

Thus, one may distinguish false from true prophecy on the basis of undivided allegiance to Yahweh as opposed to Baal. In this case, the criterion clearly states that even if a prophet performs wonders or signs, or his words are fulfilled, he is to be regarded false who leads the people to apostasy, to the worship of Baal.

In Jer 23:13, Jeremiah accuses the prophets of Samaria as prophesying by Baal, and therefore, they lead the people astray. In this passage, it seems that Jeremiah recalls the tragic fate of the northern kingdom and attributes its destruction to the apostasy of the northern prophets. It is safe to assume that these prophets did not belong to the Baal cult, as did Elijah's opponents on Mount Carmel. They rather spoke in the name of Baal having assumed the mask of Yahweh.²³ More probably, they were advocates of the syncretistic cult.²⁴ Thus, this criterion has its roots in early traditions.

This criterion has often been referred to as the test of orthodoxy, namely: a prophet whose message is contrary to the Yahwistic faith is necessary false. However, a problem immediately arises since during the period of the prophets it was impossible to define orthodox Yahwism. The faith of the covenanted people was in the process of evolution, and at the earliest, only after the Pentateuch could one speak of orthodox Yahwistic religion.

At the outset, the criterion of undivided allegiance to Yahweh becomes inoperable when applied to the confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah. As mentioned above, both prophets were rooted in the sacred covenant traditions. Jeremiah's call for repentance to avert Yahweh's judgment and save the

²³ Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict*, 55.

²⁴ By syncretistic cult I refer to the assimilation of the cultic practices of the Canaanite religion into the cult of Yahweh. However, Koch, *Prophets*, 46-51, maintains that the idolatry which Jeremiah bitterly opposed was not Canaanite in origin, but Assyrian. To Jeremiah the cult was corrupting, not only because of its theory but also, and much more, because of its practice, for it actually required human sacrifice (Jer 7:30f; 19:4f).

nation from destruction was a call to a renewal of the Sinai covenant. Yahweh chose his people Israel from among the nations. But such election imposed on the people faithfulness to the alliance as stipulated in the Decalogue transmitted through Moses. Yahweh is a faithful God, and he demands fidelity from his chosen people.

Hananiah's message of peace was deeply rooted in the Davidic covenant. Yahweh has chosen the Davidic house to rule his nation forever. Zion, the city of David, was to be the permanent dwelling place of Yahweh. Because of this divine election, Yahweh, who is a faithful God, will never allow his king and his city to be overcome and destroyed by other nations. Yahweh will continually protect his chosen people. Hananiah had the great prophet Isaiah, who advocated the royal Jerusalemite theology, to support him. If in the days of Hezekiah, Jerusalem was spared by Sennacherib's hordes, how could Yahweh allow Nebuchadnezzar to destroy his city?

It is even more likely that, with the resurgence of nationalism brought about by the Deuteronomic reform movement and the sparing of Jerusalem after the first deportation, the royal Jerusalemite theology should have been the normative rule of Yahwistic faith. Anything contrary to it should have been considered heretical, a deviation from the "orthodox" Yahwism of the time. Then, it is understandable that the opponents of Jeremiah plotted to eliminate him.

Therefore, the criterion of undivided allegiance to Yahweh is not applicable to the conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah. The people who needed to choose between them could not base their decision on this criterion since both were rooted in the sacred traditions of Israel.

The Moral Criterion. Closely related to the previous criterion of undivided allegiance to Yahweh is the moral criterion.²⁵

²⁵ In the New Testament, Jesus sanctions this criterion: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?" (Mt 7:15-16). Even the later Johannine tradition knows about this test. In the miraculous healing of the man born blind, one can detect this criterion to be operative in the blind man's replies to the Pharisees. "How can a man who

A true prophet conforms to the consensual notion of ethics or demeanor.²⁶

This criterion can trace its roots to the Elohist tradition reflected in Numbers 12. In this passage, the problem of conflicting prophetic messages is implied. Verse 2 poses the issue: "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" It seems that the problem is solved by putting Moses at the top of the prophetic hierarchy. Thus, in this tradition, Moses is held as the prophet *par excellence* since, unlike the other prophets after him, Yahweh speaks with him "mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord" (Num 12:8).

However, verse 3 adds a further description of Moses as the prophet *par excellence*. "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all men who were on the face of the earth." Because of this moral integrity, Moses can speak to God face to face, and not die.

According to this ancient tradition, a true prophet of Yahweh must be conformed to the image of Moses. Therefore, like Moses, he must possess moral integrity, because it is unthinkable for Yahweh to speak through a person of corrupt and immoral character. Jeremiah often appeals to this criterion in rejecting the words of his prophetic opponents. In Jer 6:13-15 [= 8:10-12], Jeremiah attacks the general corruption of the people, but he puts particular emphasis on the immoral behavior of the priests and prophets who, greedy for unjust gain, endeavor to placate the people into a false sense of security.

This accusation is repeated in the cycle of oracles against his prophetic opponents (Jer 23:9-40). In verses 9-12, Jeremiah laments over the moral corruption of his people. The term used to describe the conduct of the people is *adultery*. Verse 11 is an

is a sinner do such signs?" (John 9:16b) "We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him ... If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (John 9:31, 33).

²⁶ Burke O. Long, *Canon and Authority* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 18.

indictment of prophet and priest who shared in the people's corruption.

In another section (vv 13-15), the prophets of Jerusalem are accused of positively contributing to the nation's ungodliness. They are the source of encouragement for the corruption of the people. "For from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness had gone forth into all the land" (v 15b). They are worse than the prophets of Samaria, whose apostasy brought destruction to the northern kingdom. "They commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evil-doers, so that no one turns from his wickedness" (v 14). Thus, their punishment will be likened to the destruction that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah had suffered (Gen 19: 1-29; cf. Isa 1:9). In this section, Jeremiah accuses his opponents of two immoral acts: adultery and lying.

Finally, in Jer 29:22-23, Jeremiah cites another case of immorality.

The Lord make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire, because they have committed folly in Israel, they have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives, and they have spoken in my name lying words which I did not command them. I am the one who knows, and I am witness, says the Lord.

Apparently, when this criterion is applied to the case of Jeremiah and Hananiah, a problem arises. There is no mention in the text that Hananiah was guilty of immorality. Neither is there a word of Jeremiah that indicts Hananiah due to immorality. What the text provides is Hananiah's conviction that Jerusalem would be saved by Yahweh, that the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar would be broken in two years, and that the exiles would soon return with the Temple treasures. However, the present criterion does not focus on the message. If the message is the basis of judgment, then the people who were to decide whom to uphold as the true prophet would be greatly influenced by the current political ideology. But, if the personal and moral integrity of the prophet is the basis, as this present criterion suggests, then the people had a theological criterion, since ancient biblical traditions provide them with the "consensual" notion of what is good or bad, moral or immoral.

Thus, if the accusation of immorality and corruption which Jeremiah hurls against his opponents were taken as a collective indictment, then it follows that Hananiah himself was part the immoral and corrupt prophetic group that Jeremiah opposes.

In addition, if Hananiah could confront Jeremiah with such strong words and symbolic action (Jer 28:2-4, 10-11), and could put Jeremiah in an uncertain position (Jer 28:6-9), then he must have had authority, perhaps sanctioned by the central religious and political establishment. Thus, as a central prophet, his role was to uphold the official theology, to deliver oracles favorable to the establishment, "providing divine sanctions for the official religious, political and social views."²⁷ He may have even been attached to the court or cult, and served as a political adviser to King Zedekiah and supplied spiritual support for the king's decisions and policies. The pressure of his position and function could have forced him to utter words pleasing to the king and the princes.²⁸

Conclusion

The book of Jeremiah offers a valid criterion for distinguishing the true and authentic prophet from the false and spurious ones. Jeremiah's criterion is the moral criterion. When one is faced with claimants to the prophecy, Jeremiah's rule of thumb is: "An immoral and corrupt person can never be a true and authentic spokesperson of God." □

²⁷ Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 84.

²⁸ Cf. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 261.