

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Backdrop of Chapter 23

Chapter 22 condemns the political leaders of Judah for their destructive greed and arrogance which had caused so much suffering among the poor and needy. Chapter 23:9–40 turns from the political class to the religious leaders who provided a convenient veneer of patriotic ideology that endorsed the status quo and raised no challenge to wickedness in high places. These were the prophets and priests who claimed to speak in the name of YHWH, but had no mission, message or mandate from God at all. When religion is harnessed to provide justification for social evil and political folly, when the truth is suppressed or mocked, then indeed a kind of national and cultural sickness takes over. The great danger is that a sick culture feels perfectly normal to those living in it, oblivious to the signs of approaching culture death. That was the situation Jeremiah faced as he confronted the religious leaders of his own day.

- Christopher Wright

OUTLINE

Chapter 23 Unit outline

- I. The Problem with the Prophets (9-15)
- II. Don't listen to those who serve you a Nothing-Burger! (16-22)
- III. Characteristics of the prophets God is against(25-32)
- V. The real burden when prophecy is polluted (33-40)

Content Outline of Ch 23

- I. The Problem with the Prophets (9-15)
 - A. Prophet's Lament (9-12)
 - B. The Prophets part in the problem 13-15
- II. Don't listen to those who serve you a Nothing-Burger! (16-22)
 - A. 2 reasons to stop listening (16c-22)
- III. Questions to consider what has been said (23-24)
- IV. Marks of the prophets God is against(25-32)
 - A. The mark of obscuring the truth (25-29)
 - 1.) Contrast with the real thing
 - B. The mark of steal it, (30)
 - C. The mark of fake it, (31)
 - C. Those who are irresponsible
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- V. The real burden when prophecy is polluted (33-40)
 - A. God's instruction for Jeremiah 33-34
 - B. Jeremiah Word from the Lord to the people 35-40

Composition of the Jeremiah

Jeremiah is Not in completely in chronological order.

Compared to Ezekiel (which is chronological).

The book of Jeremiah was organized by Baruch. Some scholars see chapters 23-29 dealing with true and false prophetic ministry. Most see chapters 23, 26-29 as have prophetic conflict as central to the theme of the textual units.

Introduction Jeremiah's greatest Hits..

In Jeremiah 21:1—23:8 the primarily oracles were against kings. Now the subject becomes the prophets in Jerusalem (23:9-40). In this section, Jeremiah proceeded to reveal the lie under all their spiritual showmanship and sins they are committing in secret and announce God's judgment on the these prophets who were misleading His people with false prophecies (cf. v. 1). This section consists of seven different messages that Jeremiah delivered at various times, which the writer placed together in the text because of their common subject.

*"Oracles in the present collection come from different periods, although most, if not all, were probably delivered during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, at which time Jeremiah had a particularly difficult time with Jerusalem's priests and prophets."*¹

It is something like a compilation album of Jeremiah's greatest "hits" against the prophets.

Message one 9-15.

The problem with the prophets

Focus: General indictment and judgment

Message two 16-22

Don't listen to the prophets

Focus: rationale for their message being false

Message three 23-24

Are you thinking right or have you got God wrong?

Focus: some false beliefs that's distort prophetic vision

Message four 25-32

What the prophets are doing wrong

Focus: characteristics of polluted prophetic ministry.

Message five 33-40

How to deal with the human agendas of people and prophets

Focus: God's instruction on dealing with an agenda driven people and prophets.

Prophecy in the Ancient near East.

"During the Old Testament era, prophet-like diviners and mediums were probably a common feature in the royal courts throughout the Ancient Near East. On the other hand, firm nonbiblical evidence of prophet-like activity comes primarily from two main contexts: literary texts found at Mari (eighteenth century BC) and Neo-Assyrian texts from the reigns of Esarhaddon (680–669 BC) and Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC). This literature reflects a rather wide range of terms and titles used for those individuals who sought to communicate with the gods and to bring oracles and other messages to (usually) the king. Such titles include "answerer," "cult functionary," "ecstatic," "diviner" (a word similar to the Hebrew *nabi* or "prophet"), "proclaimer," "revealer" (a word similar to the Hebrew term translated as "seer"), and "sent one." In addition, this literature mentions numerous other individuals who act very much like prophets but who don't carry official titles. These functionaries (by whatever term they were called) appear to be a fairly powerful class of people with a high standing at court. Generally they backed the king and supported his policies through their oracles and dreams. On a few rare occasions a court prophet might admonish the king, but this is always done mildly and is usually in response to the king's earlier refusal to heed a previous oracle or utterance of the gods."²

¹ Jack Lundbom, Jeremiah 21-36, pp. 178-79

² H. B. Huffmon, "Prophecy: Ancient Near East," Anchor Bible Dictionary 5:477–82.

False Prophecy in the Bible

While the act and office of prophecy in Israel in many regards parallels that found in the courts of the Ancient Near East, there were some stark differences as well (especially in regard to the “true prophets” of Yahweh). Deuteronomy 18:9–22 explicitly prohibited many of the specific practices (such as sorcery, necromancy, etc.) of these prophet-like pagan intermediaries.

During the time of the Old Testament prophets, however, the backsliding kings of Israel and Judah often strove to emulate their pagan neighbors, and they established their own “court prophets” rather than listening to and obeying the prophets that Yahweh ordained. This reflected their attempt to bring the prophetic office under royal control. Thus “false prophets” appeared fairly frequently in the royal courts of Israel and Judah. Sometimes these prophets were specifically identified with pagan gods, as in the case of the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah whom Elijah encountered on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:19). These idolatrous prophets were easily recognizable as false prophets. However, in the royal courts of Israel and Judah there were also “prophets” who claimed to prophesy in the name and power of Yahweh, yet who in truth were simply pawns of the king and had not been appointed by Yahweh.

The false prophets that Jeremiah encountered, for example, are similar to those functioning in royal courts throughout the region. Since they served the king and not Yahweh, they often collided with true prophets like Jeremiah. Indeed, Yahweh sent his own specially appointed prophets to the Israelite and Judahite kings to confront the false prophets and to remind the king, his court, and the nation that they all serve Yahweh and must be obedient to him and his covenant. Furthermore, Yahweh often pronounced judgment specifically upon these false prophets. In Jeremiah 28, the false prophet Hananiah contradicted Jeremiah and told all the people that Jeremiah was mistaken. At first this “counter-prophecy” created uncertainty in Jeremiah (28:5–11). Yet Yahweh soon clarified the truth for Jeremiah, sending him back to prophesy the death of the false prophet Hananiah, who did indeed die within two months”³

Prophets not false prophets

The phrase, “false prophet,” is not present in the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, but the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures) uses the Greek word pseudoprophetes (false prophets) to translate the Hebrew word navi (prophets) on several occasions. The translators of the Septuagint wanted to bring some historical perspective to the text.

There were several types of false prophets throughout Israel's history:

“In actuality, Israel had, by Ahab's time, become plagued with false prophets. These, in turn, fell into three major categories. There were Jezebel's outrightly pagan prophets, who served Baal and Asherah (1 Kings 18:19); there were the hypocritical charlatans of Ahab's court (22:6, 7), prophets for pay, a disgrace to the name of the Lord (Micah 3:11; cf. Amos 7: 12); and there were sincere prophets, who were well-meaning but still revelationless, and hence mistaken (1 Kings 13:11-18).”⁴

Three are mentioned by Payne, pagan prophets, deviant prophets and sincerely wrong prophets. All three are mentioned in chapter 23, yet it is the last two, morally deviant and sincerely wrong prophets, that take up the majority of Jeremiah's concern.

³ Message of the prophets : a survey of the prophetic and apocalyptic books of the Old Testament, Eds J. Daniel Hays ; Tremper Longman III, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2010, ePub Ed. 2017)

⁴ J. B. Payne, The Theology of the Older Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 56

I. The Problem with the Prophets (9-15)

A. The Lament (9-11)

1.) Jeremiah's prophetic experience described (9)

"My heart is broken within me, All my bones tremble; I have become like a drunken man, Even like a man overcome with wine, Because of the LORD And because of His holy words."

Exegetical issues: the language of drunkenness is that metaphorical or descriptive of his real experience?

"The magnitude of God's words of judgment have rendered the prophet like a drunken man. It is not clear whether this is metaphorical language to describe Jeremiah's strong emotional reaction or if he actually manifests physical symptoms ("all my bones tremble")." NIV app

One could say both, since two sources are given in God and God's holy word. God's word concerning the prophets mentally and emotionally broken Jeremiah heart and Jeremiah's experience of God manifests physical symptoms akin to drunkenness and trembling.

He likely knew these so-called prophets.

Before his call, as the son of a priest (priest in training), Jeremiah likely was acquainted with them. He likely rubbed elbows with them, heard they say "I had a dream!" Felt excitement over what they were about to say. He may have listened to their lying oracle, watched them deceive the masses with empty words. Not knowing it was 'Sheqer'. Silently, invisible to all but God, the truth about their prophecies remained hidden. That is UNTIL Jeremiah had a fresh encounter with Yahweh and God revealed it all to be a lie (Sheqer). The vail was lifted, uncovering the sins at the bottom of their own lives. "Jeremiah mind was blown" He was in shock, given his own experience and how it forced him to be real with God and others, but they could fake it? Mind officially blown. Harrison Adds:

"His mind cannot grasp the way in which these prophets have chosen to abuse their professional vocation, and he is shocked at their corrupt behavior which is matched by the depravity of the Chosen People."

This lament serves as an introduction for the entire series of prophecies about the false prophets in v. 10-40. It sets up the reader to understand Jeremiah's perspective towards the prophets as not being one of condescension but brokenness, not smug satisfaction but mournful disappointment. This prepares us to understand Jeremiah's harsh language from the right frame of reference as passionate engagement not pompous revenge talk.

Jeremiah's feelings are not those of superiority or triumphalism, but rather an acute anguish, discomfort, and disorientation that words and deeds that are incompatible with YHWH's holiness should be ascribed to YHWH."⁵ - Moberly

⁵ Moberly, Prophecy and Discernment, 71

2.) The Problem Described and condemned v. 10-12

For the land is full of adulterers;

For the land mourns because of the curse.

The pastures of the wilderness have dried up.

Their course also is evil, And their might is not right.

For both prophet and priest are polluted; Even in My house I have found their wickedness,' declares the LORD.

Therefore their way will be like slippery paths to them, They will be driven away into the gloom and fall down in it; For I shall bring calamity upon them, The year of their punishment,' declares the LORD."

Exegetical issues and exposition

For/ Because singles this is the content that disturbs Jeremiah

Adultery The first is a general charge of adultery. It could indicate infidelity in marriage or spiritual apostasy, or it is both possible and likely that it suggests both. Within the book of Jeremiah the same hebrew root is used in 7:9 and 29:23 to signify immorality and in 3:1-9; 5:7; 13:27 to signify spiritual apostasy.

intentional double meaning.

Baal worship was a fertility cult that involved sex practices to entice the deities to bring forth rain and bless the land with fertility. So the charge of spiritual apostasy may very likely also be evidenced by immoral cultic rituals. If so, the desire for increased fertility of the land, expressed through immoral rites to Baal, leads to the precise opposite as it is stated in v. 10. 548

a.) The evidence of the problem. v10

The evidence of their corruption was the curse that the land was experiencing a drought of some kind. Baal was supposed to produce fertility, but worshipping him had only resulted in parched and barren land for Judah.

b.) The ultimate source of the problem: Toxic religion v11

Like following a polluted stream back to the source of the pollution, Jeremiah moves from the people to the prophets and priests to show the source of the problem. A Toxic religion has promoted godlessness as a result the land mourns/languishes (4:28) because of the curse.

“The toxic combination of corrupt priests and prophets, serving together in the temple machinery that provided religious cover for social and political evil, has been the target of Jeremiah’s rebuke several times already (Jer 5:31; 6:13). “ C. Wright

"Whenever a nation needs healing, it's usually because God's people aren't obeying and serving Him as they should. We like to blame dishonest politicians and various purveyors of pleasure for a nation's decline in morality, but God blames His own people." Warren Wiersbe

The Toxic religion promoted by priests and prophets pollutes the people.

Two marks of Toxic Religion

This Toxic religion is described as wicked (v.11). The two phrase at the end of v 10 expand on this wickedness indicative of the Toxic religion peddled by the prophets and priests.

1. Religiously “Evil” lifestyle

“Their course also is evil,. With the prophets described as having a course “Hebrew *merûšātām* (lit., “their running”) means the course of life they follow, is evil. the implication point to what follows (v.12-40), Jeremiah’s description of their prophetic ministers is what is called evil. Evil hear is not to say the prophets were hedonistic sinners (likely some of that going on). Yet they could not have a standing in the king’s court as prophets of yahweh without some measure of public decency and decorum. More likely, “evil style of life” point to a person who willfully follows their own heart’s desire to gain power, influence, in the praise of men through the prophetic ministry. Such a selfish course of life is just as godless, for the true god they worship is self. The same could be said of the priest and their service.

2. The Coercive Preservation of power

“their might is not right” - The Hebrew term for might/power indicates a great influence that the prophets and priest possessed was not upright, that it lacked integrity. Many different listed many different means of maintaining power and influence. The social respectability of being a religious leader, the sacredness of religious institutions, the influence of being seen as God’s mouthpiece. But likely the most influential is the simplest, the power of their ministry came from their message and their numbers.

Jeremiah’s uphill battle

Jeremiah was one man against a chorus of voices speaking an opposite word.

The Majority and the minority - (23:9,10) Jeremiah states “For the prophets” v9 plural.

Jeremiah was alone in his denouncement. One against the establishment, a single voice against a Majority speaking in concert. In verse 10 he speaks that their might is not right - might by majority, yet if the majority believes it, it still doesn’t make it, true. The prophets were the majority voice - as those with a democratic mindset, we must bear in mind, the democratic way is not always God’s way. God’s way is God’s way. We can only trust the majority to the measure they are faithful before the Lord.

“Their way of life (v. 10; NRSV, “course”) is evil; this is primarily a reference to oppression of the needy (“might” [NRSV] is used similarly at 22:17). The felicitous phrasing, “their might is not right,” says it well; the prophets (and others) use power to preserve their way of life at the expense of the less fortunate. The ungodliness of prophet and priest is a common charge in Jeremiah (e.g., 5:31; 6:13).” - Terence E. Fretheim,

Condemnation: the bill always come due (v.12)

The land is polluted. Israel's religion has become toxic and the people love it that way (5:30-31). The condemnation follows the cause and effect logic of the moral order. So it is likely the mechanism of judgement, God is promising to work through. If we follow a path that goes against the moral order and chaos will eventually be your fruit.

Imagery implies that Toxic religion is a very slippery path. Yet Such religious systems as described above are inherently unstable. A skillful deliberately careful person can keep from slipping but only for so long. The bill always comes due. God promises they will slip at some point, it will all come crashing down and they will fall. God promises that he will allow them to fall into perilous situations (Ps. 35:6; 73:18), or wander off into obscurity (cf. 13:16).

Transition: at this point God through Jeremiah begins to makes the clam it all began with the prophets. He does this by first heading off a justification God know they will use.

B. Double Trouble (13-15)

Jeremiah is heading off a rebuttals to the condemnation in v 12. Jeremiah's audience particularly the court prophets saw themselves as part of the elite establishment. They look down on the northern kingdom (Samaria in v13). They are nothing like "those" prophets in the Northern Kingdom. We speak for Yawah! Jeremiah says "Well yeah you're worse!"

1.) A Devastating comparison (13-14a)

A. They practiced Offensive Idolatry (13)

*"Moreover, among the prophets of Samaria I saw an **offensive thing**: They prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel astray."*

B. You Practice Horrible Spiritual Adultery (14)

*"Also among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a **horrible thing**: The committing of adultery and walking in falsehood; And they strengthen the hands of evildoers, So that no one has turned back from his wickedness.*

2) A Deserving judgement

All of them have become to Me like Sodom, And her inhabitants like Gomorrah.

C. Your Pollution is Deserving of Poison - (:15)

"Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets, 'Behold, I am going to feed them wormwood And make them drink poisonous water, For from the prophets of Jerusalem pollution has gone forth into all the land.'"

God would make the false prophets experience bitterness and tragedy, as when one eats bitter food and drinks poisoned water (cf. 8:14; 9:15), because they had embittered and poisoned the people. He would pollute them because they polluted the people and the land with their sins.

The pollution of Toxic religion is deserving of judgment. God promises the prophets since they minister a polluted message God will give them poison. God will give them Poison for their spiritual Pollution. The imagery points to God's wisdom in punishing them in accordance with their sin. Pollution is like poisoning.

Takeway Point: God takes seriously, what people ministered to his people in his name.

II. Don't Listen to those Serving you a Nothing-Burger! v16-24

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you, They are leading you into futility.'"

A. 2 reasons to stop listening

1. Because their message was from man's perspective

"They speak a vision of their own imagination." v. 16

a. Note the contradict between message and condition of the people. 17

1) *People "despise God"*

2) *People "walk by the stubbornness of their hearts"*

b. The Message offers security and peace to the unrepentant. 17

"They keep saying to those who despise Me, The Lord has said, 'You will have peace', And as for everyone who walks in the stubbornness of his own heart, They say, 'Calamity will not come upon you.'"

c. In a times of cultural decline they did not call for repentance.

The prophets message was people pleasing and self serving

"What is the most basic theological grounding that informs the message of the false prophets? The misplaced confidence trumpeted by the false prophets could be rooted in a theological perspective regarding the inviolability of Zion or the Davidic covenant; yet, the text does not say that. The reasons are probably deeper, rooted both in a defective anthropology (see vv. 17, 22) and a distorted understanding of God (see vv. 23-24). The anthropology of the false prophets is evident in the first explicit, twice-stated judgment on their message: they have treated the wound of my people lightly (6:14; 8:11). In other words, they failed to recognize the pervasive and stubborn wickedness of the people and had prescribed an over-the-counter medication when only radical surgery could resolve the matter. Jeremiah is more explicit on this anthropological point in 23:17, 22; a storm of judgment was the only appropriate response (v. 19). Regarding their understanding of God, evident especially in 23:23-24, they thought that God was so far removed from daily life that he would overlook the people's wickedness. Should judgment come, they would certainly find a place to "hide." But this is not the God of the tradition". - Fretheim, p. 335

2. Because they have not having been in God's council 18-22

But who has stood in the council of the Lord, That he should see and hear His word? Who has given heed to His word and listened?"

"Behold, the storm of the Lord has gone forth in wrath, Even a whirling tempest; It will swirl down on the head of the wicked. The anger of the Lord will not turn back Until He has performed and carried out the purposes of His heart; In the last days you will clearly understand it."

"I did not send these prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied. But if they had stood in My council, Then they would have announced My words to My people." (v.21-22a) And would have turned them back from their evil way And from the evil of their deeds."

Exegesis and exposition

In 23:18, Judah's court prophets had not stood in the counsel of Yahweh nor received His prophetic messages.

Prophets stand in the divine council to be given divine counsel. The concept when connected to prophets being send and running with a message (v21) helps clarify that standing in the divine council refers to standing "ready as a royal messenger in the heavenly precincts." ⁶

"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 (see Gen 1:26; 1 Kgs 22:19-23; Job 1-2; 15:8; Ps 82; Isa 6:1-8). As Gen 1:26 and Job 1-2 show, this is a consultative body, not just a group to which God delivers edicts. There is an element of mutuality present in these texts. The prophet was understood to be a participant in these consultations, bringing the word "back" to Israel regarding the word to be announced. More generally, the council demonstrates that God is not in heaven alone, but that a complex sociality is basic to the divine life. In other words, relationship is integral to the identity of God, independent of God's relationship to the world. In some sense the prophet was invited to participate in this relationship. The boundary between human and divine communities is not seen to be fixed or impenetrable. The human is caught up into the divine life and together they become involved in the becoming of the world. In so doing the prophet retains his individuality, and his humanness is not compromised. Yet, the prophet, in leaving the council table with a word to speak, becomes the embodiment of the word of God in the world. The prophet is a vehicle for divine immanence." - Fretheim, p. 336

"It is a word of judgment and not peace that should be proclaimed by one who really knows the mind of Yahweh. But one needs to stand in Yahweh's council, see what goes on there, hear and pay attention to Yahweh's word and obey it, to give such a word." Thompson, p. 498.

In v. 19-20 what they might've heard had they draw near to God. Verse 21 The Lord had not sent the false prophets or given them messages, but they had claimed to bring prophecies from Him to the people. They had no mission, no mandate, no message from God. If these prophets had really listened to the Lord, they would have tried to turn the people back from their evil ways as stated in v. 22.

⁶ Lundbom, Jeremiah 21—36, p. 195. The picture of the heavenly throne-room of God is common in the Old Testament (e.g., 1 Kings 22:19-22; Job 1:1—2:7; Ps. 82; Isa. 6; Ezek. 1).²

“As an analogy in modern terms we could compare the speculations of journalists over some matter of government which is being decided behind closed doors, with the actual announcement entrusted to a spokesman from the conclave itself.” - Derek Kidner, p. 91.

“How could a prophet confuse his own word with God's word? How could a prophet fail to speak condemnation to the sinful, covenant-breaking situation? Perhaps part of the answer was political and economic. The prophets were often part of the establishment; as such they were concerned with the maintenance of the establishment for their own security and well-being. Another part of the issue may have been purely rationalistic: Yes, some of our folks are sinful, but look at the pagans around us; they don't even worship God, and they practice the grossest of sins; by comparison, we're good folk and surely God will take that into account. 'Our' sins are acceptable, but 'their' sins are not. Besides, who wants to hear judgment preached all the time; just preach on the love of God.” - Drinkard, p. 345.

Question: how do you know if someone has been in the council of lord?

Answer: The evidence of having been in God's council is in 21-22, key in on 22b.