

**THE YOKE OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR OR THE POKE OF
YAHWEH: CHARACTERISATION OF GOD AND THE SOCIO-
THEOLOGICAL STAKES IN PROPHETIC MINISTRY IN
JEREMIAH 27-28**

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Abstract

The article points at the enduring dynamics and the theological contextual stakes in the question of biblical prophecy and prophetic ministry. The sample text for consideration, using narrative exegesis, is Jer. 27–28 which concentrates on the motif of the Yoke of Babylon – Jeremiah advises submission to Nebuchadnezzar as sovereign will of Yahweh amidst opposition from other prophets. The presupposition is that the narrative intricacies in this text showcase a lot about the narrator’s characterisation of God, his omnipotence and his sovereignty over the relative (qualified) power of Babylon. Through a hermeneutic of appropriation, the article shows how these intricacies in the text play out in the ministry of the word (prophecy) even in our contemporary religious settings. The emerging socio-theological stakes from the text open up room for the contextual relevance in the preaching of the word which is the essence of prophetic ministry.

Keywords: Characterisation of God, contextual prophetic ministry, hermeneutic of appropriation, narrative criticism, yoke of Babylon.

INTRODUCTION

The Bible is an ensemble of ancient texts; one of the oldest extant literature. Yet it ranks as the most popular and most read book in history. It is not because the Bible enjoys the best literary elegance and

finesse, or because its accuracy in historical details is unmatched. It is rather, *inter alia*, because it has continued to speak to every age, clime, race, ours inclusive, in a pointed and customised fashion that defies its age. Fokkelman thus picks up squabbles with those who see the ancientness of the Bible as alienation,¹ a fault he imputes highly to historical critical readers who according to him have discouraged many Bible readers, students of theology and preachers, with the mantra that the text is distant – comes from far away, dates from a long time ago, and is rooted in a radically different culture. These ‘distances,’ though not to be underestimated, are “only half-truths” and should not be treated as “unshakeable axioms” lest they “quietly turn into lies and optical illusions.”² A greater, more important truth is that these texts are well written, and are products of a deliberate and meticulous designing intelligence. The text is a living text and in reading the biblical ancient text, we must pay attention to “the world it evokes and the values it embodies, and then, the confrontation, the interplay, the friction and sometimes the clash between all this and the reader’s world and values.”³

This article points at the enduring dynamics, the theological-contextual stakes, in the question of biblical prophecy and prophetic ministry today, revealed through a narrative glance at the text of Jer. 27–28 which concentrates on the motif of the Yoke of Babylon – Jeremiah advises submission to Nebuchadnezzar as sovereign will of Yahweh amidst opposition from other prophets. The presupposition is that the narrative intricacies in the text showcase a lot of how the narrator characterises God, his omnipotence, his sovereignty and how these play out in the ministry of the word (prophecy) even today in our contemporary religious settings. We begin with a brief hint on how a

¹ J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: A Practical Guide* (Tools for Biblical Study, 1), Leiden, 1999, p. 21.

² J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, p. 21.

³ J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, p. 23.

narrative glance on a text could open up avenues for theological exercise and characterisation of personages, then cast a narrative glance on the text of Jer. 27–28, and finally consider the socio-theological stakes from the text which winds down to contextual relevance, through the principle of a hermeneutic of appreciation.⁴

1 NARRATOLOGY MEETS THEOLOGY AND CONTEXT

Hermeneutic of appropriation would then mean in fact: instead of attempting to reconstruct an ancient history, we read biblical narratives “as we might read modern novels or short stories, constructing a story world in which questions of human values and belief (and theology) find shape in relation to our own (and the readers’) world(s). Emphasis, hitherto, laid on the historicity of the text will now be laid more on the historicity of the reader.⁵ Biblical narratives can be irresistibly persuasive.⁶ The prophetic language of persuasion in particular challenges the reader at the level of decision making so that an intimate dialogue or confrontation that cannot be ignored is established between text and reader⁷ especially by the creation of character.⁸ Human language has a variety of functions. Conveying information is only one of these; and reading the biblical text just for this purpose alone is tantamount to reading it partially. Reading literature does something to the reader by way of an effect of difference; this difference involves

⁴ The phrase “A Hermeneutic of Appropriation” was coined by C.R. Romero, *A Hermeneutic of Appropriation: A Case Study of Method in the Prophet and Latin American Liberation Theology*, MI, 1982. This work focuses on the work of liberation theologians especially Jose P. Miranda and J. Severino Croatto. The book of Jeremiah was chosen from the prophetic corpus because of its similarity to the situation in Latin America. The “Hermeneutic of Appropriation” is therefore a dialectic between the text and the interpreter’s own situation.

⁵ S. Paas, *Creation and Judgement: Creation Texts in Some Eight-Century Prophets* (OTS 47), Leiden, 2003, p. 165.

⁶ Y. Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, Minneapolis, 2001, p. 2.

⁷ See L. Boadt, *The Power of Prophetic Persuasion: Preserving the Prophet’s Persona*, in *CBQ* 59 (1997) 1-20.

⁸ R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York, 1981, p. 3-22.

both an increase in information and an increase in new experience, new feeling, and perhaps new life⁹ and reading demands the participation of the reader in whose experience “the text comes to life.”¹⁰ Brueggemann writes: “Indeed the text has the powerful capacity to cause us to rediscern our own situation ... including a risky invitation in our own time to practices of justice, risks of compassion, and sufferings for peace.”¹¹ The conviction is that insistence on the narrative and artistic aspects of a discourse “stresses the rift between the narrative and the events to which it may refer”¹² and opens the text up to many other situations and contexts.

2 JER. 27–28 IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

The Book of Jeremiah, comprising 52 chapters, has been described as a two-part drama following scholars’ identification of the two broad divisions of the Jeremiah (Masoretic) text into two almost equal halves; the first scroll (1–25) and the second scroll (26–52). The structural design of the whole book seems to be an elaboration of the divine program for the prophet in the introductory verses (especially Jer. 1:10) where Yahweh defines the ministry of the prophet in terms of uprooting and planting, destroying and rebuilding. The book therefore testifies to a God who ‘uproots and overthrows’ (1–25) in order to ‘rebuild and to plant’ (26–52). A book, which portrays a literary enactment of the death and dismantling of one world (Jer. 1–25) which leads to another (Jer. 26–52), claims that Judah’s most venerable and sacral traditions – temple and system of worship, covenant and land, election and kingship

⁹ P.W. Macky, *The Coming Revolution: The New Literary Approach to New Testament Interpretation*, in MCKIM, D.K. (ed.), *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids, 1986, p. 263-279, see p. 269.

¹⁰ W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore, 1978, p. 19.

¹¹ W. Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 18.

¹² A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Bible and Literature Series 9), Sheffield, 1983, p. 13-14.

(the sacred canopies) – are all targets of divine judgement and would be plucked and pulled down (1–25), to be rebuilt again (26–52).¹² Jer. 27–28 falls at the very beginning of the second scroll, and is part of four chapters (26–29) which dramatise the confrontation between true and false prophecy.

3 STRUCTURE AND BRIEF NARRATIVE GLANCE

Admittedly, there are reasons for considering these two chapters as separate units by some exegetes.¹³ Yet, based on strong indices,¹⁴ Jer. 27–28 has been rightly considered by many exegetes as an integral unit. Thematically, both deal with the programmatic decree of Yahweh that surprisingly suggests that the people must submit themselves to the yoke of Babylon. This startling sovereign will of Yahweh that goes as far as designating the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar as “my servant” seems to constitute a theological dissonance to people, even to the priests and prophets. The narrative goes further to exemplify a prophet, Hananiah, who challenges this prophecy of Jeremiah.

¹² A description of this phenomenon in the book from the narrative perspective has been given in A.C. Osuji, “As Gaps Overlap on the Map: Negotiating Jeremiah Landscape as *Narrato-logic* Blends with *Theo-logic*,” in Ausloos, H. & Luciani, D. (eds.), *Temporalité et Intrigue: Hommage à André Wénin*. Leuven-Paris-Bristol, CT: Peeters, Belgium, 2018, pp. 107-116.

¹³ They consider the introduction of chapter 28 with its peculiar date formula as making it the beginning of a separable unit. Again the two chapters have each different characters.

¹⁴ The commentary of Keown *et al.* has it as “The Yoke of Nebuchadnezzar” (27:1-28:17 [LXX 34:1-35:17]), pp. 38-59. For them, “Chaps. 27–28 must be read together in order to be understood properly in their present shape [...]. Four main features of the present shape of these chapters indicate they now form a unit (1) the story told or implied in the arrangement of the oracles and other materials; (2) the common formal pattern found in the oracles in both chapters; (3) intertextual connections by means of quotation, repetition, or allusion; (4) shared historical setting,” G.L. Keown, P. Scalise & T.G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52* (WBC 27), Dallas, 1995, p. 44. Brueggemann titled the two chapters: “The Yoke of Yahweh (27:1–28:17).” cf. Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, pp. 240-255. See also F.-L. Hossfeld & I. Meyer, *Prophet gegen Prophet, Eine Analyse der alttestamentlichen Texte zum Thema: wahre und false Propheten* (Biblische Beiträge 9), Freiburg, 1973, especially pp. 90-103; J.S. de Vries, *Prophet against Prophet*, Grand Rapids, 1978.

We, therefore, have a structure in the following divisions:

- A. *Divine commissioning for a sign-act and oracle for the neighbouring kings (27:1-11)*
- B. *Oracle for Zedekiah (27:12-15)*
- C. *Oracle for the priests and people (27:16-22)*
- D. *Hananiah's counter oracle and counter sign-act (28:1-11)*
- E. *Yahweh's sovereign intervention (28:12-17)*

After Jeremiah's legitimisation as a true prophet of Yahweh, vindicated by Judah's highest court in chapter 26, it is logical to expect immediately afterwards Jeremiah's self affirmation and proper fulfilment of this role. We see Jeremiah confronting other prophets whether Judean or foreign, Jerusalem based or active in Babylon.¹⁵ Cast in prose, Jer. 27 is mainly a record of oracles from Yahweh. There is an abundance of the *Legitimationsformel* indicating that Jeremiah is acting on a sure base of certainty that his words are Yahweh's (vv. 2, 4, 8, 11, 15, 16, 21, 22). Yahweh commands Jeremiah to fashion a yoke, which he would put round his neck. The prophet gains access to the envoys from neighbouring kingdoms, charges them to take the yokes to their masters who have sent them to Jerusalem. The summary of the message, which interprets the symbolic act, is: submit to the king of Babylon and stop listening to the various intermediaries who preach against this option (vv. 1-11). Oracles of similar nature are delivered to Zedekiah (vv. 12-15) and to the priests and the people (vv. 16-22). In summary, each of the three sections of this divine discourse contains a two-part exhortation: serve the king of Babylon and do not listen to the falsehood by the prophets. One notices a constant distinction between the true and the false, couched in an opposition between a programme of life in

¹⁵ R. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (OTL), London, 1986, p. 523. See for example "Jeremiah against the prophets: An Independent Cycle 27-29" in R. Carroll, *Jeremiah* (OTL), pp. 523-568.

Babylon and a programme of death outside it. Brueggemann calls this a “frightened theological statement.”¹⁶

A reader of the discourse of chapter 27 would appreciate how things were building to a climax. Jeremiah’s words have been addressed to the envoys, the king, the priests and the people. When will it be spoken to the prophets, the ones most offended, because Jeremiah had been telling everyone not to listen to them (cf. 27:9, 14, 15, 16, 17). Hananiah would fill the vacuum. What comes in chapter 28 is a face-to-face confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah, the lead prophet of the opposition,¹⁷ a meeting rated as one of the most dramatic encounters between true and false prophets in the Bible, comparable only with the meeting of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (cf. 1 Kings 18:16-45).

With the *Legitimationsformel* where Hananiah claims the divine origin of his prophecy (“thus says the Lord”) and in the presence of the priests and all the people, he contradicts Jeremiah’s prophecy, and prophesies the breaking of the Babylonian yoke, the return of the exiles within two years, the restoration of the temple vessels that had been looted and the reinstallation to power of the King (v. 2-4). The reader can sense the tense atmosphere. Jeremiah then addressed his compatriot personally.

Beginning his speech, Jeremiah retorted “Amen! May the Lord do so” (v. 6) regarding Hananiah’s speech, which can be interpreted as a sarcastic wish that his prophecy be true. But immediately he adds a caveat: He invites Hananiah to listen (v. 7) and to consider the tradition of the prophets before both of them, a tradition which prophesies pestilence, war and disaster (v. 8) whereby true prophets normally prophesy warnings and danger to the people while false ones prophesy shalom or sugar-coat their message. It means that a new word that falls

¹⁶ W. Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, p. 242.

¹⁷ J.R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 21B), New York-London, 2004, p. 342

outside this tradition must be subjected to the test of fulfilment (v. 9). The narrative is furthered by Hananiah who in a dramatic style took the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and broke it, repeating his prophecy of immediate return of the exiles, still claiming the divine origin of his message (vv. 10-11). While the text says that Jeremiah walked away, he was recalled by Yahweh with a stern message to Hananiah. Jeremiah should prophesy to Hananiah that his action would usher in a harder situation; and for himself will incur death in two months for the simple reason of leading people to falsity (vv. 15-16). Thus the words of Jeremiah are confirmed as the authentic prophet, as the text ends with the notice of the death of Hananiah (v. 17) who leaves behind him an image of a discredited prophet.

4 THE CHARACTERISATION OF GOD

4.1 The Judgement and the *hesed* (Loving Mercy) of Yahweh

Brueggemann, talking of the notion of imagination especially in the prophetic corpus, is of the conviction that alongside the theological intent which the biblical text carries, a revelation of the character of God is also in question.¹⁸ Like many prophetic books, the book of Jeremiah could be understood in terms of various responses to issues that are both theological and political to the people. First of all, the book could be said to be a response to a wrong ideology. This ideology articulated by the Jerusalem establishment, fostered by the king and encouraged by temple priests, claimed that the God of Israel had made irrevocable promises to the temple and the monarchy, had taken up permanent abode in Jerusalem, and was for all time a patron and guarantor of the Jerusalem establishment. Jeremiah's work makes sense as an antithetical

¹⁸ W. Brueggemann, *A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation*, in Miller, P.D. (ed.), *Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*, Minneapolis, 1992, p. 1-21, see p. 4.

response to that ideology. In concrete terms, Jeremiah's tradition is that Jerusalem is not guaranteed at all costs, but its existence and shalom depend on the exigencies of the Torah and her resolve to keep it. Their present *kairos* stands under the 'wrath' and not the 'love of God.'

Again, like many other prophetic books, it is also a response to the question of exile. The theological dissonance engendered by the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem and its holy site needed a response. The Babylonian threat and hegemony is not only a political reality but a theological judgement on Jerusalem's recalcitrance. It is, therefore, not the yoke of Babylon; it is ultimately that of Yahweh. This is what is played out in Jer. 27–28. But this judgement, even though severe, is not definitive. The *hesed* (loving mercy) of God is supreme and will prime over his punishment: "serve the king of Babylon *and live*" (vv. 11, 12, 17). The ultimate that Yahweh gives is shalom, when "I shall establish a new covenant with you" which will be everlasting. Thus the God who destroys is the very God who builds and plants (cf. Jer. 1:10; 45:4). The God who judges trusted symbol systems and shatters sacred canopies is the One who transforms death into life by the power of love and mercy.

4.2 God's Sovereign Character: The Yoke of Babylon or the Poke of Yahweh?

Jer. 27–28 begins with the affirmation of Yahweh as Creator (cf. 27:5). Sanders argues that affirming Yahweh as God of all creation, which was part of the 'monotheising' process in ancient Israel, can be one of the signs of having come to awareness of the real nature of God.¹⁹ In fact this affirmation in Jer. 27:5 is prolonged by a corollary: the universal mastery of Yahweh on men and beasts and over the earth, which he can give to the one he pleases (cf. 27:5-11). One of the major theological

¹⁹ J.A. Sanders, "Hermeneutics in True and False Prophecy," in Coats, G.W. & Long, B.O. (eds.), *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, Philadelphia, 1977, p. 2141, see p. 37.

questions in the text of Jer. 27–28 is the status of the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar and his relationship with Yahweh. How would

Yahweh use a pagan figure as his “servant”²⁰ to punish his people? (cf. 27:6). Martin Kessler has a theological explanation that hinges on the dynamic relationship between ‘doom’ and ‘salvation’ in the prophetic books.²¹ We normally see that doom oracles against Judah normally come first, followed by another series of doom oracles against the foreign nations.²³ We would then expect salvation or hopeful oracles, “in view of the philosophy of history embedded within the Old Testament that, after Israel is punished for her alleged transgressions by nations chosen by YHWH for this purpose, these same nations and others will receive punishment as well, which leads to deliverance and hope for Israel.”²²

The reign of God, his directorship of history and destinies, would entail his overthrowing of every pretence and power arrangement that opposes his design, a dismantling of every “act of self-aggrandizement,” in the words of Brueggemann,²³ found among the nations. Most importantly, the OAN (Oracles against the Nations 46–51) emphasises the overthrow of Babylon, a nation that is significant in the book of Jeremiah. Babylon, once empowered by Yahweh to accomplish his purposes and punish his people, will ultimately be disgraced and toppled. The concluding prose of the book in Jer. 51:59-64 highlights the severe

²⁰ The designation “Nebuchadnezzar my servant” is used again in Jer. 25:9 and 43:10.

²¹ M. Kessler, *Jeremiah Chapters 26–45 Reconsidered*, in *JNES* 27 (1968), p. 81-88, see p. 82. ²³ This statement is made basing primarily on the order of the materials in the LXX but can still be applicable to that in the MT.

²² Cf. M. Kessler, *Jeremiah Chapters 26–45 Reconsidered*, p. 83, footnote 15. This pattern can also be illustrated from the book of Isaiah: while the doom motif pervades chapters 1–23 (Judah 1–12, foreign nations 13–23), the shalom motif gains significance after chapter 23, especially with chapter 40ff. Ezekiel has also the same pattern: The book divides almost neatly into three parts; chapters 1–24: oracles against Judah and Jerusalem; chapters 25–32: oracles against foreign nations; chapters 33–48: oracles of hope and restoration for Judah.

²³ W. Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, p. 420.

attack of Yahweh on Babylon: the scroll of the oracle should be read by Seraiah and cast into Euphrates to symbolise the drowning of Babylon. With this last allusion and the first temporal allusion that places the OAN at the accession year of Nebuchadnezzar (cf. 46:2, 13), one can say that the “OAN are bracketed by the birth announcement and ‘death certificate’ of Babylon, the object of Yahweh’s wrath.”²⁴ If king Nebuchadnezzar is destined to be finally humiliated in favour of God’s people, then the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar is therefore only a poke (a jab, a challenge, a pun, a fun, ridicule) of Yahweh on this pagan king and nation which is only an instrument in the hand of God. In the long run therefore, the text makes this fundamental characterisation of God: Yahweh is absolute. “Why should the nations ask, ‘Where is their God?’ Our God is in the heavens, he does whatever he wills” (Psa. 115:1-3). The book of Jeremiah bears witness to the struggle of a prophet who needed to learn, albeit with difficulty, to understand the ways of a God who has not sold his right or freedom even to his faithful prophet; a God who is not helplessly tied to his promises to his people. The Hebrew Bible attests to the fact that through varied experiences in the course of history, Yahweh wished that his people understand that he (Yahweh) is not to be localised or appropriated. He is the Other, the Yahweh of the universe.

5 SOCIO-THEOLOGICAL STAKES AND CONTEXT

The prophetic pages are not simply meant to ginger academic analytical endeavours but texts written with the aim of providing a guide to a faith community, including the present audience which has received these texts. And so the Jeremiah-Hananiah duel remains a matter for reflection for the many Churches, ecclesial groups and religious personalities who stand before the communities of believers as official mouthpiece in the peoples’ relation with their God. This text speaks

²⁴ L. Stulman, *Order amid Chaos: Jeremiah as a Symbolic Tapestry*, Sheffield, 1998, p. 95.

volumes to our Nigerian context where ‘prophecy’ seems to dominate the religious discourse and atmosphere. There are many out there who claim to gaze into the inscrutable eyes of God to see the future. Incidentally, in the context of poverty and insecurity many itch to hear and to be assured of the future. Many desperately want to hear ‘shalom’ pronounced unto them, and so are easily exploited by religious charlatans and the Hananiahs of today who generously pronounce it but not without some charges. There is a lot of social and theological dynamics about prophecy and the ministry of the word today in our context showcased in this narrative.

5.1 Prophetic Authenticity and its Criteria

Our text showcases the question of prophetic authenticity. What makes a prophet authentic? Message? Realization? Moral life? Claim to divine origin? Sincerity of the prophet? etc. How does the reader judge between Jeremiah and Hananiah in this narrative? Some authors on Jer. 27–28 have titled their commentaries “prophet against prophet/s.”²⁵ Such titling bears from the fact that reading the narrative, one notices that the narrator subtly hides his prejudices against any of the prophets to allow the text itself provide the reader clues for judgement. In the narrative, both prophets have the *Legitimationsformel* put into their mouths (cf. 27: 2, 4, 8, 11, 15, 16, 21, 22; 28:2, 4, 11 and 16). Jeremiah’s symbolic action in 27:2 receives a match in the symbolic action of Hananiah in 28:10. There is equality in attribution of the title ‘prophet’ to two of them.²⁶ However, the reader notices some list of criteria in ascending order given in the text about prophetic authenticity. Firstly, Jeremiah appeals to the prophetic tradition (v. 8), then to the

²⁵ See for example, F.-L. Hossfeld & I. Meyer, *Prophet gegen Prophet: Eine Analyse der alttestamentlichen Texte zum Thema: Wahre und false Propheten* (Biblische Beiträge 9), Freiburg, 1973.

²⁶ In chapter 28, the attribution of this title is made to Hananiah six times (v. 1, 5, 10, 12, 15, 17) and to Jeremiah equally six times (5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 15).

criterion of fulfilment (v. 9), and finally the text makes reference to the question of being sent by Yahweh (v. 12). The religious scene today demands a high level of discernment from people, a task which gets more complicated than ever in the course of time.

5.2 Man of God or God of Man?

A very big challenge for a minister of the word is to see himself as servant to this word and not its master. The minister is an instrument in the hands of God and not vice versa. The prophet is not in possession of the truth; only God possesses the truth. God is the Truth. The prophet is in search for the truth. The unit under consideration reflects two different attitudes towards the truth among the two prophets. Jeremiah's 'Amen' in v. 6 and the development that follows till v. 9, is not to suppose that one should adopt an attitude of indifference as regards the truth, but could be understood as an invitation to his fellow prophet to an inspection of historical past in order to arrive at the truth of the present. But the physical action of Hananiah afterwards – snatching and breaking the yoke – makes the reader sense a partner who does not wish to dialogue. Our religious atmosphere is filled with phenomena of religious ministers who speak in such a way that one doubts whether it is a question of man of God or God of man. There is this tendency of putting God at the service of man, and not vice versa. Many ministers of the word, especially those who run special ministries, are always faced with the temptation of presenting their words and their ministry posts as the final bus-stop to God. Is this not partly the reason for the very important long session that deals with 'testimonies' where the minister's power or the power in his location is advertised? The temptation for ministers of the word to exhibit absolutist pretensions is abundant; thinking of themselves as "appointed regents of a God who cannot act in history unless he acts through them, who will be defeated if they are,

and who will flourish if they do.”²⁷ One of the distinctions between false and true prophets is that one confiscates the word of God by a selfaffirmation of infallibility.²⁸

5.3 Truth and Fundamentalism: Timelessness or Timeliness

Israelite prophets were often faced with the problem of articulating in proper terms the changing nature of the theological expression of faith in their days. Take for example the major elements of Israelite faith: the theologies surrounding the popular themes around the election, the Patriarchs, the Exodus, the wilderness and conquest, Sinai, David, the ark, the temple, etc. These were the constitutive elements of Yahwism and at the same time constituted the major dangers to pure Yahwism. Since Yahweh is faithful, little thought is, therefore, given to the conditional nature of the covenant as if the special relationship with Yahweh is not dependent on the people’s unconditional response to his love.

Interpretation of religious texts and appreciation of the details of Godman relationship have always been prone to some tendency towards fundamentalism; the inability to get holistic view of realities and interpret the word of God in the light of the signs of the times. It is simply in this problematic that the issue of religious fundamentalism in different quarters in Nigeria could be categorised. That the ancient texts of Scripture speak to us today does not imply timelessness. In other words, the correct interpretation of the holy writ should emphasise not the timelessness of Scripture but its timeliness. Following the presentation by the narrator, one sees that the words of Hananiah before and after the act of breaking the yoke are identical (compare v. 2-4 and

²⁷ J.C. Schroeder, *I Samuel: Text, Exegesis and Exposition*, in *The Interpreters Bible*, p. 876.

²⁸ D. Lys, *Jérémie 28 et le problème du faux prophète ou la circulation du sens dans le diagnostic prophétique*, in *RHPR* 59 (1979), p. 453-482, see p. 480.

v. 11). Read in a larger corpus, it appears like an out-of-context repetition of Isaiah a century earlier about the inviolability of Zion,²⁹³⁰ a declaration which does not take into account the challenges and the risks of the current situation but which trusts in the veritable traditions of the past. Childs writes: “A false prophet was one who practised bad hermeneutics.”³¹ Assuring security and happiness in the nearest future,

Hananiah dodges the possibility of change and the call to conversion. He takes the yoke in the literal sense: object of oppression to be removed, and by breaking it, treats it like a magical object that acts by itself. But for Jeremiah, the yoke speaks of Yahweh; or better put is a language by Yahweh himself, a symbolic and open language. In the discharge of the prophetic ministry today, this calls for the dialogue between faith and context where the absoluteness of God’s truth must be proclaimed in the contingencies and vagaries of human language and context”³² for, using Brueggemann’s phrasing, “if the present-tense reality of God cannot be discerned, then any prophetic discernment is likely ideology. Thus yesterday’s certitude has become today’s distorting ideology.”³³ This is the same principle at the base of prosperity preaching that is rampant among many ministers of the word today. Prosperity evangelism concentrates in shalom promises and disregards God’s call to conversion and his justice for offenders of his law.

5.4 Good News or Nice News for the Powers that Be

Jer. 27–28 witnesses to a parallel existence of two opposite streams of thought, one championed by the Jerusalem establishment – kings, temple, priests, official prophets – and the other represented singly by

²⁹ See amidst many other texts foundational to Zion theology in Isaiah, Isa. 8:5-10; Isa. 17:12-14;

³⁰ :6-12; 60–62 etc. See also J.H. Hayes, “The Tradition of Zion’s Inviolability,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1963), pp. 419- 426.

³¹ B.S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, London, 1985, p. 136.

³² L. Boeve, *Bearing Witness to the Differend: A Model for Theologizing in the Postmodern Context*, in *LvSt* 20 (1995), p. 362-379, see p. 364.

³³ W. Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, p. 251.

the vision of Jeremiah. It is all about who and what to believe: Jeremiah who advises wilful submission to Babylon and envisions this as recipe for salvation, or Hananiah who proposes the contrary. The reader of the narratives notices a subtle reference to a system of normalisation on one side and that of destabilisation on the other; between a system with absolute claims and another that suggests an alternative vision. However it is very difficult in religious ministry to talk of change especially in a system or power structure that thinks that change would undermine its basic gains. This is the situation in the text and the situation in our context. As a lone voice, Jeremiah insists on the necessity for openness in a vicious circle and so is a voice that disturbs. As a model of prophetic activity, he becomes a “destabilising presence.”³⁴

In such context there is the tendency for ministers to align themselves with civil powers, the powers that be, and the financial stalwarts. Whenever a cult is sponsored by the royalty, the prophet is always expected to further the interests of the court and in certain occasions, failure to do so meant danger to the life of the prophet. The Elijah narratives show clearly the constant clash between the desires of the kings and those of the prophets. Examples of this in the Hebrew Bible are the story of the prophet Amos and Amaziah at Bethel (cf. Amos 7:10-17) and the story of Micaiah ben Imlah (cf. I Kings 22). This phenomenon is no less current today as ministers continually face the constant danger of compromising their messages either out of fear or favour.

³⁴ W. Brueggemann, *The Prophet as a Destabilising Presence*, in Miller, P.D. (ed.), *Walter Brueggemann: A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life*, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 221-244, see p. 223.

5.5 Crowd Expectation and Desire for Success

Failure of realization of a prophecy was the lot of many prophets in Israel and they found it difficult to understand this vis-à-vis their conviction of being sent. For example, Jeremiah's confessions were in most cases a voicing out of his anguished emotions prompted by a sense of disappointment in speaking for a God who seemed not always ready to vindicate him³⁵ (e.g. Jer. 20:7-13). In a country besieged by political and economic hardship, like Nigeria of today, it is only logical that many people turn to spiritual means as either the last resort or even the first resort for the solution to their problems, and therefore, many become clients or patients to whoever is believed to make more things happen. Logically crowd expectation could be a temptation for a minister of the word to desire for success at all times at all costs, and to legitimise his/her ways.

Religion cannot be totally divorced from human interest. Most often, in human religiosity, the deity is expected always to be there to attend to human expectations. Crowd expectation and populist theology go hand in hand. Between the expectations of the crowd, the society or epoch and the inner convictions of the minister, a choice must be made. It could not be out of place to assume that this factor played a role in

Hananiah's theatrical act of snatching the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and breaking it. Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal has the presence of the crowd as a factor that encouraged him as well as boosted his ego. Elijah's prayer is for Yahweh to "let them know today that you are God in Israel, and *that I am your servant, that I have done all these things at your command*" (I Kings 18:36). Among the prophets in the Hebrew Bible one often reads a somewhat boastful utterance such as in

³⁵ Von Rad remarks that it was difficult for the prophet Jeremiah to transcend his situation and interpret his suffering in a redemptive way, and recognise that the prophetic office implied equally martyrdom. Cf. G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology II: The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, Edinburgh, 1965, p. 206.

Ezekiel: “they shall know that a prophet has been among them” (Ezek. 2:5; 33:33).³⁶ The audience of the prophet also determines to a large extent the content of his preaching. To the rich, the bourgeois, the kings and the shapers of the current, the prophet could offer a religion that legitimates the status quo of his audience. To the poor, the down trodden and the marginalised, the prophet has the temptation of either painting the image of the suffering servant of Yahweh, in which case religion becomes the opium of the masses, or God becomes only the God of the poor and never that of the rich. Prosperity gospel is also handy in this situation. “Let the poor say I am rich...”! Some ministers pick and choose what to say in order not to offend their ‘financial contributors.’

5.6 Deception and the Scourge of Fake Ministries

Authentic religious ministry is meant to be service to God and humanity. Prophecy is at the essence of the ministry of the word, as a prophet is essentially one who proclaims the word of God to the people. The ministry of the word, and therefore the ministry of the Church, is simply and essentially prophetic. It is fact that this ministry has also suffered among many false preachers, therefore false prophets. False prophecy, that is, false ministry of the word, even if it has existed in the history of religions, has become a scourge in the recent times. Today, unsuspecting worshipers are led astray, deceived, made to wander away from the path because of inauthentic and unreal service offered by some false ministers. This is seen today in religious deceit – whether wilful, mistaken or propelled by ignorance, the rise of false prophets, the menace of subjective interpretation, the danger of ignorance and the

³⁶ See A. Osuji, “They Will Know that a Prophet is among Them” (Ezek. 33:33): Hype of Prediction Prophecy in Nigeria. Authenticity and Missing Link,” in Osuji A. and Ukeh C. (eds.), *Synod for Africa: 25 Years Later: Context and Pastoral Ministry in a Post-Synodal Local Church*, Enugu: Iykememo, 2019, pp. 1-28.

commercialization of religion.³⁷ Unscrupulous charlatans cash on people's existential predicament which leads them to the search for signs and wonders. Thus they fall prey to any religious fancy and theatrical manoeuvres. Religion is, thus, converted into money making venture, the ministers setting up religious *Small Scale Industries*³⁸ and becoming *Vendors of the Gospel*.³⁹

5.7 Prophetic Listening

In religious setting all over the world today, there have emerged two distinct ways in which religion has shaped public life. One is priestly, the other prophetic, applying the distinctions by William Pape Wood.⁴⁰ Both appeal to transcendent faith and moral values, but each has a very different orientation. In the priestly tradition, religion is more or less institutional and serve institutional goals; used as a way to comfort people and to assure them of their institutions. Besides the priestly religious attitude stands the prophetic attitude. The prophetic religious tradition involves values, ideals, and faith that stand above the behaviour and practice of any one group or nation, any religion, institutional or independent. This is the religious tradition that calls into question all human institutions, no matter how pretentiously holy, and tests them against God's demands for justice and righteousness.⁴¹

Interestingly, in the same year 1996, there appeared two books in Nigeria's theological scene that have become reference books. George

³⁷ See Gerald Umoren, "Mediocre Biblical Interpretation: A Critical Evaluation," An unpublished paper delivered at the Catholic Biblical Instructor's Union Conference at Seat of Wisdom Seminary Owerri on October 21, 2015.

³⁸ Bishop Gregory Ochiagha, *Small Scale Industries* (Lenten Pastoral 2000).

³⁹ See M. Anyaegbu, *Vendors of the Gospel: Disfiguring the Face of Christianity*, Awka: Fab Anieh Nig. Ltd., 2000.

⁴⁰ W.P. Wood, *John 2:13-22*, in *Interpretation* 45 (1991), p. 59-63, see p. 62.

⁴¹ W.P. Wood, *John 2:13-22*, p. 62.

Ehusani⁴² and Eugene Uzukwu⁴⁴ propose a prophetic character and a listening character respectively to the Church in Nigeria. With Jesus as⁴³ model, the prophets and in the modern time Martin Luther King Jr., Ehusani describes what should be the best attitude of those called into religious leadership in Nigeria, and not only that, the style of Christian witness by every baptised Christian. His summary is that we need a prophetic leadership,⁴⁴ a Church that is confrontational⁴⁵ with her message, “a prophetic Church that will discern the current situation in our country and give it a theological interpretation; that will tell some basic truths to the Nigerian people. We need a prophetic Church to tell Nigerians for example that the real problem militating against unity, national cohesion, and peace and prosperity is the selfishness of the elite.”⁴⁶ Elochukwu Uzukwu suggests the “listening model” to the Church. For the Church in Nigeria to be an agent of social transformation, it must begin by listening and developing “large ears;”⁴⁷ “courageously changing her structures from the inside. In order to liberate the Spirit, to allow the Spirit initiative in the life of the churchcommunity, this structural change is imperative.”⁴⁸

These two models are not contradictory. They are complementary. Combining the two models, the minister of the word therefore is one

⁴² G.O. Ehusani, *A Prophetic Church*, Ibadan, 1996.

⁴³ E.E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, New York, 1996.

⁴⁴ G.O. Ehusani, *A Prophetic Church*, p. 62.

⁴⁵ See B.O. Ukwuegbu, *Confrontational Evangelisation: Features, Prospects, and Challenges*, Onitsha: Effective Keys, 1995, p. 88.

⁴⁶ G.O. Ehusani, *A Prophetic Church*, p. 62-63.

⁴⁷ Uzukwu draws the idea of listening and “large ears” from an analogy of the ‘Manja paradigm’ – where among the Manja of the Central African Republic, the totem for the chief is the rabbit, an unobtrusive animal common in many parts of Africa known for its large ears. The analogy is thus neatly drawn: the ‘large ears’ of the chief “bring him close to God, ancestors, and divinities and close to the conversations taking place in the community. He has the last word because he speaks after having assimilated and digested the “Word” in the community, E.E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church*, p. 127.

⁴⁸ E.E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church*, p. 152.

who tells what Yahweh has said, who critiques the social situation, and also first and foremost one who listens to Yahweh, to others and society.

One of the dangers a religious institution can face is, considering only its 'holiness' and seeing just its role as the conscience of the society (which it truly is), it forgets the obligation to listen. Jeremiah is of the opinion that self-criticism begins with the minister of the word himself and that even the most holy institution should stand introspectively open before the mirror of God's impartial standards.

CONCLUSION

Though a microcosm of the universal Church (and like other particular Churches), Nigeria today is a typical scene of an arena where there are many competitive religious voices, each claiming to be the authentic voice. Just like many other societies of the twenty-first century, the Nigerian scene lives in an epoch of denominational and religious confusion. It is not deprived of clues, but rather faces the problem of many and at times confusing signals. Related to and fuelled necessarily by the myriads of political, social and economic problems, many voices have arisen to present themselves as the messiahs of the moment, analysing the crises, denouncing social ills and at least of course suggesting the ways out. As consequence, the avenue is made wide open to manipulation and falsity and this often saps the critical spirit of people, most of whom now have passed from credibility to gullibility. Jer. 27-28 provides a solid matrix for theological and contextual reflections on the character of the deity to which religious bodies (especially Christian) serve; a God who Himself orders the affairs of the world, who allows even adversities in pursuance of his ultimate purpose which is shalom for people. Texts like these remain foundational in as much as their narrative intricacies go a long way to provide clues for genuine God - man relationship.

