
The portrayal of Yahweh in Jeremiah 20:7-13

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Abstract

The central question put in this article is: How is Yahweh portrayed in Jeremiah 20:7-13? Proceeding from the so-called final form of the text, it is argued that Yahweh is portrayed as a powerful, present and personal God who should be praised. The conclusion reached is that no uniform picture of Yahweh is painted; in fact, there are tensions in the text that remain unresolved.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the strict sense of the word theology aims at making statements about God. What can be said of theology in general, can also be said of Old Testament theology in particular. On more than one occasion the task of Old Testament theology has been described as 'was das Alte Testament als ganzes, in allen seinen Teile von Gott sagt' (Westermann 1978:5; cf Goldingay 1987). According to Childs (1985:9) the task of Old Testament theology, is to hear the Old Testament's own theological testimony to the God of Israel whom the church confesses also to worship. Preuss (1991:27), in his Old Testament theology, tries to answer the question he put to himself: 'Wie kommt Gott in den Texten des AT zur Sprache, wie geschieht dort "Theologie"'.

A stereotyped dogmatic concept of God often blurs a picture of God painted in a particular pericope of the Bible. In this article the picture of Yahweh as portrayed in Jeremiah 20:7-13 is highlighted. It is argued that Jeremiah 20:7-13 presents us with a conflicting portrayal of Yahweh shaking conventional dogmatic concepts of God.

The question put in this contribution is: How is Yahweh portrayed in Jeremiah 20:7-13? This question is answered with some statements about Yahweh as portrayed in this pericope and then a motivation for these statements. Methodologically, this investigation takes its point of departure from the so-called final form of the text focusing on the structural features of the text.

2. YAHWEH IS A POWERFUL GOD

The very first thing that strikes one in this passage is the power of Yahweh. Clines and Gunn (1978:26-27) already hinted at the possibility that what is at stake here is the

theme of Yahweh's power, but they did not elaborate on it extensively. Yahweh's power is directed at two parties in this passage. It is directed at the prophet on the one side and the persecutors of the prophet on the other side.

2.1 Yahweh's power is directed against his prophet

Jeremiah 20:7-13 forms one of the so-called confessions of Jeremiah (Jer 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-14; 15:15-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13; 20:14-18). In these confessions the prophet voices his discomfort with his calling to be a prophet of Yahweh.

Yahweh's power is depicted in a prominent way in the very first line of the pericope by the use of three verbs: *pth*, *hzq* and *ykl*. It is said that Yahweh 'pth' his prophet, He proved to be too 'hzq' for the prophet and hence he — the prophet — cannot 'ykl'.

The verb *pth* is of course not an easy one to translate. Some scholars translate the word with 'seduce' indicating sexual overtones, even rape (Bright 1968:132; Rudolph 1968:130; Baumgartner 1917:49; Holladay 1986:552; McKane 1986:470; Brueggemann 1988:174; Ittman 1981:172). This interpretation is given by referring to Exodus 22:15 where the verb is used of a man seducing a girl. Clines and Gunn (1978:21-23) pointed out that *pth* in the sense of 'seduce' cannot be maintained. They argued that the view that *pth* refers specifically to seduction is based upon only one passage (Ex 22:15) while there are many occurrences where *pth* is used where sexual overtones are far from probable (Pr 24:28; I Ki 22:20 ff).

The verb is also translated with 'deceive' as Holladay (1986:547-548) and others (Lundbom 1975:46; Carroll 1981:125; Carroll 1986:395-396; O'Connor 1984:107) do, or (trying to) 'persuade' as Clines and Gunn (1978:21-23) proposed. Bak (1990:189) noted in this regard: 'Unabhängig von der Frage, ob es sich in diesen Verben um die sexuelle Verwältigung oder um eine Überwältigung durch ständige Überredung handelt, ist festzustellen, dass der Beter den eigentlichen Grund seines Leidens in der ihn bezwingenden Übermacht Jahwes sieht'.

Whatever the case may be, the prophet makes it clear that he was deceived/persuaded/pressured by Yahweh in such a way that resistance would be futile. This is emphasised by '*hzqtny*', Yahweh is simply too strong and the result is that He prevails '*wrwl*' over the prophet. O'Connor (1984:109) notes that, by sheer domination (*ykl*), Yahweh proves his superior strength (*hzq*) and Brueggemann (1988: 174) comments that this passage 'asserts Yahweh's raw, primitive power that overwhelms even the one who seeks to serve him'.

According to verse 8 whenever the prophet speaks, he has to cry out violence and destruction. Many different explanations of this phrase have been offered. Some scho-

lars see the cry of violence and destruction as a continuation of the image of seduction in verse 7 that is carried through to verse 8 where the phrase would refer to the cry of a woman in the context of indecent assault (Berridge 1970:153-154). Oosterhoff (1994: 220) likens the prophet to a virgin who is raped and then cries for help, but without any reaction. It has already been argued that the interpretation of seduction in this pericope is an unlikely one.

It is more probable that the prophet refers to divine violence and destruction he has to suffer. According to Clines and Gunn (1978:26) Yahweh compels the prophet with outrageous violence to speak his word. Carroll (1986:399) suggests that the cry of violence and destruction is an indication that the speaker views Yahweh as the enemy. Hubmann (1981:183) puts it even stronger: 'Der erste Teil (V7-9) setzt mit der Feststellung ein, dass Jahwe betörend auf Jeremia eingewirkt habe, mehr noch, dass er geradezu unter Anwendung von Gewalt in das Leben Jeremias eingebrochen sei und dabei vollen Erfolg hatte'.

There can be little doubt that the prophet's experience of Yahweh is that of a powerful God, compelling him in a violent way to be his prophet. He regards himself as a victim of nothing else but divine violence brought about by Yahweh himself. Behind the word the prophet has to proclaim stands Yahweh in an 'unwiderstehliche Mächtigkeit' (Hubmann 1981:185-186). Diamond (1987:113) describes Yahweh's way with Jeremiah as a way of violent domination and compulsion, forcing him to be the bearer of the word.

In verse 12 Yahweh is called '*tsebaot*'. It is a well-known fact that this is one of the most frequently used attributes of God in the Old Testament. Although there are different theories of how this epithet should be understood (is it an earthly or heavenly host?), there is a degree of consensus amongst scholars that this attribute of Yahweh denotes power or powerfulness (Preuss 1991:164-167). Eichrodt (1975:229) noted that this title refers to the demonstration of the power of Yahweh in war. According to Van der Woude (1976:506-507), especially the idea of Yahweh's ruling as a king in royal majesty is depicted. In the LXX this phrase is translated as '*kurios pantokrator*' and in modern translations like the New International Version and Today's English Version, the phrase is translated as '*Almighty*'.

2.2 Yahweh's power is directed against the prophet's persecutors

Verse 11 makes it clear that the power of Yahweh is not only directed against the prophet, but also against the persecutors of the prophet. Verse 11 describes Yahweh as a mighty warrior (*kgr arits*), or a mighty terrible one, as the American Standard Version translates. When Yahweh is described as a mighty warrior, it indicates the power-

ful presence of Yahweh (O'Connor 1984:114). The word '*gibbor*' denotes strongness, power, a hero (Kühlewein 1976:402; cf also Is 9:5; Zeph 3:17).

Yahweh painted as a mighty warrior, also has some significance for our theme. Diamond (1987:257) draws attention to the irony of the combination of '*gibbor*' and '*arits*'. '*Gibbor*' is a term associated with divine salvific actions (Ps 24:8; Zph 3:17; Is 42:13), while '*arits*' is associated with the acts of the wicked ruthless (Is 25:3-5; Ezr 28:7; Ps 37:35 cf also Bak 1990:201-202). Holladay (1986:557) noted that this is the only instance in the Old Testament where this adjective is applied to Yahweh. Otherwise it is used of foreign nations and of the wicked in general (contra Ittmann 1981:75 who regards it as a title of honour). In Jeremiah 15:21 the enemies are described as mighty and strong, but Yahweh will prove to be even stronger. This is also the case in Jeremiah 20:11. As a mighty hero, Yahweh proves to be stronger than the persecutors of the prophet (Oosterhoff 1994:223).

It is also evident from verse 11 that, on account of this, the persecutors of the prophets will stumble and, just as the prophet, they will not prevail. *wl' yklw* has a double meaning. The prophet makes an appeal to Yahweh and, as a result of that, the persecutors will not succeed in their attempt to prevail over the prophet. But, not prevailing over him, at the same means not prevailing over Yahweh. So, just as the prophet had to submit to the power of Yahweh, the persecutors will follow suit. The rest of verse 11 makes it clear that Yahweh is the only one who will prevail as the persecutors 'will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten' (NIV). To McKane (1986:479) the *wl' yklw* of verse 11 is a mocking echo of the expressed intentions of the conspirators.

The power of Yahweh is further demonstrated in the plea of the prophet to see the vengeance of Yahweh on the persecutors in verse 12. Precisely because Yahweh is a mighty hero, He is in a position of power to take revenge on the persecutors of the prophet. According to Peels (1992:183-184), Yahweh is seen in verse 12 as the ultimate judge — another position of power — able to execute justice in a righteous way. Because of the power of Yahweh it is not the persecutors who will take revenge on the prophet (verse 10) as they plan to do, but it is Yahweh who will execute his vengeance upon them.

3. YAHWEH IS THE PRESENT AND PERSONAL GOD

Yahweh is not only portrayed as a powerful God, He is also the God who is present. In verse 11 the prophet is convinced that Yahweh is with him ('*owtiy*') as was promised to him (Jr 1:18; 19; 15:20) earlier.

Yahweh *tsebaot* is the one who tests the righteous and sees the kidneys and heart of the prophet (verse 12). Kidneys are normally explained as the seat of the affections and hidden motives, or the conscience of a person (Wolff 1977: 105-106). The heart is the seat not only of the thought processes and the will, but also of a human being's desires, wishes and emotions (Stolz 1971:863-867; Wolff 1977:68-90). The mind and deepest motives of the prophet lie bare for Yahweh to see and even to examine. The prophet revealed his cause (*rib*) in the presence of Yahweh.

4. THIS POWERFUL, PERSONAL AND PRESENT GOD SHOULD BE PRAISED

The pericope comes to a close with a call to praise Yahweh in verse 13. Commentaries point out that it is a problematic verse which should be taken as a later addition (Brueggemann 1988:176; Carroll 1986:397; Holladay 1986:549). Others argue that it makes perfectly good sense in the context of the whole of the pericope (Ittmann 1981:75; O'Connor 1984:105). It has also been argued that '*ebjon*' is not an appropriate characteristic of the prophet (Holladay 1986:558). The term should be seen in contrast to the evil-doers. Yahweh is praised for deliverance from the hands of the evil-doers. What is probably meant is that the prophet counts himself among the powerless ones, being totally overpowered by Yahweh. The call to praise echoes the change of mood often found in the Psalms where a lament is followed by an expression of confidence (Diamond 1987:106-197). The reason why Yahweh should be praised is given in the second line of verse 13: He is the One who redeems the poor from the power of the wicked ones.

5. CONCLUSION

Focusing on the portrayal of Yahweh in this pericope, reveals several tensions in the text. There is no uniform picture of Yahweh painted in this passage. Yahweh is portrayed as the overwhelming powerful God, with little or no regard for the plight of his prophet. The prophet is forced to proclaim the word of Yahweh in such a way that any resistance against his vocation would be futile. Yet, at the same time, the prophet calls upon this powerful God to rescue him from his persecutors. Yahweh is enemy and ally at the same time. Even though the prophet has been overpowered by Yahweh, he also confesses Yahweh to be the One who is with him, whom he can trust and reveal his cause (verse 12). In spite of Yahweh's terrible power, he is reliable and can be counted on (Brueggemann 1988:175). The powerful, almost ruthless God is at the same time also the personal and present God who can be called upon and who should

be praised. In spite of the harshness of God experienced by the prophet, he still clings to Him. In a strange and almost conflicting way the powerless prophet finds in Yahweh's power the source of his confident expectation of vindication (Clines and Gunn 1978:26-27).

Yahweh is a powerful God who makes use of his power, but He is also the personal and present God who should be praised. What is remarkable is that the tension between the powerful God and the personal and present God remains unresolved in this confession.

This portrayal of Yahweh poses a challenge to a stereotyped, dogmatic concept of God. God does not always fit in the dogmatic schemes of what we think He should be. There is more to God than a dogmatic concept of Him.

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