

DIVINE AND HUMAN VIOLENCE AND DESTRUCTION IN JEREMIAH 20:7-13¹

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ABSTRACT

Jeremiah 20:7-13 is a text presenting the interpreter with a multitude of problems. Five main areas of research are briefly highlighted. This paper focuses on the interpretation of *hamas wasad* in Jer 20:8. Eight different interpretations have been offered but no conclusive answer to the exact meaning of the phrase has been given yet. It is argued that due to the ambiguity and structural features of the text the prophet experienced violence and destruction from the divine side as well as from a human side.

1. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Jeremiah 20:7-13 is a text presenting us with a multitude of problems. Elsewhere (Snyman [1999:1]) I indicated five main areas of research done on this particular passage.

- The very first word used in this passage was (and is) the cause of a lively discussion. While many commentators (Von Rad 1984:343; Weiser 1981:170; Rudolph 1968:130-131; Bright 1978:132; Thompson 1980:459; Carroll 1986:398; McKane 1986:470; Holladay 1986:552; Brueggemann 1988:174; Oosterhoff 1994:219) hold that the word פְּתִיתָנִי as a term indicating sexual overtones — even rape — and verging on the blasphemous, others (Clines & Gunn 1978:21; Diamond 1987:110) are of the opinion that the word should rather be understood in the sense of persuasion or to deceive (O'Connor 1984:107-109; Lundbom 1975:46).

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- Another area of research done pertains to the question of the unity or disunity of the passage.
- The phrase **מגור ספקיב** is also a bone of contention in the history of research. Is this phrase deliberately put in here to create a redactional link with the preceding pericope (20:1-6) or is it a stock phrase (Jer 6:25; 46:6; 49:29) in the book as a whole?
- Jeremiah 20:7-13 is also part of what is known as the '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). Many studies have been done on the theme of the confessions of Jeremiah (Ittmann 1981; Diamond 1987 et al).
- The word-pair **המס ושד** was the cause for another debate. A number of interpretations have been given, but no conclusive answer to the exact meaning of the phrase has been given yet. This contribution focuses on the interpretation of **המס ושד** in Jeremiah 20:8. What would be a valid understanding of this phrase in Jeremiah 20:8 is the question put in this contribution.

This investigation proceeds from the text in its final form, taking the structural features of the text into account. This kind of approach does not pretend to be a (or the only) comprehensive approach, it does provide a suitable starting point from which other strands of investigations can be carried out.

2. THE TEXT AND TRANSLATION OF JEREMIAH 20:7-13

2.1 The Hebrew text of Jer 20:7-13

7 פתיתני יהוה ואפת חזקתני ותוכל
הייתי לשחוק בלתיים בלה לע לי:
8 כרמוי אדבר אזעק חמס ושד אקרא
כידעה דבר יהוה לי לחרפה ולקלס בלתיים:
9 ואמרתי לא אזכרתי ולא אדבר עוד בשמו

וְהָיָה בְלִבִּי כְאֵשׁ בַּעֲרַת עֵצָר בַּעֲצָמָי
וְנִלְאַתִּי כְּלִכְל וְלֹא אוֹכֵל:

10 כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי דְבַר רַבִּים מְגוֹר מִסָּבִיב הִגִּידוּ וְנִגְדוּ
כֹּל אָנוּשׁ שְׁלוּמֵי שְׁמַרֵי צְלָעַי
אוֹלֵי יִפְתָּה וְנוֹכְלָה לוֹ וְנִקְחָה נִקְמַתְנוּ מִמֶּנּוּ:

11 וַיְהִי אוֹתִי כְּגִבּוֹר עָרִיץ עַל־פִּי יִכְשְׁלוּ וְלֹא יָכֹלוּ
בִשׁוּ מֵאֹד כִּי־לֹא הִשְׁכִּילוּ כְּלַמַּת עוֹלָם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח:

12 וַיְהִי צְבָאוֹת בְּחֹן צְדִיק רָאָה כְּלִזֹת וּלְב
אֲרָאָה נִקְמַתְךָ מִהֶם כִּי אֵלֶיךָ גִּלִּיתִי אֲתֵדְרִיבִי: ס

13 שִׁירוֹ לַיהוָה הִלְלוּ אֲתֵדְוָה
כִּי הִצִּיל אֶת־נַפְשׁ אַבְיֹן מִיַּד מְרָעִים: ס

2.2 The translation of Jer 20:7-13 according to the NIV.

⁷ O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me.

⁸ Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. ⁹ But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

¹⁰ I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side! Report him! Let's report him!" All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him."

¹¹ But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten.

¹² O LORD Almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

¹³ Sing to the LORD! Give praise to the LORD! He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.

3. A BRIEF OUTLINE OF CURRENT INTERPRETATIONS

In his commentary Rudolph (1968:130) listed three possible interpretations. Clines & Gunn (1978:24) also give three possibilities, albeit slightly different from the presentation of Rudolph. This article links with the different interpretations given by Rudolph and will list at least five more possibilities offered since the publication of Rudolph's commentary in 1968.

3.1 Yahweh will punish his people

The first possibility that Rudolph (1968:130) gave, holds that the phrase may indicate that Yahweh will punish his people by bringing violence and destruction upon them. O'Connor (1984:110-111) is a recent defender of this line of interpretation. According to him (O'Connor 1984:110) "the prophetic pronouncement of **חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה** promises that Judah will experience physical violence, perversion of justice and violation of law". He argues that **חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה** and **דְּבַר יְהוָה** should be considered as synonyms as well as the phrase **מַעוֹר מִסִּבִּיב**. To him the message of chapters 1-20 can be well described as promises of "violence and destruction upon Judah and Jerusalem, priest and prophet, king and people and even upon the land itself" (O'Connor 1984:111). This interpretation coincides with the second possibility given by Clines & Gunn (1978:24). They noted what they call a major flaw in this point of view: the verb **זָעַק** is not an appropriate term for introducing either a judgement-speech or an oracle of doom. It is rather a technical term for a cry of appeal made by an innocent sufferer against unjust oppressors.

3.2 The sins of the people

A second possibility given by Rudolph — and by far the most popular one — is that it may refer to the sins of the people, they were guilty of violence and destruction. This possibility coincides with the first in the presentation of Clines & Gunn (1978:24). According to von Rad (1984:343) and Bright (1978:132) Jeremiah is probably summarizing his judicial indictment. Thompson (1980:459-460) refers to the destructive aspects of Jeremiah's message, summed up in cry of **חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה**. Recently Bak (1990:192-193) sees **חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה** "als eine Wiedergabe der prophetischen Verkündigung" where the unjust behavior of the people and the pitiful state of the community at large are depicted and brought to light. The objection Clines & Gunn (1978:24) raise against this interpretation is valid: it is hard to see why accusations of injustice should make the prophet a "laughing-stock", or in what way such a reaction to his message should lead him to protest that Yahweh has "overpowered" him.

There are scholars who view **חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה** as a combination of both the two above-mentioned interpretations. Carroll (1981:126) opts for the view that **חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה** "could be directed at the injustices of the community, warning it about impending invasion for such viciousness, or it could reflect the later view that the enemy nations would soon be destroyed by Yahweh".

3.3 The suffering of Jeremiah

A third possibility is that the phrase **חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה** may refer to the violence and destruction Jeremiah has to suffer at the hands of his opponents. This is the interpretation favoured by Rudolph (1968:130). According to Diamond (1987:111) "the prophetic task is clearly associated with the social victimization of the innocent in the cry of **חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה**". This line of interpretation coincides with the third possibility Clines & Gunn (1978:24) mention: **חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה** should be seen as the conventional words of a cry for help, meaning that Jeremiah appeals to Yahweh for deliverance from denouncers and persecutors".

Weiser (1981:170) opted for a two-fold meaning: on the one hand **חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה** refers to the message of doom Jeremiah brought, on the other

hand it refers to the personal suffering of the prophet, thereby combining the first and the third possibility Rudolph mentioned.

3.4 Yahweh as the cause of the חמס וּשְׂדֵה

Holladay (1986:554) admits that חמס וּשְׂדֵה is ambiguous but adds a fourth possibility: Yahweh is the who has done חמס וּשְׂדֵה to Jeremiah, implied by the second colon of verse 7. In a related but yet different interpretation, Carroll (1986:399) in his commentary advances the view that חמס וּשְׂדֵה refers to violence suffered by a complainant with Yahweh as the enemy, hence the result that Yahweh is the One who is to be seen as the cause for the violence the prophet has to suffer. When one considers Carroll's previous interpretation of this phrase (1981:126), it seems as if he came to a somewhat different result in his commentary of 1986. Clines & Gunn (1978:25-26) also opt for the opinion that Yahweh is the cause for the violence. חמס וּשְׂדֵה is then seen as Jeremiah's protest against Yahweh's compelling him to speak prophetic words.

3.5 Violence done to Yahweh

A fifth possibility is precisely the opposite of the previous interpretation. The phrase refers to the violence and destruction done to Yahweh by his people. This point of view is advocated by Van Selms (1972:237). He does not elaborate on this but according to him Jeremiah voiced the agony of Yahweh because his people has done an injustice to his person (חמס), as well as to the land belonging to him (וּשְׂדֵה). God is not rightly honoured for the personal aims he has for Israel and for his exclusive rights to the holy land. Unfortunately, Van Selms does not give any motivation for this interpretation and therefore it remains difficult to judge this interpretation on merit. It is, however, noteworthy that his interpretation did not receive any following. Furthermore, the word-pair חמס וּשְׂדֵה normally refers to what human beings do to each other on the level of social justice and oppression. It is also doubtful whether חמס וּשְׂדֵה ever refers to violence done to Yahweh by humans.

3.6 An image of seduction

There is a strong case to be made out that פתה in verse 7 carries with it nuances of seduction, implying sexual overtones, even rape. There are scholars (Berridge 1970:153-154) who are of the conviction that the image of seduction is carried through to חמס ושר, where the phrase would refer to the cry of a woman in the context of indecent assault (cf Dt 22:27). Oosterhoff (1994:220) for instance, likens the prophet to a virgin who is raped and then cried for help, but without any reaction. While some scholars adhere to this interpretation, not everyone is convinced that פתה is meant to be seduction or that the image used in verse 7 can be carried through to the חמס ושר in verse 8 (McKane 1986:471-472).

3.7 An expression of desperation

For McKane (1986:472-473) the phrase refers to "an explosive verbal expression of inner desperation". He rejects the idea that verse 8a is a reference to the prophecies of doom uttered by the prophet on linguistic grounds or that it may have any direct reference to ill-treatment or persecution. Verse 8b makes it clear that it is his obedience to his calling to be a prophet which put him in a condition such as this.

3.8 A polyvalent meaning of חמס ושר

Swart (1994:193-204) opted for a polyvalent meaning of the phrase. He argues along form- and redaction-historical lines to arrive at his eventual results. The phrase does not only refer to violence and oppression by human opponents of the prophet, but it also expresses the nature of the divine word. Because the phrase סגור מסכיב establishes a connection between Jer 20:1-6 and Jer 20:7-13 occurring in both verse 3 and 10, חמס ושר refers also to the physical abuse at the time of a specific event. In an ironic way the physical and psychological hardships the prophet has to endure, become symbols of the coming misery of the people. In a post-exilic community the experiences of Jeremiah became the experience and message of the post-exilic believers (Swart 1994:202).

4. DIVINE AND HUMAN חַמַּס וְיָשָׁר IN JEREMIAH 20:7-13

4.1 The ambiguity of the text

Should only one of the above-mentioned proposals be chosen as the 'correct' interpretation? Each proposal made does have its relative merit so that not one of them can be discarded as completely unconvincing. The wide range of possibilities posed by scholars testify to the ambiguity of the text. Several authors hinted at the possibility of a double meaning the text may have. Fishbane (1982:175) speaks of "the network of syntactic ambiguities in verse 8 that is truly complex but it does not seem necessary to affirm one resolution at the expense of any other" so that it can be that "simultaneous levels of protest and distress raging within Jeremiah". Bezuidenhout (1990:363) is of opinion that "it could be possible that the author deliberately created room for different co-existing strands of meaning". The brief survey of different interpretations also pointed out how that scholars considered a two-fold meaning to this phrase (Carroll 1981:126; Weiser 1981:170).

4.2 Structural features of the text

Jeremiah 20:7-13 can be divided into the following parts: verses 7-9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 (Snyman 1998:1). In verses 7-9 the focus is on the prophet and Yahweh (Hubmann 1981:183). The prophet regards himself as persuaded by Yahweh, Yahweh is too strong for him, he is compelled to proclaim the word of Yahweh. Although the focus is on the prophet and Yahweh, verses 7b and 8b make mention of the mockery and insults the prophet has to endure, creating a link to verse 10 where the focus of attention shifts from the prophet and Yahweh to the prophet and his opponents. Yahweh is not mentioned even once in this part of the pericope. Verse 10 makes it clear that the prophet is trapped between divine (verses 7-9) and human (verse 10) forces. This is illustrated by the parallel structuring of פְּתָה and יָכַל at the beginning of verse 7 and at the end of verse 10.

This observation leads one to make a distinction between a divine level of פְּתָה in verses 7-9 and a human level in verse 10 (Snyman 1998:559-563). In verse 7 Yahweh is accused of deceiving/persua-

ding the prophet into proclaiming the word of God. In verse 10 there is no mention of the word of God. In verse 10 the opponents of the prophet rather want him to be derailed by some personal mis-step or to say something false, which would be exactly the opposite of the word of God he has to proclaim. It would also be a far-fetched interpretation to claim that the opponents have insight in the deceiving/persuading powers of Yahweh. In any case it does seem highly unlikely that the deceiving of the prophet in verse 10 can be equated with the deceiving/persuading by Yahweh in verse 7.

There is another difference between פתח in verse 7 and the use of the same verb in verse 10. Verse 7 most probably refers to the initial calling of the prophet to proclaim the word of God. The use of פתח in verse 10 refers to the current situation of the prophet. It is interesting to note that Diamond (1987:103-104) mentioned a temporal progression from past to present to future in this passage.

The aspect of revenge mentioned in verse 10 but lacking in verses 7-9 should also be taken into account. The opponents do not only want him to be deceived so that they can prevail over him, they also want to take revenge on him. That is something not found in verses 7-9 and even though the prophet is under tremendous pressure from Yahweh, there is no hint of Yahweh taking revenge on him.

In verses 7-9 it is Yahweh who deceives/persuades the prophet and prevails over him. In verse 10 the opponents want the prophet to be deceived/persuaded so that they (not Yahweh) can prevail over him.

Verse 11 marks the next section in this pericope. Once again there is a marked shift in the focus of attention. While there is no mention of Yahweh in verse 10, verse 11 focuses on Yahweh (mentioned prominent at the beginning of the verse) and the opponents of the prophet. Because Yahweh is like a dread warrior, the prophet's opponents will stumble and eventually be thoroughly disgraced.

Verse 12 constitutes the fourth section of this pericope. As in the previous part, this section is introduced by ויחיה, creating a link with verse 11. Whereas Yahweh is portrayed as a dread warrior in verse 11, He is now called צבאות. While in the previous part the focus is on Yahweh and the opponents of the prophet, the emphasis in this part is mainly on Yahweh and the prophet (Bak 1990:203), as in the case

of the first section. The structural link between verse 12 and verses 7-9 lies in the use of לָב found in verse 9 and then only in verse 12. The prophet's heart burning like a fire (verse 9) is there for Yahweh to see (verse 12).

There are not many links between verse 13 and the rest of the pericope. The occurrence of יהוה provides a link with verses 11 and 12 and also with verse 7. Except for כִּי in verse 13 there are no other links on a structural level with the rest of the pericope.

When viewing the pericope as whole and taking the intra-textual relationships in account as a result of the foregoing argumentation, a chiasitic pattern emerges:

| | | |
|------------|-------------------------------|-----|
| Verses 7-9 | The prophet and Yahweh | A |
| Verse 10 | The prophet and his opponents | B |
| Verse 11 | Yahweh and the opponents | B1 |
| Verse 12 | The prophet and Yahweh | A1. |
| Verse 13 | Conclusion | C. |

4.3 A Divine and human level of חמס ושׂר

In order to probe the meaning of this phrase it might be useful to make a distinction between a divine and human level of the violence and destruction the prophet experienced. The hint that a divine and human level can be distinguished is found in verse 7, the first verse of the pericope. On a divine level the prophet regards himself as being persuaded/deceived by Yahweh, Yahweh proved to be too strong for him so that he could not prevail (verse 7a). The next line moves on to the human level: he is mocked and ridiculed the whole day (verse 7b).

He suffered divine violence because he is misled (פִּתּוּיָהּ) by Yahweh, Yahweh overpowered (חִזַּק) him so that he could not prevail (יָכַל). According to Clines & Gunn (1978:26) Yahweh compels him, with outrageous violence, to speak his word. Carroll (1986:399) maintains that the cry חמס ושׂר suggests that the speaker views Yahweh as the enemy. Hubmann (1981:183) says that "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". Even when he decided not to speak the word of the Lord, it resulted in suffering for him. The prophet views Yahweh as a dread warrior (verse 11). Holladay (1986:557) noted that this is the only instance in the Old Testament where this adjective is applied to Yahweh, it is used otherwise of foreign nations and of the wicked in general.

The prophet suffered violence also on a human level. In fact, the divine violence he has to suffer manifested in violence on human level. He complains of being mocked and ridiculed all day long (verse 7b). He is mocked and ridiculed because of the word of Yahweh he has to speak. The structuring of the pericope shows that the prophet is trapped between divine and human forces. According to verse 10 he is the victim of cheap gossip. People whom he thought were his friends, were actually looking for his downfall, trying to take revenge on him. The term חמס is a phrase denoting social injustice. The speaking of the word of Yahweh resulted in the mockery of the prophet in public. His experience is that it is nothing else than violence done to him.

5. CONCLUSION

The ambiguity of the text must be respected. To pose only one single meaning to the phrase חמס ושר in Jeremiah would not suffice. There are indications in the text that a divine and human level of חמס ושר can be distinguished. Likewise the prophet experienced violence and destruction from the divine side as well as from a human side. In the end this contribution boils down to a combination of options three (the violence and destruction Jeremiah has to suffer) and four (Yahweh is the cause of the violence and destruction) mentioned in the survey of attempts to establish the meaning of חמס ושר. The prophet thus portrays himself as a victim of divine and human violence.

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