

AN EXEGETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF JER. 26:12-15 AND THE CHALLENGES FACING THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY IN NIGERIA TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

The insight to write on this theme came while in Rome *on* studies away from my land and people. Listening to the news from Nigeria both in the radio and on the television became a kind of nightmare as a result of the many atrocities being reported. Some instances might suffice here. There were cases of misappropriation and mismanagement of public funds; misappropriation of justice; extrajudicial killings; armed robbery and ritual killings; *kidnappings* and assassinations, just to mention a few. It prompted the question: is the prophetic voice in Nigeria being heard loud enough so as to effect any positive change in the society? This is what then forms the background for this study: to look at the prophetic consciousness of Jeremiah, a consciousness that made him to give up everything for the sake of his prophetic ministry.

One sees in Nigeria today a great number of men and women who claim to have been called and sent by God. They

go about as God's messengers and emissaries enjoying all the privileges that pertain to the office of God's mouthpiece. In the same society, however, we find so many atrocities being committed in high and low places, and the prophetic voice is almost never heard or at the least never loud enough. In this paper, an exegesis of Jer 26:12-15 is done to prove that Jeremiah was a true prophet who was conscious of his calling and mission. It also underscores the fact that a true prophet must be resolute and determined to speak to the different situations of life irrespective of whose ox is gored. It is sad to submit that our society today is not yet blessed with many such prophets like Jeremiah.

Historical Background of Jer 26:12-15

Chap. 26 is dated in the accession year of King Jehoiakim to underscore the fragility of the political situation at the time. King Josiah initiated some reforms which were both religious and political to which Jeremiah gave his succinct support initially until he realized that the reform failed to inspire personal repentance because it dealt more with the externals of religion. Henri Cazelles describes this period saying that judging by the possibilities offered by Deuteronomy (17:6), Jeremiah became prominent in Jerusalem where he enjoyed the friendship of the reformed group that sustained him in the difficult moments (26:24) but he had only limited rights to worship in the temple such that he came in conflict with the priests of Jerusalem (20:26, 28). What he then saw in Jerusalem showed fullness of corruption (5:1) and the strength of the resistance to the politics of Josiah (183). That is, Jeremiah became discontented with the behaviour of the religious figures and the people in Jerusalem even after the reforms of Josiah. Werner Schmidt also believes that Jeremiah was favourable to the reforms of Josiah but he warns: "Jeremiah has good relations with the supporters of the reform (compare 26:24; 36:10 with 2 Kgs 22:12), but at no point does he take an explicit position on it. King Josiah is praised not for his reform but for his dedication to social justice (22:15f.)" (277). However, King Josiah met his death at the hands of Pharaoh Necho of Egypt at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29ff) while trying to prevent Necho from helping the Assyrians against the Babylonian incursion and his son

Jehoahaz was installed in his place. He was only there for three months when Pharaoh Necho removed him and sent him on exile in Egypt and in his place he installed his elder brother, Eliakim, whom he named Jehoiakim as king. This means within one year, Judah had three different kings (2 Kgs 23:28-37). Jehoiakim was loyal to Egypt as he was paying the heavy tribute to Necho even at the expense of his people. He did everything to wipe out the traces of his father's reforms. Jeremiah discerned that the idolatrous practices of the king and his encouraging the people to participate in such would spell doom for the whole nation. He then heard the word of the Lord to warn them of the danger involved in taking such a course of action. Meanwhile at this time, Babylon had grown to become a super power demanding the allegiance of Judah and so Judah was caught between the two super powers-Egypt and Babylon. This was how there came to be two different parties in Judah namely those who were pro-Egyptian and those who were pro-Babylonian. The pro-Egyptian party wanted Judah to maintain allegiance to Egypt while the pro-Babylonian party wanted Judah to submit to Babylon.

Jeremiah urged the king and the people not to resist Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon but to submit to him as this was the Lord's wish to punish the people for not heeding the words of the prophets he had sent to them (Jer 25). However, these words of Jeremiah were considered by the officials of Judah as treacherous even though the King Zedekiah believed Jeremiah but was too weak and afraid of his officials, the priests and prophets and all those who were pro-Egyptian. They therefore regarded the prophet as being pro-Babylonian and so a traitor and an enemy of the state (Jer 27-29). This fact could have contributed to the hostile way in which the people, especially the religious authorities, reacted to the temple sermon and were bent on killing Jeremiah. As Barbara Bozak puts it "Jeremiah's prophetic message attempted to make sense of a constantly changing situation. After Assyria's power had crumbled and Babylon had grown stronger, Jeremiah, recognizing the futility of an alliance with Egypt, preached confidence in יהודאי" (1066). The shock, however, came when he asked the people to surrender to

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon as God's servant (Jer 27; 29).

What all this points to is that Jeremiah was no longer seen as speaking the mind of God but the mind of Babylon. He was considered a traitor. This may have also contributed to the continued suffering and persecution of the prophet at the hands of the political and religious establishments of Judah. The historical background of this text, therefore, rests on the fact that the prophets, the priests and all the people, bearing in mind all the aforementioned, saw Jeremiah as a traitor and someone not to be trusted. He was looked upon with suspicion and all his prophecies and actions were seen as such. Hence, Jeremiah had to put up a defence of his prophetic call, using his divine mandate to establish that he was conscious of his prophetic call.

Literary Analysis of Jer 26:12-15

The literary analysis of this text is done under the following sub headings: delimitation, text and textual criticism, literary context and genre, and organizational structure.

Delimitation of Jer 26:12-15

The defence of Jeremiah is a unique unit in chap. 26. In addition, there is an internal coherence in the pericope of vv. 12-15 that makes it independent of v. 11 and capable of standing on its own. This coherence is shown by the content and the language of the text which are different from the content and language of the preceding verse (v. 11) and the following verse (v.16). The pericope, vv. 12-15, is marked by the first person pronouns. It is the only place in the entire chapter where Jeremiah refers to himself in the first person. The remaining verses are marked by references to Jeremiah in the third person. Besides, the content is also different from the rest because it contains the defence speech of Jeremiah distinct from the narration of the events leading to and following it. The process started in v. 10 and ended in v. 16 but it is only vv. 12-15 that contains the direct words of the prophet. Therefore, the unit, vv. 12-15, can stand on its own as a pericope.

Structure of Jer 26:12-15

The structure of the text of Jer 26:12-15 is concentric.

This means that the author ends with the same theme with which he begins the text. In this case, what is contained in v. 12 is repeated in v. 15.

This proposed structure is presented thus: The proposed structure could be interpreted as A-B-A¹. This is a chiasmic structure in which Jeremiah begins his speech in v. 12b which is A. Then from vv. 13-15b which is B, the speech continues but in a different tone and is closed by 15c which is A¹, because it goes back to the same theme as 12b (A).

As noted while delimiting this text, Jer 26:12-15 is a literary unit bound together by the *setumah* at the end of the unit. They are together because they contain the response of the prophet in his own defence before the officials and all the people as a result of the allegation by the priests and prophets that he prophesied against the city. This is the only place where Jeremiah spoke directly in the entire chap. 26. This in itself marks it out from the rest of the chapter.

From the structure of Jer 26:12-15, it is evident where the emphasis lies. This is underscored by the repetition of the words *שָׁלַח יְהוָה* which appear in both v. 12 and v. 15. Yes, YHWH truly sent Jeremiah to speak his words to his people. In other words, Jeremiah is fully conscious of his identity as God's prophet and he is ready to defend it with the last drop of his blood. The order of these words, furthermore, forms a chiasm as the following table shows:

v. 12	שָׁלַח יְהוָה	יְהוָה
v. 15	יְהוָה	שָׁלַח יְהוָה

Though they are not worded in the same manner, a parallel is also formed by the words *לְדַבֵּר* in v. 12 and *לְדַבֵּר* in v. 15 which may be referred to as a synonymous parallelism. This is due to the fact that they both have the same object, the prophet, and they both refer to the same activity of proclaiming. This is why this researcher thinks that the structure of this pericope is A-B-A¹ where v. 12b is the A, vv. 13-15b is the B, and v. 15c the A¹.

Therefore, this structure can be summarized in pictorial form thus:

V. 12b=A: Jeremiah's assertion of divine authority

Vv. 13-15b= B: New call to conversion and submission to judgment

V.15c=A¹: Jeremiah's assertion of divine authority

Content analysis of Jer 26:12-15

The defence of Jeremiah as noted all along in this work is a turning point in chap. 26 and in the entire book of Jeremiah. This is because it is the only instance in the whole book where the prophet was brought to trial and was allowed to defend himself. This however did not prevent further persecution by the royal and religious authorities. It nevertheless showed up the prophet as being able to stand by his vocation and defend it.

יְהוָה שָׁלַח חָנִי (the Lord sent me v. 12)

Jeremiah opens his defence with the claim that the Lord sent him to the people. This is a very strong claim by Jeremiah considering the regulation in the book of Deuteronomy concerning those who claim to have been sent by God whereas they have not been sent (Deut 18:20). So, Jeremiah's offence could vary from treason (by predicting the overthrow of the government of the land cf. 1 Sam 22; 6-19); to blasphemy (by saying that the sacred city and its Temple would be destroyed cf. Exod 22: 8; Lev 24:16); to presumptuous prophecy (by claiming to have spoken at God's orders cf. Deut 18:20). The consequence of prophesying falsely in the name of God, if found guilty, is death. Jeremiah was aware of this provision, yet, he dared claim that it was the Lord who sent him to prophesy to the people. By so doing Jeremiah establishes his authenticity as the spokesman for God in bringing the people back to the right track.

Jeremiah uses this verb to challenge the authority of his opponents, the “false prophets” according to the LXX. Unlike them who have not been sent by God, Jeremiah claims his divine authority as God's messenger by using this verb. Though the goal is not stated, it is to be understood from the context of the oracle where God explicitly says: I have sent you (Jer 1:7).

The use of this word as sending does not refer exclusively to the commissioning of a prophet by God. It could be used in other contexts like sending someone to do something in the ordinary day life. However, it is still “the primary catchword for the commissioning of a prophet.” (Herrmann 64). The use

of this word with the subject, הַיהוָה, points to a prophetic call. Jeremiah claims by these words that his call and message came from הַיהוָה whose mission he must accomplish.

So in Jer. 26:12-15, Jeremiah used the verb שָׁלַח to underscore the fact that it was God who sent him. It is used in the transitive sense saying that God sent him to prophesy. The three components are present namely the sender (God), the object (Jeremiah) and the purpose (to prophesy). The fact that this word is repeated in v. 15 demonstrates its importance and relevance in the book of Jeremiah showing that Jeremiah is convinced of his divine call and mission and has no doubts whatsoever about it. The words were not his but the Lord's. K. O'Connor puts it thus: "By affirming that Yahweh is the source of his mission, the latter frame highlights Jeremiah's claim to be a true prophet" (622). The word שָׁלַח is put in the לֵאמֹר perfect in both verses to underscore this fact which is also to debunk the first allegation of his accusers that he has spoken presumptuously in the name of the Lord (v. 11)

In fact, the entire defence of Jeremiah revolves around this verb because it is the springboard upon which his entire message rests. One can see the indication to this in the structure of the pericope which is chiasmic. Thus, the most important word in the defence is שָׁלַח together with יְהוָה which is mentioned both at the beginning and at the end of the pericope. This is not surprising because the word was prominent even at the beginning of the book in the episode of the call and commissioning of the prophet (1:4-10) and he was very conscious of this throughout his entire prophetic ministry notwithstanding the few times that he complained to God (cf. 15:10-21; 18:18-23; 20:7-18).

In the other prophetic books, this word occurs especially in the commissioning of the prophets. In Isaiah 6, it was the prophet who volunteered to be at the service of the Lord as his messenger when he says in v. 8 הֲנִי שָׁלַחְנִי "here I am, send me". The prophet Jeremiah at his own commissioning when he expressed his unworthiness to be God's messenger was told this by God תֵּלֵךְ אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ אֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁלַחְךָ "for you shall go to whomever I shall send you" (Jer 1:7). Ezekiel too received his own commissioning when God said to him: אֵל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁלַּחְתִּי אֲנִי אוֹתְךָ, "I send you to the sons of Israel" (2:1). So שָׁלַח is very prominent in the call and commissioning of the prophets.

There can be no doubt as to the importance of these words in the defence of Jeremiah since the defence opens with it and closes also with it. The prophet begins his speech by laying claim to divine authority (v. 12b) and after preaching repentance to the people, he concludes by reiterating with an oath that he had truly been sent (v. 15c). Brueggemann highlights the meaning and significance of these words when he says: “Jeremiah makes an important distinction between the words he must speak from God (vv. 12-13) and his own personal destiny (v. 14)... in v. 15 the prophet returns to the main issue, the summons to *torah* as the only chance for life in Jerusalem. His opponents want to dispose of his message by a political-judicial maneuver. Such an urgent, ominous word, however, cannot be eliminated by disposing of the messenger. The message itself will have to be engaged, because it is from God” (7). So, it is in order to emphasize the otherness of his mission and message that Jeremiah used these words in two of the four verses that make up his defence. He has not spoken of his own volition but he had been mandated by God to speak all the words they had heard him speak. The reference, therefore, is not just to the message but also to the exact words spoken. This is the essence of the כָּל “all” that Jeremiah used to accompany the words in both verses. By this he removes himself completely from the scene while laying everything at the doorsteps of God, the giver of the message. However, he takes responsibility for the message by submitting himself to judgment (v. 14) because he is the messenger that brought the message.

לְהִנָּחֵם (to prophesy, v. 12)

That Jeremiah is a true prophet is the goal here. The prophet uses the verb form of the word *abn* to convince his hearers that he is a true prophet sent by God to prophesy to them. The LXX distinguishes between Jeremiah and the other prophets by referring to the latter as *pseudo-prophetai* (Lundbom, Jeremiah 21-36, 288). The word as used in the MT is in the *niphal* infinitive construct *abeúN"hil* placing emphasis on his mission unlike their own prophets who have not been sent by God but prophesy peace and tranquility to them. Jeremiah speaks against the prophets who have not been sent by God but prophesy lies in his name (cf. 14:13-16).

All the versions are agreed on the use of this word to express the authentic ministry of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah used the *niphal* infinitive construct of *abn* to lay claim to his prophetic authority to speak in the name of the Lord. The meaning of this word in the *niphal* sense is to signify an inspired prophetic discourse. He is under prophetic influence and whatever he says is not his own but belongs to the one who has sent him. That Jeremiah is a true prophet who spoke the mouth of the Lord is attested to in 1 Chr 36:12. He is sent like any other true prophet before him to bring the people to repentance in order to avoid disaster and so what he is sent to do is to prophesy concerning what is about to happen to the people should they fail to repent which is what these words *la, abeúN"hil*. “to prophesy against” stand for.

What the use of *nb* strongly suggests is that Jeremiah did not just say the words of his own volition but had been compelled by the Lord to “play the prophet”. This means that the initiative to prophesy is not from him but from יהוה who mandates him to go and deliver his message (Jeremias 705ff). This may have perhaps been the reason he used *nb* (to prophesy) instead of the usual *ראמי* (to say) though he also used another word in the defence (v. 15) apart from *nb* which is *רב* (to speak). This brings about the question of the difference between *nb* “to prophesy” and *רב* “to speak”. The difference between them is that while *nb* refers to a prophetic action, *רב* concerns only the action of speaking. These two words are used in the defence of Jeremiah in vv. 12 and 15 respectively though the Targum maintains the use of *יאמנ* פ in both vv. 12 and 15.

Taken together, therefore, the statement *אבן להנני שאלתי להנני בא* (the Lord sent me to prophesy v. 12) answers the charge against Jeremiah by the prophets and priests that he spoke presumptuously in the name of the Lord. This could not have happened if Jeremiah had not been conscious of his status as a prophet and his mission to prophesy to the people. This is the argument of this paper that Jeremiah, in the course of his defence, did not mince words in showing that he was very conscious of his prophetic calling and mission. This is the high point of the defence which is also reiterated in v. 15.

וּמַעַלְלֵיכֶם וְהִטִּיבוּ דְרֹכֵיכֶם (make good your ways and your deeds v. 13)

Jeremiah continues by inviting the people to reform. This word הָיָה can mean “make good” or “reform”. It is a term used for repentance. The people are summoned to amend their ways and conduct before God. This is a clarion call from the prophet that the people turn from their evil ways and practices. Hence he says to them “make good your ways and your deeds”, that is, he charges the people to make their ways and deeds right before God. Their ways may refer to their worship of Yahweh in the Temple while their deeds may refer to their conduct outside of the Temple. Jeremiah therefore dissociates himself from any shallow and superficial worship of God.

The reference to “your ways and your deeds” points not just to the people’s public worship of Yahweh in the Temple but more importantly to their way of life outside of the Temple. In other words, it challenges the people’s life in its entirety, be it in the Temple, at home and everywhere they may find themselves. This is why J. P. Hyatt describes Jeremiah as a man who challenged the people “...and called them to find true salvation by practicing justice and righteousness in the sight of God” (34). Their ways and deeds must be right before God if their worship is to be acceptable.

וּשְׁמַעוּ בְקוֹלִי (obey the voice of v. 13)

The use of וּשְׁמַעוּ is not like its use in v. 12 where it simply means to hear or to listen. Here it also involves obedience. This word can have different meanings depending on the Hebrew grammar. Hence it could mean to hear, listen, pay attention, understand, heed, obey, grant, and examine, all these in the qal sense. Here the word, used in the qal imperative, means to obey. In the niphil it means to be heard, be obedient or be granted. In the piel it means to summon. In the hiphil it means to cause to hear, proclaim, announce or summon (Aitken 175-181). Here as it is used in this verse it means to listen and obey. Israel’s failure to perceive God’s revelation is often expressed as the inability of their ears to hear (Deut 29:4; Isa 6:9ff). This word echoes Jeremiah’s call to reform in 7:3-7 (Lundbom 292).

So it can be said that while in v. 12 [m;v refers simply to

the act of hearing, in v. 13 it goes deeper into the act of obeying what is heard. The people must as a matter of fact put into practice the message of the Lord which they hear from the mouth of his servant, the prophet. However, it is interesting to note the way the Targ. renders this passage. In place of the MT's וְשָׁמְעוּ בְקוֹלִי “and obey the voice of”, it has וְרַחֲמֵנוּ לְלִבְאֵינוּ, which means “and welcome the Memra”.

The word Memra does not refer to mere words but it is a powerful way of expressing what comes from God to human agents. Hayward expresses the meaning of Memra thus: “The Word (Memra) of דְּבַר־יְהוָה is one of the most famous Targumic expressions, ... and seems to have a sense of a divine command or order which Israel may receive (e. g. 3:13, 25; 9:12; 23:18; 34:14, 17; 40:3; 44:23), transgress and rebel against (e. g. 2:20, 29; 3:13; 11:9; 33:8), or believe in (2:2)” (Hayward 31).

וַיִּנָּחֵם (and will repent, v. 13)

The use of the word here is to say that God will change his mind and not punish his people if they turn away from their sins. It is used in the niph'al with a jussive meaning, that is, to repent (Butterworth 89ff). In many cases in the OT, God's changing his mind is a gracious response to human factors. Thus in Jeremiah we often read that repentance on the part of the people will make it possible for God to also repent or change his mind. Cfr. Jer 18:8, 10; 20:16; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10; cf. also Amos 7:3, 6 (Butterworth 81ff; Simian-Yofre 340-355). The word used to designate the change on the part of God in the LXX is quite different from the MT. While the MT uses the word נָחַם “to repent”, the LXX uses *pau, setai* meaning “to cease”. Here the Lord does not repent as if a human being but ceases to carry out what he has threatened. The Targum too seems to have a problem with the use of נָחַם for God and therefore opts for וְיִנָּחֵם which means “will turn”. In this sense, the Lord will turn from the evil which he has threatened rather than repent which is a human way of doing things that does not befit God.

The MT however does not consider the use of נָחַם for Yahweh as inappropriate or demeaning. In fact, in this chap. 26 alone, the word occurs 3 times (vv. 2, 13, and 19) being used for God and “the notion of Yahweh's repentance (cf. v.

19) is mooted as a general principle in 18. 7-10” (Carroll 513). The significance of this word is captured succinctly by an author, Simian-Yofre, when he says: “The syntagmeme of Yahweh's repentance thus gives expression to Yahweh's profound and fundamental determination to forgive, gives meaning to the prophet's mission as one of intercession, and justifies the defense presented by the elders” (340-355).

It must be noted that the use of this word for God in the entire OT does not have the same meaning as it is used of a human being. God is not repenting from evil or sin but rather changing his mind from inflicting punishment on his people because of their sins (Osuji 128). The import of this word in v. 13 rests on the fact that the message which Yahweh has sent through his prophet Jeremiah is not a concluded one. The people are given a way out if only they would heed the call to amend their ways and be upright. This is in contrast to the claim of the priests and prophets, Jeremiah's accusers, who have given the impression that the prophet has prophesied the ruin of the nation. As noted earlier, their aim in not stating the conditionality in Jeremiah's message might be to elicit sympathy from the officials and the people and thereby accelerate the prophet's condemnation. However, the prophet restores this conditionality in his defence which may have partly influenced not just the officials but also the people who now changed sides to be on the side of the prophet. He turns his defence into a form of offence by challenging both his accusers and the judges to “listen to the voice of the Lord” (v. 13) (For more on the rare occurrence of a defence turned offence, see Bovati, *Re-Established Justice*, 114-117).

וְאָנִי הַנְּנִי בְיַדְכֶם (I am in your hands, v. 14)

Jeremiah begins this second part of his defence in v. 14 with a rhetorical genre called “surrender”. He says: וְאָנִי הַנְּנִי בְיַדְכֶם which translates into “I am in your hands”. With these words Jeremiah surrenders himself to the judgment of the “court” trying him for perjury or treason as the case may be. Having stated his own side of the story which seems to be evidently clear to all over against the distorted version told by his accusers, the prophet leaves himself curiously not in the hands of God but in the hands of the officials and the people. It is curious because as God's messenger delivering God's

message, one would ordinarily have expected Jeremiah to invoke God's help and intervention at such a perilous moment in his prophetic life. This is especially true because God himself has promised to deliver him from all his adversaries (Jer 1:19). Instead of making recourse to this lifeline that he has, Jeremiah submits himself to the decision of the court. The question is: what does he expect to get from this haphazardly constituted court?

Majority of scholars agree with the way the MT puts it and based on this they extol the courage and resilience of Jeremiah in the face of stiff opposition and imminent death that he is able to hold up his head. R. Carroll calls it “a magnificent gesture of self-humbling which indicates a lack of arrogance” (517). W. Holladay explains it thus: “Jrm deliberately puts himself in the power of the court, a power that obviously includes the possibility of the death penalty” (107).

For J. Lundbom, Jeremiah's submission to the will of the court is a veiled argument because it is meant to throw the challenge back at the court. He says: “This submission to the will of the court is actually a veiled argument, one that the classical rhetoricians called “surrender”” (292). O'Connor also says of Jeremiah's surrender: “Jeremiah's surrender into the hands of his captors (v 14) dramatically underscores the decision facing the community which this text places before them anew- to accept or reject the prophetic word. It is a matter of life or death for the community, and it rests in their hands (v 14)” (622). We can therefore say that Jeremiah's submission to the court is a subtle way of making the judicial panel take responsibility for whatever decision they may take concerning him. He is right there before them powerless, defenceless and apparently forsaken.

עֲשׂוּ- לִי כַטּוֹב וְכַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם (do to me as good and right in your eyes, v. 14)

After Jeremiah had submitted himself into the hands of the court, he challenges the members of the court to do to him what is good and right in their eyes. He invites them to use their power to give him a fair hearing, a hearing that respects the principles of justice and right judgment. As officials of Judah, they should be knowledgeable in the law to know

when an offence is committed and which offence merits a death sentence as demanded for him by his accusers, the priests and prophets.

אָךְ יָדַעַתְּ עוֹ (but know for sure, v. 15)

Jeremiah introduces this statement in v. 15, the last verse of the defence, with an adversative particle אָךְ a word which suggests a contrasting opinion from the previous one. It is a very powerful word in making comparisons. In v. 14 he submits himself to the whims and caprices of the court challenging them to do to him whatever seems good and right to them. However with this particle, he gives another dimension of the issue by pointing out the consequence of an unjust death sentence on him. The “only” here changes the tone of the defence and introduces in clear terms the likely consequence of the decision before the court.

Jeremiah begins the second part of his defence with a rhetorical argument called “surrender” (v. 14) and now in v. 15, he introduces another one called *descriptio* by the classical rhetoricians. In fact, Lundbom says that this kind of argument could be used for both prosecution and defence. (293).

אָךְ יָדַעַתְּ עוֹ which literally means “only know for certain” is a way of underscoring the seriousness and importance of the issue at hand. It is a form of emphasis given to the discussion by the play on the verb יָדַע “to know”. The knowledge spoken about here is awareness or consciousness. Jeremiah calls the people to the awareness of the seriousness of the decision that lies ahead of them. This consciousness or awareness is very necessary for any imputation of guilt to take place. Should the people proceed to kill the prophet, they would have no excuse because they have been forewarned. However, יָדַעַתְּ עוֹ could also refer to God's knowledge of his people which signifies the special relationship he has with the people of Israel (Amos 3:2). So this phrase better translated as “only know for sure” can also be found elsewhere in Jeremiah (Jer 42:19, 22). The prophet had no doubt whatsoever in his mind that he was delivering God's message to the people and that whatever course of action they take against him would be tantamount to fighting against God, the sender of the message, and this can only result in one thing namely disaster.

כִּי אִם-מָוֶתֶתֶם אֹתָם אֲתִי (for if you put me to death v. 15)

Jeremiah continues by telling the members of the court that “if you put me to death” which is a conditional statement, then he states the consequence וְאֶל־הָעִיר הַזֹּאת וְאֶל־יֹשְׁבֵיהָ כִּי־יָדֹם בְּכַף אֶתֶם נֹתְנִים עֲלֵיכֶם “you are bringing innocent blood upon yourselves, and upon this city and upon its inhabitants”. There is a case of protasis and apodosis here. This explains the communal nature of the sin of shedding innocent blood. Jeremiah considers the possibility that the officials together with the people could pass a death sentence on him. He knows the danger which faces him based on the obvious animosity of the priests and prophets who are bent on his death. One might not be too certain what was going on in the mind of Jeremiah during his trial and defence before the court. However, what becomes clear is that he lays the options before the people from which to choose, each with its own consequence. This knowledge is necessary for them before they make their decision concerning him. It is such a delicate decision to take, hence he brings their attention to the full consequence of that decision not only on the judges themselves but also on the whole land and their posterity (O'Connor 622).

Some questions have been asked about why Jeremiah chose this form of argument. Was he threatening the judges in his case? Was he intimidating them because he had a direct contact with God? Was he even blackmailing them by preempting their judgment? A few authors have tried to explain why Jeremiah employed these rhetorical methods. Keown, Scalise and Smothers have given some explanation about the reason behind the way Jeremiah defended himself. They say: “Jeremiah was not threatening his judges with some form of personal revenge, a haunting from his grave, or a curse laid upon them; he was reminding them of an accepted principle of justice: the death of innocent persons... must be avenged or atoned (Gen 9:5-6; Deut 19:13)” (26). Jeremiah could not have been threatening his accusers and all the people having earlier on submitted himself to their judgment. What he was doing was to make them conscious of the action they were about to take and to take responsibility for it.

Lundbom, Brueggemann, Barker and Kohlenberger have all acknowledged the brave performance of Jeremiah at his trial. For McEntire, the defence of Jeremiah was an affirmation that he knew what he was doing and what life with

Yahweh could mean- danger and risk. He says: “Jeremiah points to a way to live with this danger faithfully, while his opponents deny the existence of danger and claim God's protection from all harm” (303). The implication of these views is that Jeremiah's defence was one that demonstrated courage, fortitude and fearlessness in the midst of danger, hostility and even imminent death. This does not in any way turn Jeremiah into a superman who was not afraid even to die. No! What it only did show is a man who being very conscious of his prophetic calling was undaunted in defending it. He was also conscious of the fact that he was part and parcel of the people and whatever happens to them, he too would not be spared.

In fact, it seems that the fate of Jeremiah is embedded in the fate of the city. This explains further his passion and resolve in wanting to save his people from disaster even when they were hell-bent to enter into it. He continued to make effort to convince his people that the only option available to them to be at peace is a return to God and his commands. He followed this path of negotiation and patriotism till even after the destruction of Jerusalem though he was often misunderstood by his people who saw him as a traitor. However, the love he has for God and his people would not permit him to remain silent (14:19). Thus in this episode, he resumes the defence of his prophetic authenticity in the words that follow.

מִתְּשַׁלְּחֵנִי יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּאָזְנוֹכֶם אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה
 בָּא (for in truth the Lord sent me to speak in your hearing
 all these words, v. 15)

Jeremiah goes back to what he started with by adjuring himself that “for in truth the Lord sent me to speak in your hearing all these words”. In these words we again find all the essential features of a true prophet namely: the sender (God); the messenger (Jeremiah); and the mission (to speak). Jeremiah here reiterates the fact that he has been truly sent by Yahweh to deliver his words to his people. This is his final appeal to the court before they give their verdict. Carroll has this to say about these final words of the defence: “It is an impressive performance by a man facing death at the hands of a mob screaming for his blood and, even more dangerous, a

tribunal with the power to execute him. The editors have penned the portrait of a very brave man” (517). Thus the portrait of Jeremiah in his trial and defence is that of a man resolute and determined to carry out God's commands to the very end no matter the sufferings and pains that accompany them. It is therefore not a matter of blackmail or threat but a plea for conversion.

The point of emphasis in the judicial trial of Jeremiah in general and his defence in particular is the message that came from God and the need to be faithful to it. The defence brings into limelight how the words of God could be received by people especially when it calls to conversion and amendment of life. Jeremiah finds himself at odds with the power establishment of Judah because he dares to challenge the *status quo* to make it turn inwards and reform. By openly defending himself and his prophetic ministry, Jeremiah resonates the need to distinguish between true and false prophecy as this would go a long way in determining the fate of the people before God. If they listen to false prophecy which ordinarily will soothe them by preaching peace even where there is obviously none, this will pitch them against God and consequently lead to their destruction. However, if they listen to true prophecy no matter how harsh and uncomfortable it may be, they will have sought the face of God and thus save their own lives (cf. 26:19).

L. Allen summarizes the events of the trial and defence of Jeremiah thus: “That Jeremiah's prophesying led to a public discussion of whether Jeremiah should be tried on a capital charge carries the ironic implication that his audience was hammering a further nail into its own coffin. The community's response to Jeremiah was a measure of its response to Yahweh, because prophesying had been done “in Yahweh's name” (vv. 9, 16, 20)” (296-297). The officials and all the people seem to have realized this by the verdict of v. 16 which acquits Jeremiah of any wrongdoing. In their judgment, they simply negated the words of the priests and prophets by saying: *מִשְׁפַּט־מָוֶת הָיָה לְאִישׁ הַזֶּה* that is, “there is no death judgment to/for this man” as against what the priests and prophets said *מִשְׁפַּט־מָוֶת הָיָה לְאִישׁ הַזֶּה* “death sentence to/for this man” (v. 11). The officials and all the people were unanimous in upholding the innocence of the prophet against

the guilty verdict sought by the priests and prophets. Even though Emerton, Cranfield and Stanton do not see the officials as judges in the case against Jeremiah and their words in v. 16 as not declaring him a true prophet, they nevertheless hold that "... they gave him the benefit of the doubt and decided that there was no treasonable intent" (681; also McEntire 303). O'Connor, however, is of the opinion that the verdict in v. 16 of chap. 26 is a proclamation of Jeremiah as a true prophet (625). This researcher is in complete agreement with this latter view.

The position of Emerton, Cranfield and Stanton above is contestable because the officials and all the people asserted that Jeremiah spoke to them in the name of the Lord their God. This has no other meaning than to say that he is a true prophet. They might not have believed or put into practice what he said to them, nevertheless, they declared him to be a true prophet as against the priests and the prophets who accused him of speaking falsely in the name of the Lord.

This is the task of a true prophet and this is what Jeremiah did which presents him as being prophetically conscious during his trial in general (vv. 10-16) and in his defence in particular (vv. 12-15).

Theology of Jer. 26:12-15

The theology of this text is brought out to reflect the challenges facing the prophetic ministry in Nigeria today. This is because the defence of Jeremiah as enunciated in the passage under review attests to how a true prophet should comport himself and carry out his prophetic ministry fearlessly even in the face of stiff opposition.

The Prophet's Loyalty: to the Sender or to the Audience?

In the consideration of the task of the prophets, the question of allegiance is very necessary. This is because oftentimes, if not all the time, the authenticity of the prophet is called to question by the audience or the recipients of the message of the prophets (Exod 3:13-15). In the passage just cited, Moses tries to establish the authenticity of the message God is giving him by asking for his identity so that when he is asked about the source of his message, he would know what to say. Thus, authenticity gives credence to the issue of

allegiance. Once the authenticity of the message of the prophet has been established, then his allegiance can be guaranteed. The allegiance of the prophet is to the sender of the message, namely God. It is not to the audience, namely the people. Hence, in Yoruba wisdom literature, it is often said that “*eni ran ni nise la nberu; a ki nberu eni a maa jise fun*” meaning “the person to be feared is the sender of the message and not the recipient of the message”. Bright puts it succinctly when he says: “This was the point at issue in Jeremiah's own defense of himself (vss. 12-15). He neither denied that he had spoken as charged (he obviously had), nor contended that his words were not out of accord with popular belief (they obviously were); he merely insisted that Yahweh had indeed commanded him to say what he had said. The princes for their part accepted this explanation, and therefore took Jeremiah's side on the grounds that a prophet ought not to suffer reprisals for speaking Yahweh's word” (Lxxxviii).

O'Connor underscores the importance of the authentication of the prophetic word leading to allegiance when she says: “Two framing devices set his speech apart from the rest of the scene. The first is the threat of death in v 11, הַזָּאָה יָלֵךְ תָּמוּ אִם מִן, and again in v 16, תָּמוּ אִם מִן הַזָּאָה לֵךְ. The second is the repetition of key words in Jeremiah's defense, הוֹדִי נִא לֵי יְהוָה 'Yahweh sent me,' (v 12) and its inverse (v 15). By affirming that Yahweh is the source of his mission, the latter frame highlights Jeremiah's claim to be a true prophet” (621-622). It was this conviction that he did not send himself that enabled Jeremiah to be true to his prophetic calling in spite of all odds. He did not fear the hostile audience so as to mitigate the force of his message. As Dempsey puts it “True to his vocation, he remained faithful to his preaching, his vision, and his God, despite all odds and despite the eventual loss of everything for Judah, which he knew was inevitable” (xxiv).

When someone is not truly sent by God to speak his words and he does so presumptuously, there is a tendency for the person to say only what will appease the ears of his audience. This often happens for two reasons: to curry favour from them and to avoid persecution. For these reasons, the so called prophet's allegiance is to the recipients of his message since he has not been sent by God. The true prophet, however, is not

afraid to speak God's word to the people even if unwanted and unpopular. In the words of J. Dubbink, “The prophet is drawn as a picture (in the Confessions, but not only there) of a man in a challenged position. He does not doubt that his version of the word of YHWH is right, but he suffers, afraid that he may not be shown to be convincing to others” (31). This cannot be said of the false prophets whose only preoccupation is to gratify their audience in order to gratify themselves too.

Therefore, the important point from this pericope of Jer 26:12-15 is that the prophet's allegiance must always be to the sender and not to the audience. Once the prophet is sure that he has received God's word, he must speak it to the people without compromise. This point is more relevant in today's society where many claim to be prophets but only a few really speak God's true words to the people. Many of these “prophets” tell the people only what they want and like to hear. They feed at the corridors of power and so cannot afford to speak against their benefactors just like those prophets at the palace of the kings in the OT whose allegiance was to the kings rather than to God. Others who are not at the service of rulers do all they can to keep their audience by speaking to them only what suits them. They never challenge the people's way of life or their sources of income as long as money flows in to their coffers. This is why the prophets are not penetrating the heart of the society as they should. Jeremiah offers a shining example of being true to God's word in spite of the difficulties involved. The prophet is not supposed to be afraid of his audience (Jer. 1: 8). This leads to the second theme in the theology of Jer 26:12-15.

The Prophet's Task to Deliver God's Message in its “Rawness”

As a follow up to the prophet being loyal to the sender of the message, namely God, he is also challenged to deliver this word in all its “rawness” without watering it down or compromising it. This point is evident in the life and ministry of Jeremiah who was even warned at the beginning of his ministry not to remove anything from God's message that comes to him (Jer 1:17-19; 26:2). This is a great temptation for the prophet because in the circumstances in which he found himself, the people were prepared to hear only words of peace and prosperity. There were other prophets who readily

tell them these soothing words all the time. Yet, in spite of this Jeremiah must speak God's word, unpopular and unpalatable as it may be, to the people. This he did in the famous temple sermon in chaps. 7 and 26 and which he also defended in 26:12-15. "Jeremiah's speech in this verse {v. 13} does not have to do with this case; it has to do with the reason the Lord sent him to preach in the temple in the first place. His judges must make a decision about their own lives, which is more important than Jeremiah's case; they had to choose whether to obey God's word. The defense speech gave Jeremiah an opportunity to draw his audience's attention back to the rest of the message God had given them (26:4-6), to *all* the words that they had heard him speak" (Keown, Scalise, Smothers 25).

The nature of the prophetic ministry entails that the prophet can receive any message from God which may be favorable or unfavorable. No matter how strong or negative the message is, the messenger must be prepared to deliver it just as it is given. This is where the great challenge of the prophetic office lies. The prophet is not at liberty to choose which message to deliver and which message to be discarded. He is not free to water down the tone of the message received or to remove some part of it. Prophets are to deliver God's messages as they receive them from God without compromise. Talking about the nature of the prophetic ministry, Dempsey says: "Usually a very 'ordinary' person, the prophet is often God's 'surprise' to a group of people, presenting them with an unexpected word, insight, or vision that can either jar and cut to the quick or comfort, soothe, and salve a bleeding wound, a broken dream, a shattered life" (xxvii). Thus, the prophet is often caught in a dilemma between allegiance to God and his message and giving room for compromise. He is a lover of both God and his people but his first allegiance is to God who must be obeyed without any hesitation or reservation.

Consequently, the prophet becomes a sign of contradiction in the midst of the people. He is at the receiving end both from God and from the people. In his attempt to be true to God and his message, he offends the people and also in his effort to palliate the people by softening the word, he offends God. Hence, Dempsey again submits thus regarding

the attributes of a true prophet: “Gifted with tremendous passion, heightened sensibilities, and enlivened imagination, the prophet speaks with authority the hard word that wells up and gushes forth from the deep reservoir of uncompromised love. Often living life both on the periphery and on the cutting edge, the prophet is someone who remains faithful to God, faithful to the community, and faithful to the mission, even if it means having to stand alone. A servant of the divine word and vision, the prophet becomes the one capable of leading all to wholeness and holiness in the measure that the prophet is willing 'to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with God' (Mic 6:8)” (Dempsey xxviii).

It follows, therefore, that the prophet must be impervious to the machinations of the people in the process of delivering God's message to them otherwise he stands the risk of compromising the message in order to satisfy or placate the people. Since the words they speak are not their own, they are expected to be fearless in proclaiming it to the people. This is an important characteristic of the OT prophets as Boadt puts it, “There are a number of indications within the Old Testament that this conviction that the words they spoke came directly from God was based on the prophetic experience of being summoned in some kind of a vision to hear God speak in the *heavenly throne room*” (306).

So the prophets spoke words other than theirs. Just as Jeremiah attributed his words to God and stood by it, the priests and prophets of today are challenged to see their calling and ministry not as their own but as God's initiative. This conviction will help them to speak the prophetic word without fear or favour and without minding the consequence. This is a great challenge to the prophets of today who have continued to water down the word of God in order to make it palatable to their audience. This is often done in order to curry favour and ensure that the people continue to be generous in their giving. Thus, such prophets hardly speak words that prick the consciences of the people leading them to conversion but only words of peace and prosperity. In fact, this is more serious in today's world where the gospel that sells best is the gospel of prosperity. This leads to the final point under the theology of Jer 26:12-15.

The Prophetic Consciousness of Jeremiah in his Defence

That Jeremiah was prophetically conscious of his call and mission in his defence is an issue that cannot be overemphasized. This is because he was fully aware and conscious of his mission and calling even when he was confronted with a very difficult and life threatening situation. Walter Brueggemann describes Jeremiah thus: “Jeremiah embodies the alternative consciousness of Moses in the face of the denying king. He grieves the grief of Judah because he knows what the king refuses to know. It is clear that Jeremiah did not in anger heap scorn on Judah but rather articulated what was in fact present in the community whether they acknowledged it or not” (47). This means that Jeremiah knew what others, including fellow prophets, did not know and for this reason he was unperturbed and undaunted by the death threat from his opponents. The prophet knew that he had been called and chosen by God to carry his word. He had no iota of doubt about this. This was why after speaking the word to the people and it was resisted, Jeremiah did not mitigate the effect of his message or compromise it. He did not explain it away in order to make himself acceptable to his audience. Instead, he seized the opportunity to reiterate what he already told them. So, the knowledge that Jeremiah had which others did not have was that consciousness that the call and mission belong to the Lord and not to the prophet.

In the four verses of his defence, Jeremiah encompasses his entire teaching about repentance and submission to God's rule. He challenged the status quo concerning their false hope and trust in the inviolability of Judah and Jerusalem in spite of whatever the people did. He told them that their security can only be guaranteed if and when their lives outside of the temple correspond to the worship they offered in the temple. He was unambiguous in taking his stand as Brueggemann again notes “The most striking thing about Jeremiah's public ministry is that he takes sides on a decisive public question in unambiguous terms” (12). This is a mark of someone who is prophetically conscious. He is never evasive or undecided when it matters most. He does not keep quiet when he should speak neither does he speak when he should be silent. He does not sit on the fence. People can always count on him to speak the word of truth to them and to chart the right course for them.

That the fate of the people is also shared by Jeremiah is shown in the words of Barbara Bozak when she says: “The prophet Jeremiah is a paradoxical figure. He cares deeply for his people, identifies with their suffering, and repeatedly calls them to repentance. However, he also rails against their sin and issues threats of destruction” (1062).

Lundbom, in his reflection on the defence of Jeremiah, has this to say: “It has frequently been pointed out what exemplary behaviour Jeremiah shows in making his defence: no heroics, no theatrical defiance, simply a humble testimony exuding confidence in what he has prophesied” (292). This does not mean that the prophet was not in danger or that he did not realise how dangerous the path he was treading by being God's messenger. Brueggemann has expressed the view that love was the motive behind the ministry of Jeremiah, love of God and love of his people. It was this love that moved him to continue to appeal to them to reform their ways so as to escape punishment even when they were very hostile to him and his message. “The grief of Jeremiah”, he says “was at two levels. First, it was the grief he grieved for the end of his people. And that was genuine because he cared about this people and he knew that God cared about this people. But the second dimension of his grief, more intense, was because no one would listen and no one would see what was so transparent to him. So his grief was kept sharp and painful because he had to face regularly the royal consciousness, which insisted 'peace, peace' when apparently only he knew there was no peace” (47).

McEntire sees in prophet Jeremiah a man determined to carry out God's commands to the last letter. He challenged the people's way of life by telling them that life with Yahweh was risky and dangerous while they insist on their security. “Jeremiah points to a way to live with this danger faithfully, while his opponents deny the existence of danger and claim God's protection from all harm” (303). He continues by saying that Jeremiah was even aware that working for Yahweh could also be very risky and this became clear in the counter-precedent cited by the elders. Hence he concludes: “There is a stark reminder, however, in the fate of Uriah, that speaking against the dominant theology is dangerous behaviour” (305). It is clear from the foregoing that Jeremiah

was prophetically conscious of his call and mission during his trial and defence. This is a challenge, therefore, to the priests and prophets of today to be convinced of their calling and mission and to defend it with everything they have. In today's world where people are obnoxious to the truth and are ready to quench any vanguard of the truth, Jeremiah offers a shining example of how to be prophetic even in the midst of a stiff opposition.

Conclusion

One of the contentions in the book of Jeremiah is the issue of false prophecy. The prophet, Jeremiah, had to contend with the presence and activities of the false prophets who always antagonised whatever he said to the people. They are referred to as “the *shalom* prophets” (Osuji 112). In fact, Jeremiah went into serious struggles with them and even confronted them on certain occasions (Cf. Jer 6:14; 14:13-16; 28). The bone of contention in all of these instances was the determination of who carried God's word. There were prophets who spoke only sweet words to the people assuring them of security and peace where there were none. The LXX did not mince words by referring to them as false prophets (Hibbard 340). Others, though true prophets, sometimes spoke without hearing from the Lord e. g. Hananiah (Jer 28). In other words, they spoke presumptuously.

However, the criteria for determining which prophet was true or false are not so clearly spelt out in the Hebrew Bible. The only clear references to this are in the book of Deuteronomy (13:1-5; 18:20-22). In both passages those whose predictions are not fulfilled or those who speak in the name of other gods or who presume to speak in the name of the Lord when he has not actually sent them are condemned as being false. Even the criterion of predictive accuracy or fulfillment is debunked by Jeremiah as can be seen in Jer 26:3, 13, 19. The prediction of doom may not come through if the people repent and turn back to God. Hence, Hibbard concludes that “As such, the criterion of fulfilment as an indicator of true prophecy is replaced by prophecy's function as a source of reform” (346-347).

One may thus conclude by offering the following criteria for distinguishing between true and false prophets:

- A) Called and commissioned: The true prophet must have been called and commissioned to speak in the name of the Lord (Isa 6:4-9; Jer 1:4-10; Ezek 2:1-10; Hosea 1:1-2; Amos 7:14-15 etc).
- B) Words of repentance: the true prophet must always call people back to repentance (Isa 1:1-20; Jer 7:1-15; 26:1-6; Ezek 33:1-20; Hosea 14:1-3; Joel 2:12-17).
- C) Consistency: The true prophet must be consistent in his preaching to the people and not be double-faced. He must be sure that he has received words from the Lord before giving them to the people.
- D) Personal moral life: The true prophet must avoid complicity and duplicity in his own private life. This means he must live by his own words, otherwise, his hearers may despise him (See Matt 7:15-20).
- E) Readiness to suffer: The true prophet must be seen to be ready for personal suffering occasioned by his calling. He should not fail to speak out against evil as a result of fear of suffering. True prophets are long suffering and resilient (Jer 20:1-6; 26:7-24; 37:11-38:13; Ezek 3:22-27).
- F) Disciplined: The true prophet must be disciplined and not carried away by gifts, privileges and accolades (Jer 16:1-13). In order to be true to his prophetic calling, the true prophet must embrace personal discipline so as not to be swerved by the powerful and influential in the society (Jer 1:17-19).

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