

Prophet's Identity in Jeremiah 23:9-40. An Exegetical and Theological Study

Doctoral Dissertation

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On the 11th of June 2014, the defence of Rev. Piotr Paweł Jaworski's doctoral dissertation took place at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. The supervisor of the thesis was prof. Wojciech Pikor (John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin), and its reviewers were prof. Marek Parchem (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Warsaw) and prof. Dariusz Dziadosz (John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin).

The dissertation focuses on the analysis of Jeremiah 23:9-40, and raises the question concerning the identity of the biblical prophet. The fragment consists of the prophecies proclaimed by Jeremiah on the eve of the catastrophic events of the year 586 BC. In the face of the crisis that engulfed the whole society, the prophet of Anathoth gives a kind of spiritual retreat to its social, spiritual and religious leaders (21:11–23:40). He pays attention in it to the acquainted duties coming from the held office (21:11–22:30) or vocation (23:9-40). As the preamble opening the cycle and dedicated to prophets (23:9a) suggests, the speeches following it do not just treat “about prophets” but are rather an appeal addressed “to prophets”, formulated in extremely dramatic words and pronounced in a very suggestive way. The general character of the wording indicates that Jeremiah, speaking on behalf of Yahweh, addresses “all prophets”, being not only a preacher himself, but also the first recipient of the word he preaches. The admonitions that he utters not only call on other prophets to verify their mission in view of God's expectations coming from vocation, but they are primarily an invitation to rediscover one's own identity. And since we do not deal with teachings delivered in isolation but prophecies made in public, also those who, although not being prophets themselves, are subject to them in their lives, are given an opportunity to reflect over the essence of the mission of a prophet. Therefore, the audience faces questions to which it has to give answers: “Who is a prophet?” and “Who am I – me, a prophet?”, and considering the depravity spreading among the

called ones, also: “Who should a prophet be?” and “Who should I – a prophet be?”. Thus, the fragment gains a programmatic character for everyone who has been chosen by God and called to perform a prophetic function. And for all the other recipients, the text remains to be a kind of a compendium of the characteristics concerning the mission of a biblical prophet.

In the presented dissertation, the attention focuses on the universal dimension of the analyzed fragment. While searching for an answer to the question about the prophetic identity, the message of the text was considered in the context of the whole Book of Jeremiah, which is not only a collection of the prophet’s addresses, but also, to a great extent, a biographical or autobiographical record which gives us an insight into his personal experiences and the spiritual evolution in the relation with God. It enables a broader view of the key problem, as well as allows one to confront the Jeremiah addresses with his personal experience of being Yahweh’s prophet. Jer 23:9-40 was analyzed with the use of the historical-critical method which, although indispensable *per se*, appears to be insufficient. Therefore, the analysis of tradition history and redaction criticism was supplemented with the elements of narrative analysis that took into consideration the characteristics of Semitic rhetoric. The theological synthesis of the message included in Jer 23:9-40 is the culmination of the historical-critical and rhetorical analysis of the text.

The dissertation consists of three chapters. The first one concentrates on the literary analysis of the studied excerpt. The starting point is the consideration of the context, both the larger one, comprising the issue of the identity and authenticity of a prophet in the Hebrew Bible, and the closer one, considering the location of Jer 23:9-40 in the body of the Book of Jeremiah. Then there followed text critical remarks, translation, and the analysis of the composition of the studied fragment. The latter includes two approaches to the text: the diachronic and the synchronic one. A clearly compilatory character of the analyzed fragment in the first place makes us pose the question about the course of its redaction process (diachronic analysis), which sheds light on the history of the biblical text. Although undoubtedly the pericope is, just like the Book of Jeremiah, a result of a long and complex redaction process, it is not possible to focus on its formation only, without considering its final version. That is why Jer 23:9-40 in its final shape became the basis for the study of the text structure (synchronic analysis). Using the rules that are valid in the Semitic rhetoric enabled one not only to become acquainted with the structure of the fragment but also with its inner dynamics. Chapter two is devoted to the exegesis of the individual rhetorical units of which Jer 23:9-40 is composed. The linguistic, syntactical, and semantic analysis considers the studied pericope in the context of both the Book of Jeremiah

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and the whole Hebrew Bible. Chapter three brings theological conclusions arising from the previously conducted analyses. What emerges from them is the figure of the prophet as a relational being whose identity is founded on the relation with God and His word, as well as with the people of God and their leaders. This four-fold dependence reveals the essence of the character of each prophet and the prophetic vocation.

In the first place, the prophetic vocation is characterized by a relation connecting the prophet with Yahweh and initiated by God. Admittedly, the choice made by Yahweh is characterized by some kind of arbitrariness but man appointed by God is not treated by Him instrumentally. The appointed one is not incapacitated and deprived of the right to speak. Just the opposite – he is in constant dialogue with God. At any moment he can not only express his views and objections regarding His decisions, but even have a lively discussion with Him, the example of which can be found in so-called “Jeremiah’s Confessions” (cf. 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18). In spite of the declarative character of the message: “You must go to everyone I send you to! You shall say whatever I command you!” (1,7b), God waits for the acceptance of the proposal given to man. As Jeremiah testifies, God “persuades” him until he “allows to be persuaded” (cf. 20:7), and declares the readiness to be God’s messenger: “Here I am! Send me!” (Isa 6:8b). The dialogical character of the relationship between Yahweh and the prophet is the reason for which one can say not only that God “creates” him, but also “brings him up”. It emphasizes the truth that not only this one moment is considered, but the process comprising the whole life of the prophet as well. Thus, a unique personal bond is established between the prophet and God. Although this relation is shown in the categories of sending and command, it is also characterized by intimacy exceeding the expectations of people of those times (cf. 23:18,22). It is during those intimate meetings that God reveals the intentions of His heart to him (cf. 23:20), so that he could then present them to people (cf. 23:22a). Therefore, the relation connecting a prophet with Yahweh is the relation of obedience: to go where God sends and to say what God ordered (cf. 23:21,32). This, however, is not slavish but filial obedience. Thus, the prophet appears as a son obedient to his Father, and at the same time as a model of obedience in following His orders destined for all those who name themselves God’s children.

The relation of the prophet and Yahweh is closely linked with God’s word. The beginning of this relationship is marked out by the so-called prophet investiture when Yahweh places his word in the prophet’s mouth making him His spokesman to people (cf. 1:7,9,17; 15:19). At that moment the prophet is a receptive party, but his personal relation with God warrants the opinion that

he is not just a passive tool Yahweh uses for the fulfillment of His intentions. Although God expects and requires from him “faithfulness” in passing the entrusted message (cf. 23:28b), it is not about purely mechanical faithfulness. Owing to the received word that possesses the revealing power, the prophet gets acquainted with God and his intentions (cf. 23:18) in order to communicate them next to those to whom he was sent (cf. 23:22). We can clearly see here an indirect stage between the sensual perception of the word and its enunciation. It consists in personal reception of Yahweh’s word, which stresses the truth that each one appointed to fulfill the prophet mission should be the first listener of the word and its first interlocutor. Jeremiah serves here as a good example of such an approach. His inner dialogue with the word received from God leads to the full assimilation of the message. This climax in the relation of the prophet and the word is expressed by a metaphor in which the prophet consumes the word (15:16a; cf. Ezek 2:8–3:3). The word swallowed by him infiltrates the most intimate parts of the body, and thus “materializes” in the prophet. Therefore, the prophet not only preaches the word but he also becomes God’s word himself sent by Yahweh to his people.

Thus each prophet is a person that belongs to two realms: divine and human. That is why, in addition to the relation with Yahweh and His word, he is in constant relation with the people of God. By becoming “Yahweh’s mouth”, every prophet preaches the same word which Yahweh pronounced when making the Sinai covenant (cf. Jer 7:23; 11:1-2). He reminds and updates it, thus mediating in the creative dialogue between God and His people lasting for centuries (cf. 7:13,25; 25:4; 26:5; 29:19; 35:15; 44:4). Due to the inclination of the people to forget Yahweh (cf. 23:27) and dispense themselves from the requirements arising from the covenant’s obligations (cf. 23:10-11), the prophet is most often forced to reprimand his listeners, inviting them to give up their lifestyle and enter the path of reformation (cf. 23:22b). Under no circumstances can he afford to give tacit or open approval to sinful behavior (cf. accusations included in 23:13-17). Being Yahweh’s voice, he consequently becomes the voice of conscience for the whole community and its individual members. However, to be able to fulfill this task in an unhampered way, he himself cannot be involved in any evil action (cf. 23:11,13-14). The prophet who wants to fulfill well his mission should pass the word received from God not only via verbal messages and performed symbolic actions but especially via personal testimony. Unfortunately, he must take into account the fact that the people who reject God’s word “pronounced with mouth” (cf. 7:24-26; 25:4; 29:18-19) will also reject God’s word “materialized in the prophet” (cf. 11:18-19,21; 12:6; 15:10-11; 18:18,22; 20:1-2,7-8,10; 26:8-11; 37:15-16; 38:1-6). Therefore, a rather sad fate awaits the

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majority of the prophets truly devoted to God. Neglecting the prophet who becomes the sign of opposition for his contemporaries brings forth severe punishment to the rebels (23:39-40). Yahweh lets his anger kindle (cf. 7:17-20), thus addressing his people and making them come to their senses and return (cf. 23:20). Also in such difficult circumstances each prophet has a significant role to perform. His task is to help suffering people notice the purgatory dimension of the punitive events falling onto them, and to raise and sustain hope for the renewal of broken ties. Thus, the prophet becomes not only the word of condemnation, but primarily the word of salvation. His mission is aimed at saving the listeners and ensuring the fullness of life to them (cf. 1:10; 23:22).

Standing before the people in the name of Yahweh, the prophet belongs to the group of those who enjoy special social respect, and at the same time, to those who are responsible for the fate of the nation. As shepherds, they are supposed to watch over God's people and bring them back to God and to each other by making them follow law and justice. The prophet appointed by Yahweh both over whole communities (1:10) and their leaders (1:18) performs his service in a totally free and unhampered way (cf. 23:30-32). He knows that the source of his power and authority is not, as it is the case of a king or a priest, a human choice or origin but Yahweh's direct decision.

Thus, to sum up, the prophet chosen by Yahweh and appointed from among the people is adopted as His son who by receiving, or even swallowing, each of His words, incorporates them in himself and becomes a living word sent to the people, and the voice of conscience that leads to salvation.