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False Prophets in the Book of Jeremiah: Did They All Prophecy and Speak Falsehood?

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ABSTRACT: Scholars have often considered the conflict between Jeremiah and the other prophets in the book as fundamental traits of his prophetic career and biographical accounts of the life of Jeremiah. This article defends an alternative view: prophetic conflicts in Jeremiah are literary creations produced by later redactors to strengthen Jeremiah's status of true prophet of Yhwh, as it appears clear in addressing the clash between Jeremiah and some of other prophets in the book: Passhur, Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemaiah. In fact, none of these characters was originally a prophet nor was he connected to any prophetic activities. It was the work of later redactors that turned these characters into prophets of falsehood, in so reinforcing Jeremiah's prophetic prerogatives in comparison.

Key words: The prophet Jeremiah, False Prophecy, Prophetic Conflict, Redaction Criticism

Prophecy and Falsehood: Preliminary Remarks

The nature of false prophecy and the prophetic conflicts between true and false prophets in the Hebrew Bible received extensive attention from scholarship.¹ The topic is far from being new and a common understanding among

1. Given the amount of attention the topic gained throughout the years, any lists of scholarly works about false prophecy or false prophets is destined to remain incomplete. However, there are some prominent studies that cannot be overlooked, such as Gerard von Rad, "Die Falsche Propheten", ZAW 51, (1933), pp. 109-120; Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962); Eva Osswald, *Falsche Prophetie im Alten Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1962); Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Prophetie in der Krisis: Studien zu Texten aus dem Buch Jeremia* (Biblische Studien, 43; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag Des Erziehungsvereins, 1964); Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood* (SBT Second Series 16; London: SCM Press, 1970); James L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect upon Israelite Religion* (BZAW, 124; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971); Frank Lothar Hossfeld & Ivo Meyer, *Prophet gegen Prophet: Analyse der alttestamentlichen Texte zum Thema: wahre und falsche Propheten* (BBB, 9; Fribourg: Schweizerisches Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1973); Simon J. De Vries, *Prophet Against Prophet: The Role of the Micah Narrative (I Kings 22) in the Development of Early Prophetic Tradition* (Grand

biblical scholars is to consider that in ancient Israel some prophets were directly called by Yhwh and thus only spoke his truthful words (these are the writing prophets of the tradition), while others were not appointed by the deity and uttered false messages for their personal gain, which were destined to remain vain words (these are the false prophets).² There are some obvious problems in using labels such as “true” and “false” prophets as if they applied to two specific and clearly opposite groups of foretellers, one positive and one negative. First, these labels are ambiguous, as they evidently direct to the veracity of their message as criterion of differentiation; however, it appears that even the prophet who tells the truth at times should not be trusted by the people (Deut 13,1-5). Secondly, not all the prophets that are unreliable are “false”, as they may not be lying nor pretending to be prophets, but they may rather be resorting to forbidden techniques of divination or be talking in name of gods other than Yhwh (Deut 18,10-11.20-22). Besides, at times even prophets of Yhwh can be deceived and become false prophets (1 Kgs 22; Jer 28). Even more problematic is the fact that within the Masoretic text (MT) the expression “false prophet” never occurs (in the Hebrew Bible there are only נבאים), while it is used in some passages of the Septuagint (G) in the Greek version of the book of Jeremiah (explicit references to the ψευδοπροφήται appear only in Jer 6,13; 27,9; 28,1; 29,8,³ but are absent from other excerpts in the book which revolve around the same theme, such as Jer 5,30-31; 14,13-16; 23,9-32). Therefore, some precaution is needed when using expressions such as “false prophets” and “false prophecy”, because they do not refer to any prophetic groups with well-defined and homogeneous characteristics in the Hebrew Bible.

In this article, “prophets of falsehood” or “false prophets” are used to refer exclusively to the prophetic antagonists of Jeremiah who are accused of proclaiming falsehood (as per the Hebrew שקר), in the nation and to the people. It is certainly not new that, among prophetic books, Jeremiah is the most concerned with the falsehood spread by the prophetic class (cf. Jer 6,13-15; 8,10b-12; 14,13-16; 19,14-20,6; 23,13-14.25-32; 27,9-10.12-15; 28; 29,8-9.21-23.24-32).⁴ However, it is not my purpose to define the characteristics

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); Hans W. Wolff, *Confrontations with Prophets* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

2. However, the mere fulfilment of an oracle is a controversial element that cannot separate true and false prophecies objectively. Already Hempel questioned the validity of the criterion of fulfilment; see Johannes Hempel, “Vom irrenden Glauben”, *ZSystTh* 7, (1930), pp. 631-660. This article has been later reprinted in Hempel, *Apoxysmata: Vorarbeiten zu Einer Religion Geschichte und Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1961), pp. 174-197. See also Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict*, pp. 49-52; Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Reactions and Responses to Failure in the Old Testament Prophetic Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 1979), pp. 29-37.

3. In the Greek version of Jeremiah, MT Jer 27-29 correspond to chs. 34-36.

4. A first attempt to analyse the charges of falsehood against the prophetic class in Jeremiah was undertaken by Overholt's *The Threat of Falsehood*. According to

of false prophecy in the book of Jeremiah, neither is it my goal to establish the differences, if any, between Jeremiah's way of understanding his role in contrast to that of his prophetic opponents. The goal of this article is to show that the accusation of prophesying falsehood at the expenses of some of his adversaries is ideological and represents the product of later redactional interventions intended to emphasize the role of Jeremiah as the only true prophet of Yhwh in the book.⁵

There are, in the book of Jeremiah, only five false prophets presented by their names: Pashhur (Jer 19,14-20,6), Hananiah (Jer 28), Ahab and Zedekiah (Jer 29,21-23) and Shemaiah the Nehelamite (Jer 29,24-32). All of them are accused by the prophet Jeremiah of having prophesied falsehood, but, as for the MT, only Hananiah was without doubt a נביא (Jer 28,2), while the association of Pashhur, Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemaiah with any prophetic activities (let alone false prophesying) is not as straightforward and even appears out-of-place. None of them is ever called "prophet" nor seems to have shown any inclination toward prophecy or divination – nonetheless, they are all associated with those prophets who spread falsehood in the nation. Through the analysis of the short passages about these figures (Jer 19,14-20,6; 29,21-23 and 29,24-32), it will be shown how later redactors have resketched non-prophetic characters into prophetic antagonists for Jeremiah.

Did Pashhur Ever Prophesy?

The first character accused of prophesying falsehood in the book of Jeremiah is Pashhur (Jer 19,14-20,6).⁶ In the episode, Pashhur, who acts as chief of the

Overholt, who mostly focuses on the historical Jeremiah's clash with the prophets of his time, the term שקר covers mainly three domains. First, it recurs to identify idolatry and foreign cultic practices (cf. Jer 3,23; 7,9). Secondly, it denotes the utterances of Jeremiah's opponents (cf. Jer 27,12-15; 28,15). Finally, it embodies the false sense of security that the prophets transmitted to the people prior the fall of Jerusalem (Jer 6,13; 14,14-15; 23,17); see Overholt, *Falsehood*, pp. 1, 29, 75. A different approach has then been undertaken by Carroll, whose work on the book of Jeremiah proved to be fundamental in moving forward from problematic notions such as the "historical Jeremiah", approaching prophetic conflicts in the book as reflections of the ideology of the different scribal circles responsible for the final form of the book; see Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (London: SCM Press, 1981), pp. 5-11, 181-198. Also consider Carroll's commentary on the book of Jeremiah, *The Book of Jeremiah: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1986).

5. The nature of prophetic conflicts as literary creations that serve ideological purposes not only in the book of Jeremiah, but also in Ezekiel and Micah has been the main focus of my latest research; see Francesco Arena, *Prophetic Conflicts in Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Micah: How Post-Exilic Ideologies Created the False (and the True) Prophets* (FAT II, 121; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

6. Many consider Jer 19,14-20,6 as a self-standing literary unit, which seems a sound understanding; see Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 389; William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah I-XXV, Vol I (ICC)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), p. 449; Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley & Joel F. Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25 (WBC 26)* (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), p. 263; Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20 (AB, 21A)*,

temple, hears Jeremiah prophesying doom against Jerusalem (Jer 19,14-15), and punishes him, having him beaten and put into stocks (Jer 20,1-3). Once freed, Jeremiah foretells that Pashhur will be deported in Babylon, for he has prophesied falsehood (אשר נבאת להם בשקר, “because you prophesied to them falsehood”, in Jer 20,4-6). This is quite the surprising statement, as Pashhur is never said to be a prophet, nor does he appear to be concerned by the prediction of the future of Judah. To be precise, Pashhur does not pronounce a single word throughout this passage. It is impossible to date the episode with any certainty, as this text offers no temporal indications. However, since Jeremiah threatens Pashhur of deportation in Babylon, scholars generally place this episode under the rule of King Jehoiakim prior the first siege of Jerusalem.⁷ Besides, later in the book, Zephaniah appears as chief of the temple (Jer 29,24-29), thus commentators often assume that Pashhur was among the deportees of 597 with his position taken up by Zephaniah.⁸ This is the only appearance of Pashhur son of Immer in the book of Jeremiah, and it is surprising to see that his words are not recorded, especially if one considers that Pashhur is doomed to deportation exactly because he prophesied falsehood.⁹

New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 842; Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 277. Only few scholars work with a longer text, as in Jer 19,1-20,6; see William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1. A Commentary on the book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 1-25* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), p. 537; Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), p. 192. As to its placement, the clash between Jeremiah and Pashhur is evidently framed by the “broken flask” episode (Jer 19,1-13) and a brief, first-person lament (Jer 20,7-13). Apparently, Jer 20,7-13 is connected to what precedes by the catch-phrase מסביב מגור, that appears in Jer 20,3 and 20,10; see John Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (AB, 21. New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 134; Ernest W. Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 1-25* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 169; John A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 457; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 397; McKane, *Jeremiah* vol.1, p. 467; Craigie et alii, *Jeremiah 1-25*, p. 270.

7. See Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. 133; Nicholson, *Jeremiah 1-25*, p. 167; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 445; Craigie et alii, *Jeremiah 1-25*, p. 267. Holladay assumes that this episode has been redacted by Baruch after King Jehoiakim burned the first scroll (cf. Jer 36,26), around 600/601; see Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, p. 539. Conversely, Jones argues that this episode represents a first reaction of the establishment against Jeremiah, which lately would force the prophet into hiding (cf. Jer 36). Hence, he suggests a dating before the burning of the scroll in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (around 604); see Douglas R. Jones, *Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 268.

8. See Nicholson, *Jeremiah 1-25*, p. 167; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 445; Allen, *Jeremiah*, p. 328.

9. In contrast, consider the confrontation between Jeremiah and the prophet Hananiah, and all the words they have in Jer 28. There may be some problems with the definition of false prophecy in Jer 28 (in fact, Jeremiah does not grant Hananiah

This may have something to do with the redaction history of the episode. Although representing now a cohesive unit, the pericope Jer 19,14-20,6 has most probably undergone expansion and reworking from a core unit. This core is found in the direct confrontation between Jeremiah and Pashhur (cf. Jer 20,2-3), which once represented a stand-alone episode, later connected to the broken flask prophecy by the addition of Jer 19,14-15.¹⁰ In fact, Jer 19,14-15 reprises the settings of Jer 19,1-13 and depicts Jeremiah as a prophet that comes and goes to deliver Yhwh's words at the deity's will. Besides, the oracle uttered by Jeremiah in the temple courtyard (cf. Jer 19,15) provides a reasonable cause for Pashhur's indignation against him, an element that is missing in Jer 20,2-3. The introduction in Jer 20,1 is yet another linking device, as it strengthens the connection between the core Jer 20,2-3 and Jer 19,14-15.

The latest addition comprises Jer 20,4-6, which reads as an exegesis of previous features. In its early form, the disputation against Pashhur in Jer 20,2-3 had in the change of name its climactic apex, so that the redactor responsible for Jer 20,4-6 inserted these verses as an explanation of the new name that Jeremiah has given to Pashhur.¹¹ Thus, Jer 20,4-6 departs from the dispute against Pashhur but is not connected to the words that caused Jeremiah to be beaten; these verses expand upon the meaning of מגור מסביב, "terror is all around",¹² reading it as a prefiguration of Pashhur's fate in connection to the Babylonian invasion. Only in this latest development the accusation of having prophesied falsehood recurs.

two years to see if his words would be fulfilled; cf. Jer 28,2-4.15-17), but at least Hananiah's prediction and his status as prophet are clearly stated in the episode.

10. This is the reconstruction proposed by Winfried Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 1-25* (WMANT, 41; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), p. 226; Nicholson, *Jeremiah 1-25*, p. 166; McKane, *Jeremiah vol.1*, p. 465. Allen also considers that Jer 19,14-15 stands as a prelude to Jer 20,1-6 and presupposes the fuller redactional form of Jer 19,1-13; see Allen, *Jeremiah*, p. 229.

11. See Thiel, *Redaktion 1-25*, p. 227; McKane, *Jeremiah vol.1*, pp. 462, 466.

12. It has often been assumed that the Hebrew מגור מסביב contains some sort of pun on the name Pashhur and many commentators have proposed comparisons and antitheses with words in Hebrew or with cognate terms from other Semitic languages. For a summary of these attempts see McKane, *Jeremiah vol.1*, pp. 461-64; Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, pp. 543-545. Unfortunately, none of the solutions proposed so far are convincing and the attempt to establish a literary relationship should be discarded. One of the major difficulties in understanding the change of name comes from the three meanings that the word גור carries in Hebrew, as highlighted in the versions. In fact, G renames Pashhur as Μέτοικον, "deportee", so the translators probably understood the meaning to refer to I גור, "sojourn", reading מגור as a reference to deportation (similarly, the Peshitta). The Targum instead has it as II גור, "gather against", while the MT and the Vulgate understand the root to be III גור, "terror", which represents the most widely accepted translation.

Therefore, some scepticism as to the legitimacy of the identification of Pashhur as a (false) prophet seems grounded.¹³ Pashhur is clearly introduced by his role and title at the beginning of the episode, which are not connected to any form of divination. He is identified as פקיד and נגיד of the house of Yhwh (Jer 20,1). Pashhur's titles are difficult to translate, but the versions agree in describing him as someone in charge of the maintenance of public order in the temple.¹⁴ Thus, W. McKane considers Pashhur as head of the temple police (פקיד) but also a high-ranking priestly official (נגיד);¹⁵ conversely, W. L. Holladay argues that the two terms stand as a double title for the overseer of the temple.¹⁶ Whatever the solution, there seems to be no link to "Pashhur the prophet" in the episode. It is true that this does not represent undisputable evidence that Pashhur could not act as a prophet, because the roles of priest and prophet were not mutually exclusive in ancient Israel.¹⁷ Regardless, it should also be considered that in the episode, Pashhur punishes Jeremiah because he uttered an oracle of judgement against Jerusalem while standing in the gates of the temple (Jer 19,14-15), which is definitely in line with his role as overseer of the temple, rather than being connected to the dynamics of prophetic conflict. Hence, the accusation of false prophesying against Pashhur really comes out of nowhere. If Pashhur's case were isolated, one could be content and accept that, although not being explicit in the text, the chief of the temple was indeed a prophet who spread lies in the land. It is

13. As considered by Thiel, *Redaktion 1-25*, p. 227; Nicholson, *Jeremiah 1-25*, p. 167; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 394; McKane, *Jeremiah vol.1*, p. 466. Holladay deems "curious" the mention of false prophesying in the episode, and instead of considering Pashhur as someone who performs prophetic actions, takes his lies as connected to his name, which he translates as "fruitful all around"; see Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, p. 545. Besides, some commentators do not question his role as a prophet nor the false message he allegedly uttered; see Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. 133; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 456; Allen, *Jeremiah*, p. 229.

14. As to this, G has ἡγούμενος οἴκου κυρίου, and the Vulgate reads, *princeps in domo Domini*, both identifying Pashhur as some sort of superintendent of the temple.

15. See McKane, *Jeremiah vol.1*, p. 460.

16. See Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, p. 542.

17. In the biblical tradition, Jeremiah himself happens to be both a priest and a prophet (Jer 1,1) and so does Ezekiel (Ezek 1,1-3). As for the overlapping of sacred offices in ancient Israel, see Lester L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995), p. 220; Ehud Ben Zvi, "Observations on Prophetic Characters, Prophetic Texts, Priests of Old, Persian Period Priests and Literati", in Lester L. Grabbe & Alice Ogden Bellis (eds.), *The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets* (JSOTSup, 408; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), p. 26. Moreover, the exclusivity between the roles of priest and prophet seems to emerge as a paradigm only in early Christian literature and in the writing of the Church Fathers of the Late Antiquity, as argued by Ziony Zevit, "The Prophets Versus the Priests", in Lester L. Grabbe & Alice Ogden Bellis (eds.), *The Priests in the Prophets*, p. 213.

not so, however, and we shall dwell further in the matter and see if there is another solution to this *non sequitur*.

Were Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemaiah Prophets?

There are other three named characters who appear to be unexpectedly associated with false prophecy in the book of Jeremiah, all of them mentioned in Jer 29.¹⁸ The first and second are Ahab the son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah the son of Maaseiah, accused of false prophesying together in Jer 29,21-23. The third and last one is Shemaiah the Nehelamite, accused in Jer 29,30-32. All these three figures are part of the deportee community in Babylon after 597, but besides that and the accusation of false prophesying, they do not share any other significant traits and are seemingly unknown to each other.

As for Ahab and Zedekiah, they have committed sinful actions in the community, mainly prophesying falsehood (Jer 29,21) and committing adultery (Jer 29,23). A first problem with the identification of Ahab and Zedekiah as prophets comes from a comparison with the Greek version, which does not contain the sentence שָׁקֵר בְּשֵׁמִי לָכֵן הַנְּבִאִים “who prophesy to you in my name falsehood” (Jer 29,21aβ), so that there is a strong possibility that this sentence represents a later addition to the MT.¹⁹ Thus, the earlier Greek version does not explicitly identify Ahab and Zedekiah as prophets or as someone entitled to prophesy.²⁰ It should be considered that the Greek text may hint to some

18. While this article addresses exclusively part of Jer 29, it should be considered that scholars largely agree that this chapter belongs to a longer, uniform section in the book of Jeremiah that covers the entirety of Jer 27-29. The main elements of this section are the political tensions between Judah and Babylon prior 587, Jeremiah's dispute against other prophets as to a possible military invasion and the duration of the Babylonian captivity. See Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah: Introduction and Commentary (The Torch Bible Commentaries)* (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 180; Overholt, *Falsehood*, p. 24; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 528; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 529; Holladay, *Jeremiah 2. A Commentary on the book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 26-52 (Hermeneia)* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), p. 114; Jones, *Jeremiah*, p. 346; Pamela J. Scalise, Gerald L. Keown & Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, (WBC 27; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 35; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB, 21B)* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), p. 308. Others instead favour a shorter section, comprising only Jer 27-28; see Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. 201; Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 26-52* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 28; Walter Brueggemann, *To Build, To Plant: A Commentary on Jeremiah 26-52 (ITC)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 13. Only Allen works with a longer section, namely Jer 26-29, although suggesting that ch. 26 was added later as the preface to the collection; see Allen, *Jeremiah*, p. 295.

19. As maintained by Gerald J. Janzen, *Studies in the Text of Jeremiah (HSM, 6)* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 49; McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah XXVI-LII, Vol II (ICC)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 730; Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, p. 134; Allen, *Jeremiah*, p. 328.

20. There is however the problem posed by Jer 29,15 in the MT, which clearly refers to the people's confidence that Yhwh has appointed prophets in Babylon. In G, this

sort of oracular activity on the behalf of Ahab and Zedekiah in its rendition of MT Jer 29,23b, although this element should be carefully weighed. The Greek text reads, καὶ λόγον ἐξηματίσαν ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου, ὃν οὐ συνέταξα αὐτοῖς, “and a speech they reported in my name, which I did not command them”. The verb here used, ἐξηματίζω, points to giving speeches or responses, and when deities are involved, oracular responses can also be assumed. Nonetheless, this verb never represents a translation of the Hebrew נבא (cf. the recurrence of the verb דבר in Jer 29,23 to parallel the Greek ἐξηματίσαν). Similarly, the term שקר in Jer 29,23 is not represented in the Greek, whose translators are generally quite liberal with the use of the word ψευδῆ, especially when it comes to the prophets in Jer 27-29 (G Jer 34-36). This is not to say that Ahab and Zedekiah did not give an oracular response or speak without Yhwh’s command, but that the tradition, neither in the Greek nor in the Hebrew (excluding the late insertion of Jer 29,21aβ), had originally identified them as prophets of falsehood.

Moreover, a closer look into the charges against Ahab and Zedekiah seems to support the interpretation that the status of Ahab and Zedekiah as prophets of falsehood is retrospective. It is said, in Jer 29,23, that Ahab and Zedekiah committed an outrageous action, presenting a technical term of legal jargon, נבלה, that generally points to aberrant sexual conduct (cf. premarital intercourse in Deut 22,21; the rape of Dinah in Gen 34,7; the rape of the Levite’s concubine at Gibeah in Judg 19,23-24; the rape of Tamar in 2 Sam 13,12).²¹ The reader’s impression that Ahab and Zedekiah had given scandal to the community with unacceptable sexual behaviour by fornicating

verse (G Jer 36,15) immediately precedes the episode of Ahab and Zedekiah, because the pericope vv 16-20 does not appear in the Greek. It is debated whether Jer 29,15 should be considered as part of the unit Jer 29,21-23. Some commentators have considered that Jer 29,16-20 has been inserted in the MT within an original layer Jer 29,15.21-23, and hence have proposed to restore v 15 right after v 20. This solution appears to have been adapted already in the Lucianic recension; see Nicholson, *Jeremiah* 26-52, p. 46; Janzen, *Studies*, p. 118 and Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, p. 135. Similarly, Bright states that also v 20 represents an addition, meant to restore the connection between vv 15 and 21, broken by the insertion of vv 16-19; see Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. 208. Others have considered that v 15 represents the introduction to the first mention of prophets in the chapter, thus it should be placed before Jer 29,8-9; see Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia* 26-45 (WMANT, 52; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), p. 14, followed by Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 559. Finally, McKane suggests placing v 15 right after the pericope against the prophets Jer 29,8-9; see McKane, *Jeremiah* vol.2, p. cxxxix. However, the text of Jer 29 is overall too convoluted and fragmentary to allow any of such assumptions. It seems safer to leave this verse aside, as an individual fragment, since its link to the layer Jer 29,21-23 is doubtful. This may answer also the alleged relation between v 15 and vv 21-23 as an independent unit in G, a solution which presents, in the opinion of this writer, the same problems seen in the MT.

21. Carroll, Holladay and Scalise take the term נבלה to refer to all actions that undermine order in the community; see Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 554; Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, p. 144; Scalise *et alii*, *Jeremiah* 26-52, p. 78.

with married women is reinforced by the pairing of the term נבלה with נאף, “adultery” (cf. the expression וינאפו את נשי רעיהם, “and they committed adultery with the wives of their neighbours”, in Jer 29,23a), which in this context ostensibly points to marital infidelity.²² As we see, the main charge against Ahab and Zedekiah does not seem to relate to prophesying at all, as it appears that only later redactional interventions connect them to those prophets who prophesied falsehood in Babylon (explicitly referred to in Jer 29,8-9).

A final remark must be made as to Jer 29,23, namely that this verse may even represent a later development of Ahab and Zedekiah’s fate. There are inconsistencies between their faults, which even appear *after* the verdict (cf. the verdict in Jer 29,22 and the faults in v 23), and the hyperbolic circumstances of the carrying out of their sentence. The direct involvement of Yhwh and Nebuchadnezzar II in what appears to be a minor matter of criminal justice is surprising,²³ and might be due to the later literary growth of the episode.²⁴ Thus, at least two clear supplementations to the Hebrew text of Ahab

22. The possibility that in this context adultery could point to apostasy or religious pollution might still be sustained, as the text specifies that Ahab and Zedekiah did what they did with the wives of their neighbours, which may be their fellow Israelites as well as the “unclean” Babylonian women that lived close to them. The term רע, “neighbour”, is fluid in the Hebrew Bible, as it refers to Israelites and non-Israelites depending on the context (cf. it clearly refers to non-Israelites in Gen 11,3; 38,12; Exod 2,13; 20,16; Deut 5,17); see Richard E. Friedman, “Love Your Neighbor: Only the Israelites or Everyone?”, in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, (2014), pp. 48-52. It has been suggested that Ahab and Zedekiah were punished because they refused to take Israelite wives to procreate with (as prescribed in Jer 29,6), preferring instead to defile themselves with foreign women; see Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel: Exkritisches, Sprachliches und Sachliches* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908), p. 316. Such a solution seems to read too much into the text, although we cannot exclude completely the possibility that the text is hinting to something more than conjugal infidelity.

23. It is true that adultery is punishable by death (cf. Lev 18,29; Deut 22,22) and overall represents an offence before Yhwh’s eyes (Gen 37,9) but is also treated somewhat lightly elsewhere (cf. Job 24,15-18; Prov 6,32; 30,20) or not punished by death of the culprit (cf. the episode of David and Uriah’s wife, in which David’s sin seems to be expiated by the death of his illegitimate son; cf. 2 Sam 12,13-14). Conversely, rape represents a crime that usually goes unnoticed in the culture expressed by the Hebrew Bible (cf. Gen 19,8; Judg 19,24-25; 2 Sam 13,11-16), and it requires marriage to the victim to repair the offense (cf. Deut 22,28-29). Why, for such faults, Ahab and Zedekiah should become the object of a sempiternal curse among the people (Jer 29,22) remains a mystery, as much as their execution by the ruler of the Babylonian empire.

24. There have been unsatisfactory attempts to solve the inadequacy between crime and punishment. Holladay considers that Ahab and Zedekiah are more likely guilty of having antagonized the Babylonian dominion, similarly to Hananiah in Jer 28. Hence, they have been executed by Nebuchadnezzar, who acted to stop a revolt against him; see Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, p. 143. Similarly, Jones, *Jeremiah*, p. 368. Carroll instead states that the mention of adultery is a literary contribution to the denigration of Ahab and Zedekiah, which is sound; see Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 560.

and Zedekiah's story are highlighted. First, we have the addition of Jer 29,21aß, which explicitly presents Ahab and Zedekiah as false prophets; secondly, the presence of the term שקר in Jer 29,23, which connects the action of speaking in name of Yhwh with falsehood. Both these elements are unattested in the earlier Greek version. We do not know who Ahab and Zedekiah were, perhaps some notables among the exiles; what seems clear however is that, at some point, they gained the resentment of their community (maybe even of the Babylonian overlords) and were put to death. Their story (at least from an editorial point of view) did not end there but was reprised and expanded to present them as prophets of falsehood in conflict with Jeremiah, which is the main theme in Jer 27-29.

Even more interesting is the case of Shemaiah the Nehelamite (Jer 29,24-29.30-32). Just as Pashhur, Ahab and Zedekiah, also Shemaiah is accused of having prophesied falsehood, albeit never being called a prophet and, even more remarkably, having spoken the truth. In the episode, Jeremiah addresses some letters that Shemaiah sent from Babylon to Zephaniah, chief of the temple in Jerusalem (Jer 29,24-29). Shemaiah complains that Zephaniah, as overseer of the house of Yhwh, was supposed to put into stocks all the maniacs that acted as prophets;²⁵ nonetheless, he apparently allowed Jeremiah to speak freely in the temple (Jer 29,27). According to Shemaiah, Jeremiah had to be imprisoned because he announced to the exiles that they should settle and build houses in Babylon, because Yhwh intended their stay there to be long (in Jer 29,28, clearly based upon Jeremiah's own words in Jer 29,5-7). Having come to know Shemaiah's words (Jer 29,29-30), Jeremiah accuses him of false prophesying and rebellion against Yhwh (Jer 29,31-32).

As we see, besides Jeremiah's accusations, there is no connection between Shemaiah and prophecy. Moreover, the charges of false prophesying against Shemaiah read ill-founded since, as the text witnesses, Shemaiah simply reported verbatim Jeremiah's message to the exiles (Jer 29,5-7.27). It appears

Likewise, Scalise states that role of Nebuchadnezzar in the cycle Jer 27-29 is that of being servant of Yhwh (cf. Jer 27,6; 28,14), and it is not surprising that the editors have chosen him to execute Ahab and Zedekiah for their offense against Yhwh's dignity; see Scalise *et alii*, *Jeremiah* 26-52, p. 78.

25. The MT presents the term מְשֻׁגַּע, meaning "madman", which is not unusual as a derogatory reference to prophetic gifts (cf. 2 Kgs 9,11; Hos 9,7). Holladay compares it to a cognate Arabic root that refers to bird noises, so he understands the Hebrew to imply some sort of babbling while prophesying. Moreover, both Holladay and Allen take the *hitpael* stem of נָבֵא in Jer 29,6 as illegitimate divination; see Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, p. 147; Allen, *Jeremiah*, 167, p. 323. McKane instead considers that Zephaniah is called to act against all those who turn prophesying into madness; see McKane, *Jeremiah* vol.2, p. 727. Finally, Carroll states that מְשֻׁגַּע is a synonym for prophet, especially those who resolve to divine frenzy; see Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 564. It is unclear if Zephaniah was supposed to act against a specific class of prophets (as in, those who resort to ecstasy or divinatory trance), or against all of them, as they all are "madmen". Since within his prophetic career, Jeremiah happens to experience ecstatic visions (cf. Jer 1,10-12; 23,9; 24,1-3), both solutions are equally possible.

that the accusation of prophesying falsehood is the work of a later redactor who attached Jer 29,30-32 to the text of Shemaiah's letter (Jer 29,24-29).²⁶ We are on safe ground assuming that Shemaiah was not originally a prophet, but since he antagonized Jeremiah, and in a section of the book where prophetic conflicts are mentioned diffusely (Jer 27-29), he was included among the false prophets although he never prophesied and did speak the truth.

Ideology and Conflict: Creating Prophetic Antagonists

What are we to do with these odd "prophets of falsehood" who were not prophets, did not prophesy and, as for Shemaiah, explicitly did not lie? As the analysis suggests, first we should acknowledge that Pashhur, Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemaiah had nothing to do with prophecy or divination, but at some point within the redaction history of the book of Jeremiah, they have been assimilated to the other prophets attacked by Jeremiah (cf. Jer 6,13-15; 8,10b-12; 14,13-15; 23,13-32; 27,9-10.12-15; 29,8-9). To find out why, however, it seems useful to pay some attention upon the depiction of Jeremiah in these chapters (Jer 20 and 27-29 overall). In reading Jer 19,14-20,6, we notice that Jeremiah is portrayed as a devoted servant who comes and goes to deliver Yhwh's words at the deity's will. He clearly appears as the privileged prophet of Yhwh, active in the temple of Jerusalem, but also determined to carry Yhwh's words wherever needed.²⁷ Jeremiah simply embodies the authority of Yhwh and acts as the perfect representation of a prophet. Because of his determination to stay true to his command, he faces the hatred and resentment of the temple official Pashhur. Although some scholars have considered a great deal of historicity in Jer 19,14-20,6; 29, reading it as a biographical account of the life of Jeremiah,²⁸ it seems that all the *dramatis personae* involved relate to an ideological conflict pursued with stereotypical elements. In the episode, Pashhur never proclaimed falsehood (he did not speak at all), but the fact that he attacked Jeremiah and prevented him from carrying on his duty was more than enough to have him associated with the prophets of falsehood. In this text, Jeremiah represents the true prophet of Yhwh and the privileged authority for the community; Pashhur may stand for

26. Already Duhm, albeit considering most of Jer 29 as Jeremiah's original letter redacted by Baruch, takes the final bicolon Jer 29,30-32 as a later insertion attached to what precedes; see Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia (KHC, 11; Tübingen: Mohr, 1901)*, p. 236. Thiel ascribes to Deuteronomistic redactors most of the verses that revolve around "false" prophecy, thus also Jer 29,30-32; see Thiel, *Redaktion* 26-45, p. 13. Similarly, Nicholson, *Jeremiah* 26-52, p. 48 and McKane (who however does not consider a Deuteronomistic hand), *Jeremiah* vol.2, p. 741.

27. Carroll compares this depiction of Jeremiah with that of the prophet Elijah, who acts as an itinerant prophet who goes wherever Yhwh commands (cf. 1 Kgs 17,1-10 and 18,1-19); see Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 392.

28. See Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. 133; Nicholson, *Jeremiah* 1-25, p. 162; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 445; Holladay, *Jeremiah* 1, p. 539.

an opponent group (maybe linked to the temple of Jerusalem),²⁹ or a generic rival, who is attacked reusing formulaic charges in the book. This is a common feature in any ideological conflict, in which the adversaries must be heavily discredited with any means at disposal, and whether the accusations are realistic or not is a secondary element.³⁰ In the book of Jeremiah, Pashhur is just a character that was never a prophet and hardly prophesied, but due to his clash with Jeremiah, was eventually re-sketched as the perfect opposite to the protagonist of the book. Besides, such an authoritative representation of Jeremiah as a prophet coincides with the very positive consideration of prophets given by later books like Chronicles and is almost absent in the oldest materials in the book of Jeremiah.³¹

Not too dissimilar has been the fate of Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemaiah. Especially in the cycle Jer 27-29, the figure of Jeremiah undergoes a peculiar treatment. He is repeatedly addressed with the title “prophet” (not a common feature in the first 25 chapters of the book) and appears as a voice to all the nations, in line with the late prologue of the book (Jer 1,1-10). Moreover, he acts as the highest authority for the community, as he speaks in front of King Zedekiah and the ambassadors from foreign reigns (Jer 27) and to Hananiah in front of all the people and the priests in the temple (Jer 28). Moreover, he also appears to direct the diaspora community in Babylon from Jerusalem (Jer 29). Such a portrait of Jeremiah could emerge only from the integrated reading of the whole book, as it represents a later feature in its redaction.

29. Thiel and Carroll consider the rhetoric of opposition between city and cult and the antagonism against some public figures of the community to lay behind the final form of this episode; see Thiel, *Redaktion 1-25*, 228 and Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 394.

30. As to this, Carroll rightly considers that in the book of Jeremiah, prophetic conflicts are far removed from the domain of prophecy as an empiric phenomenon but pertain to ideology, as the redactors were not interested in determining whether and how prophets and prophecies could be true or false Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant*, p. 194.

31. For the emergence of “Jeremiah the prophet” as a secondary editorial development in the book of Jeremiah, see Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant*, pp. 192-94, and *Jeremiah*, pp. 55-64. Such considerations cannot be separated from the thesis that the writing prophets had not been נבאים originally, but rather opponents of the prophetic class, only later assimilated to the prophets through editorial additions; see Graeme Auld, “Prophets Through the Looking Glass: Between Writings and Moses”, *JSOT* 27, (1983), pp. 3-23; Carroll, “Poets not Prophets: A Response to ‘Prophets Through the Looking Glass’”, *JSOT* 27, (1983), pp. 25-31; “Whose Prophet? Whose Society? Whose Social Reality? Troubling the Interpretative Community Again: Notes Towards a Response to T. W. Overholt’s Critique”, *JSOT* 48, (1990), pp. 33-49; Giovanni Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (trans. by John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1988), pp. 114-116; Alessandro Castagnoli, *Profeti e Tradizione* (Pisa: Giardini ed., 1990), pp. 41-60; Francolino J. Gonçalves, “Les ‘prophètes écrivains’ étaient-ils des נבאים?”, in P. M. Michèle Daviau, John W. Wevers & Michael Weigl (eds.), *The World of the Arameans: Volume 1 (JSOTS, 324)* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 144-185.

From the point of view of the editor(s) of Jer 29, it did not really matter if Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemaiah were prophets, neither was important to explain why and how they spread falsehood (as for Shemaiah, he did not even lie); however, they crossed the authority of Jeremiah, the only one entitled to speak the truth, and that was enough to make them despicable prophets in order to make the status of Jeremiah as the only true prophet shine even brighter. The fact that Pashhur, Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemaiah appear to be high-ranking characters in the book almost certainly played a functional role to this purpose. Pashhur, above them all, is the overseer of the house of Yhwh in Jerusalem, and yet not even he was able to break Jeremiah's commitment to his call. Moreover, Jeremiah got the best of Pashhur in the end, predicting his deportation and death in Babylon. Similarly, Shemaiah appears to be a prominent in the exilic community, given his acquaintance to Zephaniah, another chief of the temple of Jerusalem. Once again, Jeremiah is not intimidated by his threats, and in the end curses Shemaiah: neither he nor his seed will dwell in the land among the chosen people (Jer 29,32). Less clear is the status of Ahab and Zedekiah among the exiles; they are presented as sinners and adulterers in the community, but the comparison with the Greek version excludes their involvement with prophetic activities (although they did speak a message that Yhwh did not command, cf. Jer 29,23).

Conclusion

In the book, Jeremiah has quite a few quarrels with the prophetic class and its deceitful members, which he generally deals with in group and anonymously (cf. Jer 6,13-15; 8,10b-12; 14,13-16; 23,13-15.25-32; 27,9-10.12-15.16-22; 29,8-9); however, when he faces specific characters and accuses them of prophesying falsehood, it appears that such accusation is out-of-place. The only exception is Hananiah, who is clearly identified as a נביא from the very beginning and even utters a prophecy as to the fate of the exiles in Babylon (Jer 28,2-4.10-11). Conversely, Pashhur, Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemaiah are never identified as prophets and nothing of what they did or say seems to connect to prophecy in any way. They certainly antagonized the prophet Jeremiah (especially Pashhur and Shemaiah), but their contretemps are hardly developed as prophetic conflicts. The above analysis has pointed out some redactional interventions in the episodes about Pashhur, Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemaiah, most probably aimed at presenting these figures as prophesying falsehood, even though none of them did prophesy, and in Shemaiah's case (the only one whose words are recorded) did not even lie. Compared to these characters, Jeremiah's status of true prophet and mouthpiece of Yhwh certainly emerges fortified. Jeremiah in fact appears to overcome important figures, two of them connected to the temple (Pashhur and Shemaiah), although none of them was actually a prophet, let alone a false prophets, a status that has been bestowed upon them only by the work of later redactors, interested in reinforcing the role of Jeremiah as the one and only prophet of Yhwh. Hence, the accusations of prophesying falsehood against Pashhur, Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemaiah are much more stereotypical and cliché than it may

seem, as they serve the ideology of the editors. They happen to be false prophets because at some point they dared to contradict the prophet of the book, and in the eyes of the editors, that was something that only a prophet of falsehood would have done. The accusation itself was already an established part of the book, only this time, the false prophets could have a name, making the fame of the prophet Jeremiah even greater.