

Economic Motivation of Prophetic Vocation in Ancient Israel: Reflections in Nigeria

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Abstract

From the eight century BC, the phenomenon of false prophecy has become a controversial issue in Old Testament studies because; sometimes, it is very difficult to distinguish true prophecy from false. Previous studies on false prophecies have focused on its existence and consequences in ancient Israel, with little or no attention paid to the economic dimension, which is central to understanding prophetic ministry crises, in ancient Israel and the contemporary Nigerian society. This study, therefore, examined economic motivations for false prophecies in ancient Israel, with a view to establishing their reflections in the prophetic ministry in Nigerian context. The study adopted the historical and phenomenological methods. It discovered that there were false Prophets in ancient Israel and Nigerian society. Prophets in both contexts operated in groups and as such it was common to see one group making derogatory remarks about the other. This study further revealed that, some of the Prophets in ancient Israel who were part of the power structure and economically buoyant were called false Prophets by those who dissociated themselves from the reigning monarch. Therefore, economic hardships in a nation can make Prophets to compromise prophetic oracles on the altar of pecuniary benefits. The paper concluded that Prophets in Nigeria, like some Prophets in ancient Israel should condemn in clear terms, the unjust socio-political structure and elements that are responsible for the present economic predicaments. Hence, the paper recommended that Prophets in Nigeria should focus on their calling and trust in God to meet their economic needs.

Keywords: Economic Motivation, Prophetic Vocation, False Prophecy, Ancient Israel, Nigeria

Introduction

From the historical antecedent of the Israelites, the nation believed in the possibility of hearing from Yahweh through human medium called the Prophet. Prophets were Yahweh's 'fire brigade', raised up in times of spiritual

emergencies to put out spiritual fires (Palmer, 2011, p. 111). In ancient Israel, true Prophets were regarded as distinct people called to their vocation by Yahweh. The true Prophet was a person sent by Yahweh with a definite message. It is the message delivered by the Prophet that is called prophecy. The Prophets have the responsibility of delivering the will of God in particular situations to the people in form of message of rebuke, warning, encouragement and restoration (Freeman, 1968, p. 101). One of the acid tests for true prophecy is when it comes to fulfilment (Deut. 18: 20). This view is based on the claim that if a prophecy was from Yahweh, it must surely be fulfilled. This was why some of the Prophets, who delivered messages that did not come to pass were called false Prophets, who come into the prophetic vocation for pecuniary benefits (Jer. 28: 1-13). This study, therefore, examined the economic motivations for false prophecies and their effects on ancient Israel with a view to establishing their reflections in the prophetic ministry in Nigeria context. In this study, Christian clerics are regarded as prophets in the Nigerian context.

Prophets (*nevi'im*) in ancient Israel

Before discussing the phenomenon of False Prophets and prophecies in ancient Israel, it is expedient to understand who a Prophet is. Prophets were real human beings who shared their lives with their contemporaries in a cultural context. Prophets received oracles from God but spoke in the language that people could understand. The Prophets were aware of their distinct call and of belonging to a prophetic tradition. The Prophet was primarily God's spokesperson, and his/her voice was the voice of God. He/she spoke with the authority of the One who sent him. Prophets are considered as Yahweh's mouthpiece and bearers of His message. In the Bible, God gave specific instructions to prophets for specific audience. Those who disobeyed instructions from the prophet faced serious consequences, while those who obeyed were always blessed. The prophetic word has a bearing on the historical context of the Prophet, but its relevance goes far beyond what the Prophet said and how it was fulfilled (VanGemeren, 1990). It should be noted that in the early days of Israel, the called Prophets operated in groups and were attached to sanctuaries (1 Sam. 10: 5ff, 9: 18-19, 2 Sam. 19: 20ff) (Akao, 2005, p. 105).

The prophetic oracles or prophecies are God's word to each new generation in its own historical context. The Prophet was conscious during the

process of receiving and transmitting the message of God as seen when he/she is in dialogue with God. The prophets were obliged to reveal the will of God to the people. This, in most cases, came in form of instruction, admonition and exhortation, promises or stern rebukes. The prophets as it were, were the ministerial monitors of the people and the interpreters of the law (Deut. 18: 15-16). In ancient Israel, Prophets were known to have protested against mere formalism, stressed moral duty, encouraged spiritual services and promoted truth and righteousness. They had the responsibility of calling the backsliding nations to Yahweh. It was their duty to intimate the people of the future promises from God. They give their audience the picture of what the future holds. There are indications from the biblical literature that the true prophets of Yahweh in Israel and Judah typify the great coming prophet (Deut. 18:5; Acts 3:23-24), and that he was already functioning through them (I Pet. 1:11).

False Prophets in Ancient Israel

False Prophets and prophecies are inherent in any society that tolerates, believes and accepts the existence and ministry of Prophets (Sears, 2009). For this reason, the ancient Israel was not exempted from the presence and influence of false Prophets of their time (Polysti, 1982, p. 23). False Prophets compromised divine message on the altar of pecuniary benefits. Positive prophecies were the common trademarks of false Prophets. These Prophets specialized in pronouncing words of assurance and comfort to the people oblivious of their moral deficiencies. It assured the nation of divine mercies amidst blatant moral misconduct. (Quayesi-Amakye, 2018, p. 8).

A careful study of prophecy in the ancient Israel revealed the criteria for discerning the prophet of Yahweh, but Israel had difficulty in distinguishing the true prophet from the false. Prophets were false when they misled people (Deut. 13:2; 18:20; Jer. 2:8; 23:27), when their morals were loose (Jer. 23:14), or when they practiced magic and divination (Isa. 8:19; Jer. 14:14). False prophets were zealous for the preservation of the old way but refused to give in to new revelation. They were ideologists who operated from the belief that their interpretation of God's revelation through Moses was true and would always be (VanGemeran, 1996, p. 60). Obviously, this issue was a great concern to the authors of biblical literature, to the point that false prophecy was considered an offence that would attract capital punishment like any other apostate practices

(Sears, 2009).

According to Wood (1985), it is a difficult task to distinguish between true and false prophets. He asserts that “false prophesying relates itself to the national ideal independently of any spiritual quality, while the true prophesying ever kept uppermost, the spiritual conception of the national life.” (p.101). False prophets are deceivers and liars and as such worthy of death (Deuteronomy 18:20). Commenting on the activities of false Prophets in ancient Israel; Hosea 9:7-9 refers to them as fools who deeply corrupt themselves. In Jeremiah 3:13, false prophets are noted for false and shady dealings. False prophets are not sent by God. (Jer. 23:2, Isaiah 61:1). They prophesy in the name of the spirit of Baal and causes people to err (Micah 3:5). False prophets profane themselves (Hosea 9:7-9). Also, they are treacherous (Zeph. 3:4). Invariably, these Prophets condemned the life and ministry of the true Prophets in ancient Israel. (Wood, 1985, p.101) (Ezek. 13:3-6). They also claimed that, because Yahweh is against them, their activities will attract death (Yates, 1942, p.3).

Historically, the emergence of false Prophets can be traced to the era of the divided monarchy (Polysti, 1982, pp. 23-29). The picture became clearer in the pre-exilic canonical Prophets. For instance, Isaiah accused false Prophets of teaching falsehood (Isa. 9: 15); Ezekiel said they prophesy of their own inspiration (Ezek. 13: 2). As far as Micah was concerned, the false Prophets were divining for money (Micah 3: 5). Zephaniah called the false Prophets reckless and treacherous (Zeph. 3: 4). Jeremiah was most forceful and precise in his indictment of false Prophets when he said that they wilfully practiced deceit out of the deception of their mind (Jer. 23: 10). They are immoral (Jer. 23: 14) and prophesy lies, be it from auto-inspiration, self-deception or strong drink (Jer. 28: 20) (Polysti, 1982, p. 29).

Scholars are divided on the origin of the word “false” used to designate these prophets. Some scholars have suggested that prophets who call their contemporaries false prophet are being unfair (Davidson, 1955, p. 307) to them. That is, the idea is that, other groups of prophets might just as well have thought those opposed to them were false and they themselves were true. In response to this, Wood opined that whether or not the group called false is properly designated by the biblical writer will be determined by a person's opinion of the scriptures (1985, p.105). If the scriptures are taken as authoritative, then, they

are correct in referring to one group as false and the other as true. It is good to agree with Wood that the Bible is reliable and dependable. So, one should not hesitate in speaking of those prophets as indeed false (Deut. 18: 18-22; Jer. 28:9; Matt. 7: 15, 20; 1 Jn. 4: 1-2).

The question is: what are the motivations for the rise of false Prophets and prophecies in ancient Israel? To this end, three suggestions were put forward by Wood. According to him, the first was that most prophets did not get involved in ecstatic frenzy, while some did due to presumed Canaanites' influence. Thus, anyone who observed the practices of foreign nations was considered as false by other prophets. Second, though certain prophets did not receive a true word from God, they thought they did due to some unusual experience. Others however, knowing that they had not received a word from God called them fake. Last, certain prophets, under the impulse for position, reputation or monetary considerations allowed themselves to become caterers to the whims of people, especially the kings. Thus they came to lose their dedication to the true word of God and to speak out of their own minds what they knew the king or other influential person wanted to hear (Wood, 1997, p. 105).

There is no doubt however, that there are elements of truth in the above submission of Wood. There is the likelihood that some of these prophets were greatly influenced by the Canaanite's practices of ecstasy and thus contradicted the practice of Israelite prophets. It is also true that some of them may have been confused in their own thinking as to what was truly a word from God. They could have believed that they have received such oracles from God and thus began to proclaim it. Moreover, it is also possible that there could be those who defected to be king pleasers and to enjoy the ease of the court, rather than the rigours of a true prophet's life.

We may now conclude that the false Prophets were not sent by God nor were their messages from God. The case of false Prophet was so terrible that God ordered in Deuteronomy 13: 5 “that prophet shall be put to death” (Deut. 18: 20). It was with this authority that Elijah slew the 450 Prophets of Baal (Sear, 2009).

Economic Motivations for False Prophecy in Ancient Israel

It is pertinent to mention at this point that Prophets in ancient Israel were in groups or guilds (1kgs. 20:35; 2Kgs. 2:7; 4:1, 38; 6:1; 9:1). There were the

Free Prophets and the Court or Temple Prophets. The Free Prophets were not stipended because they were not considered as royal court or temple staff. The Court or Temple Prophets were part of the administrative staff of the king. In other words, they were stipended members of the royal court. (1Kgs. 18:19; 22:6). Therefore, this group of Prophets were appointed by the power that be. They were in-charge of the spiritual sector of the administration. Also, they were directly responsible to the King, and as such, the monarch demanded oracles from them whenever the need arises. The Court Prophets were more buoyant economically than the others. The other groups of Prophets always referred to some of the Court Prophets as false Prophets. They accused them of delivering fake prophecies in order to please their employer and as such keep their jobs. Examples of Court or Temple Prophets are: Nathan, Jeremiah (in the reign of Josiah, but replaced in the reign of Zedekiah), Hananiah, to mention a few. Nathan operated in the royal court of King David. It was Nathan that reprimanded David for marrying Uriah's wife after killing him. When David was planning to build a temple for God, he consulted Nathan who immediately approved the project. But at night the word of the LORD came to him that the project would be executed by the son of David, who would succeed him on the throne. Investigating this incident, critical minds have queried the initial action of Nathan as a reliable Prophet of God. The question is: was Nathan trying to tell the King what would please him like the false Prophets used to do? But some scholars conclude that Nathan's positive reply to David's desire was nothing but human error and exemplar of Prophets who acted without clear instructions from God (Sergi, 2009, p. 46).

As mentioned above by Wood, economy is a crucial factor in prophetic ministry. Our task in this segment of the study is to consider the Economic motivations for false prophecy in ancient Israel with reference to Micah 3:5, 11 and Jeremiah 28: 1-17. These passages are investigated to establish the role economy played in false prophecies in ancient Israel.

Prophet Micah prophesied from the time of Jotham (740-732 BC) to that of Hezekiah (715-686). This was the time when the neo-Assyrian empire was rising to power under the leadership of king Tiglath-Pileser III, (744-727) whose ambition was to expand the empire (VanGemeren, 1997, p.324). Micah informed his audience that Israel has broken the covenant with Yahweh and that this is the reason for reproach on the people and the land. On the Prophets,

Micah expressed Yahweh's displeasure on the way they have operated their ministries among His chosen nation.

In Micah 3:5, the Bible declares: "This is what the Lord says: As for the Prophets who lead my people astray, if one feeds them, they proclaim peace; if he does not, they prepare to wage war against him." Here Yahweh accused false Prophets of leading his people astray because of what to eat. Their main goal in the prophetic ministry is food and they use all gimmicks to achieve this objective (Awojobi, 2002, p. 41). According to Yahweh, as long as their mouth is filled, they will continue to prophesy peace, but once they suffer hunger they will declare war. To Micah, food is the reason for their involvement in prophetic ministry. The word "feeds" is always used in the Old Testament for the bite of a serpent. This is the reason why some scholars have interpreted this word to mean that their oracles are as harmful as a serpent bite. These Prophets accepted bribes given to them for the performance of their prophetic functions (Barker & Kohlenberger, 1994, p. 1473). Metaphorically, false Prophets are described as biters, signifying the deadly effects of their appetite and desire for mundane things (VanGemeran, 1997). These group of Prophets identified the divine purpose of salvation with political stability and peace in Israel, but this position is not acceptable to other Prophets who argued that the issue of divine salvation and peace could not be treated in isolation from the guilt and sins of the nation (cf. Jer. 6: 14; 14: 13; 28; Ezek 13: 16). They gave assurances that all is well (*shalom, shalom*) when nothing is well (see Jer. 6: 14; 8: 11; cf. 23: 16-29; Isa. 30: 10-11; Ezek. 13: 10-12' 20-23; Mic. 2: 6-11). Also, in Verse 11, the Prophet Micah declares: "... and her Prophets tell fortunes for money." As far as Micah was concerned, the false Prophets were divining or prophesying for money or salary. Despite the fact that it was the practice in the ancient Israel to appreciate the Prophet in cash or in kind after delivering an oracle, this group of Prophets prophesy for money.

In Jeremiah 28: 1-17, Jeremiah and Hananiah clashed because Jeremiah's oracle was against the government of the day in which Hananiah was an officer. Jeremiah was a peripheral Prophet, who came to the Temple without recourse to the Temple staff, and delivered an oracle that is capable of bringing the government of the day down, if fully fulfilled. The prompt reaction of Hananiah to Jeremiah's oracle has been interpreted to mean that he was protecting his job before the Temple authorities. As mentioned earlier, the temple Prophets were

better economically than the other group of prophets because they were on the pay roll of the government of the day. Hananiah as the leader of the temple Prophets at this time, was economically better than Jeremiah and his group because of his affiliation with the monarch of his days. As far as Jeremiah and his group are concerned, Hananiah was part of the power structures in Jerusalem that Jeremiah believed contributed to the moral depravity in Judah. Also, because they are wining and dining with the Kings, they can no longer speak the truth. Hananiah was blamed for sins similar to those committed by the kings of Judah and as such have violated the covenant stipulations. Hananiah and his group were often presented as false prophets and deceivers who claimed to prophesy in the name of Yahweh, but in actual fact, they were prophesying for financial gains. Their inspiration can be traced to the pantheons of the elemental religions of Canaan (Hue, 1993; Dempsey, 2000).

According to Jeremiah, Yahweh had not sent Hananiah (Jer. 28:15) and both the prophet and his word were a lie (Malina and Neyrey 1993, p. 37). Delivering the oracle, Jeremiah declares: "I did not send you to prophesy." That is, "I will send you away from the earth," Hananiah had announced life for Judah, but his own destiny was death (Miller, 1982, p. 27). According to Jeremiah, Hananiah had rebelled against Yahweh and so he must die (Deut. 18:20). It should be noted that Jeremiah's groups were often represented as the true prophets, who were operating their prophetic vocation under the inspiration of Yahweh. This is because; they have always interpreted Jeremiah 28 in the light of such texts as Deuteronomy 18:18-22, which provide criteria for determining true or false prophecy. To this end, some interpreters have come to believe that intermediaries or prophets who speak in the name of Yahweh and the oracle did not come true, as false prophets and false prophets shall die. Hence, the death of Hananiah was considered as a reward for false prophecy (Jer. 28: 1-17) Jeremiah further claimed that, it was typical of these Jerusalem prophets to proclaim salvation to the people and State. They were strong supporters of the political systems in place in Judah. This is clear from Jer. 23:17, where it is stated that they opposed a prophet like Jeremiah, who prophesied doom for Judah and its people. Instead of warning the people of the impending doom, they proclaimed peace. According to Thompson they "were strong adherents of the doctrine of the inviolability of Israel, the temple and Jerusalem (1980, pp. 498-499). In other words, they believed strongly in the

absolute security of Judah. This group believed “that their ecclesiastical and political institutions are immune from historical accident or disturbance, and that their territorial integrity will always be maintained” (Mekane, 1986, p. 579). They were overconfident in what they called unconditional covenant. To this, Nicholson observed that they had confused patriotism and nationalism with Yahwism (Nicholson, 1970, p. 75).

Economic Motivations for Prophecy in Nigerian Context

At the moment, Nigeria as a nation is battling with economic challenges which have affected other sectors drastically. The rate at which the Youths and potential leaders are relocating from Nigeria to developed nations of the world is very alarming. Some of the factors responsible for these are: unemployment, insecurity, inter-tribal/ethnic wars, banditries, kidnapping and so on. A number of industries in Nigeria have relocated to countries like Ghana, South Africa, Dubai and others as a result of economic challenges facing the country. Various organizations have been set up at one time or the other, with the sole aim of getting people out of poverty, all to no avail. More so, many people have become victims of Wonder Bank, MMM, Farewell to Poverty, and other so called Poverty alleviation Programmes, which instead of solving their problem, added to it (Atoyebi, 2018, p. 159).

In an attempt to find lasting solutions to the political and economic challenges the nation, Nigeria is currently facing, some Nigerian Christians have engaged in some spiritual activities like prayer and prophecies. They resolved to seek spiritual help from Prophets, Pastors and Clerics, to know what the future has in stock for them. Most of those who consult the Prophets in Nigeria appreciate them with gifts in cash and kind (Alokan, 1991, p. 92). However, there are Prophets in Nigeria that charge consultation fees from persons that desire to know the mind of God on critical issues in their lives (Awojobi, 2018, p.126). As mentioned earlier, all the clerics in Christian ministry in Nigeria are regarded as Prophets in this study. Like their counterparts in ancient Israel, they also claim to be called by God, and receive oracles or prophecies from God. Like in ancient Israel, there are true and false Prophets in Nigeria. It is commonly held in Nigeria that false Prophets are those who called themselves into Christian service for economic benefits. This group of Prophets considers the Christian ministry as a lucrative business. They sell

anointed handkerchiefs, water, and oil, at exorbitant prices to worshippers (Awojobi, 2018, p. 125). Sometimes, they deliver oracles that they have not received from God, and this is the reason why their prophecies did not come to pass most of the time. According to Ndiokwere, some of the prophets and prophetess in Nigeria are fraudulent. He stressed that they have sinister intention, and described them as liars (Ndiokwere, 1981, p. 98). Some people in Nigeria attribute proliferation of churches to the current economic hardship. It is generally claimed that some Prophets or Pastors established churches in Nigeria because they are jobless, and they think the quickest way out is to start churches. Ademiluka observed:

These sects breed people who are very money conscious. Hence quarrel over money is rampant among them. Some of their leaders are drug barons. Some of the main reason behind the establishment of these churches is materialism. Sometimes, they organize impromptu crusades where people pay for healing. In this way, Christianity is being offered for sale in the name of miracles. Immoral behaviours such as duping, raping, murder occur in these churches (2007, p.2).

It is clear from the above submission that some Prophets or Pastors establish churches for economic benefits. This creates a wrong image of the church before the society. It brings disunity and schisms to Christendom. Ademiluka further asserts that this development is a bad omen to the nation and the church. He claims that when somebody loses his job, is frustrated or is looking for money, he just goes to Bible school and thereafter starts a church. If he is unable to get members, he goes to native doctors to acquire power to perform magic (Ademiluka, 2007, p. 3). In the same vein; Yahemaka (2006) opined that “prophets establish churches for financial benefit” (p.43). According to him, they have simply turned the calling into a business venture. To Abiodun, Church is like pure water business in which a lot of the operators do not care about hygiene (2006, p. 42). In support of this view, Archbishop Okogie submitted that the way things are going; Churches will soon become big companies selling shares. Similarly, Archbishop Makinde is worried about this development but sees this as the fulfilment of scripture that in the end time, many false Prophets will arise to deceive many (2007, p. 33). He added that, the major cause of proliferation and false prophecies is the abundant poverty in the

land, which pushes people to think that they can make money by establishing churches. Some Prophets in Nigeria sometimes placed price tag on prophetic oracles received and delivered (Awojobi, 2018, p. 126).

Besides, some Nigerians from all walks of life often consult prophets in order to find out what the future holds in stock. Political leaders in Nigeria are keenly interested in predictive prophecy (Dada, 2018, p. 189). There are Prophets that are close to those in the corridor of power in Nigeria. For instance, the late Captain Christiana Abiodun Emmanuel, one of the early leaders of the prophetic movement in Nigeria and co-founder of Cherubim and Seraphim Church, was former President Shehu Shagari's Prophet. The President though a Muslim constantly consults her on any matter (Sunday Time, 1986, p. 35). Prophets in Nigeria, through prophecy have influenced government policies. A good example of this is the case of the incessant rise in the pump price of petroleum. In 2003, Prophet T.O. Obadare of Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) warned that God would remove President Olusegun Obasanjo if he continued with the harsh policy of the deregulation of the downstream sector of the petroleum industry in Nigeria (Obadare, 2003, p.3). This made the former President to rescind or modify his policies.

Furthermore, some Prophets in an attempt to be recognized by people and the government of the day have embarked on predictive prophecies which never came to fulfilment. For instance, Primate Ayodele of the INRI Evangelical Spiritual Church predicted that President Jonathan would continue to rule Nigeria till 2019 (Dada, 2018, p.191). This prophecy did not come to pass as Muhammadu Buhari was declared winner of the election. This made Nigerians to see the Prophet as fake. In another instance, Prophet Moses Olagunju, who predicted President Buhari's victory in 2015 election, said that the President would be dethroned in 2019 by former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar. According to him, "God is angry with Buhari because of his failure to alleviate the sufferings of Nigerians but adding to it... God says any party that fields Buhari for the 2019 presidential election will be fielding liability as its candidate and would make the party lose election..." (www.naija.ng/16080300-prophet-atiku-defeat-pmb-2019). This prophecy did not come through, and as a result, Nigerians labelled him a false Prophet.

Conclusion

From the examination of the economic motivations for false prophecy in ancient Israel and their reflections in Nigeria, it is quite evident that there are true and false Prophets in ancient Israel and Nigeria. The principal motivation for false prophecy in both contexts is economy. The Court Prophets by reason of their affiliation with the reigning monarchs or political office holders may compromise divine oracles for pecuniary benefits. In Nigeria, some Prophets who desire to be popular with those in the corridor of power have delivered prophetic oracles that never came to fulfilment. For the prophetic ministry to continue to be relevant in the Nigerian society, the Prophets must focus on God and not on financial gains. Prophets in Nigeria like their counterparts in ancient Israel must condemn in clear terms, the unjust social structure and elements that are responsible for the present economic predicament.

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