

PROPHETS AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE.

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Abstract

Prophets are human beings with divine call and message for a specific audience. In ancient Israel they speak on behalf of Yahweh on political, religious and social issues of their time. One of the roles of prophecy in ancient Israel was that it served as a medium for instituting social change and reform. The intention of this paper is to consider the Prophets as agents of Social Change in ancient Israel with the view of establishing parallel with the prophetic ministry in the Nigerian society. The method used is historical and theological interpretative approach. The paper reasons that there is a wide disparity between prophets in ancient Israel and the ones in Nigeria. The paper concludes that there is the need for the prophets in Nigeria to be bold, true to their calling and discharge their duty without fear or favour.

Keywords: Prophets, Agents, Social Change, Ancient Israel, Nigeria.

Introduction

Prophet is that individual who communicates the divine will to the people. Prophets in this piece are Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ called and commissioned with a definite message for humanity. The prophet is believed by his audience to have had an encounter with the supernatural or the divine and serves as an intermediary between the divinity and humanity. The Old Testament prophets played an important role in shaping the course and context of Israelite history and religion. This was evident by the involvement of prophets in social, political, religious, and economic life of the nation of Israel. Yahweh used the prophets as channels through which he communicated or disclosed his intention to the people in politics, business and interpersonal relationship (Akintola, 2008). The Prophets stand as watchmen for their nation because they could enter into the realm of the spirit to stand in the gap between the nation and God. This gave the prophets the privilege to sharpen the religious, economic, and social life of the prophet and as such they called for reform and transformation in the land (Griffin, 1997).

The thrust of this paper is to investigate how prophets in ancient Israel served as agents of Social Change with the view of establishing its relevance in Nigerian prophetic ministry.

Prophets in Ancient Israel

A Prophet in ancient Israel was a messenger of Yahweh. The Prophet speaks on behalf of Yahweh. A careful study of texts such as Exodus 7:1 and Deuteronomy 18:18 revealed that there are two elements in prophetic operations. One is passive while the other is active. The prophet receives oracles in dreams, visions or verbal communications and passes these on to the audience, either orally or visibly in prophetic actions. (cf. Num 12:6-8; Isa. 6; Jer. 1:4-10;

Eze. 3:1-4, 17). Out of the two functional elements, the most important is the passive, because it controls or regulates the active element. Without reception of oracles there is no delivery. A true prophet of Yahweh is that individual who receives oracle from him and delivers without editing. It should however be pointed out that the one who receives divine message may not necessarily be a prophet. Examples of such men include Abimelech, Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar. According to Berkhof what makes one a Prophet is divine call, the instruction received and the impetus to communicate divine oracles to his audience (Berkhof, 2000:358).

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. In ancient Israel Prophets were known to have protested against mere formalism, stressed moral duty, encourage spiritual services and promote 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 typifies the great coming Prophet (Deut. 18:5; Acts 3:23-24), and that he was already functioning through them (I Pet. 1:11).

Yahweh at one time or the other in human history had spoken through men. To the Israelites, Prophets were seen as Yahweh's mouthpiece. Prophets in ancient Israel were believed to have been called and commissioned by Yahweh to receive and deliver oracles to their contemporaries. The main task of a Prophet in ancient Israel was to communicate the mind of Yahweh to his people.

One of the issues at stake in the study of Old Testament prophecy is how does Yahweh communicate his will or mind to the Prophets? This has become necessary in the light of conflicting oracles by the Prophets in the name of Yahweh. Some scholars submitted that a true speaker of Yahweh was the person who spoke and his words come true. They support their view with the Deuteronomist criterion for true Prophets. W. A. Vangemere (1990) observed that:

The prophet (nabi) was a spokesman for God with the distinct call to be the ambassador of God. Every Prophet was "like Moses" and conformed to the seven criteria set forth in the Mosaic revelation: (1) he was an Israelite; (2) called by the Lord; and (3) empowered by the Holy Spirit; (4) he served as God's spokesperson; (5) his authority lay in speaking in the name of the Lord; (6) he was a good shepherd over God's people; and (7) he vindicated his message by signs.

It is clear from the above submission that a spokesman for Yahweh was a person who deliver to his audience verbatim what he has received from him. The Prophet is not bothered whether the oracle comes true or not. His main task was to speak as instructed. As observed earlier, true Prophets sometimes proclaimed things that did not come true. The prediction could be reversed or its fulfillment delayed so that neither the Prophet nor the hearer comes to pass in their life time. A good example was the prediction about the death of King Hezekiah in Isaiah

38:1-8. In the light of this it is appropriate to conclude that a false Prophet was that individual who was not sent by Yahweh.

In ancient Israel Prophets were considered as agents of social change. For instance, prophets like Elijah, Elisha and Jeremiah were actively involved in the socio-political life of their time. Their prophetic ministries became popular in the context of their encounters with the political and religious powers of their days (Dada, 2018: 182-183). It should be noted at this point that some scholars have classified prophets in ancient Israel into two categories. They are: central and peripheral (Lewis, 1989: 15-90). The central are those prophets that functioned within the realm of the seat of power. These Prophets have access to social power, wealth and prestige. The peripheral prophets are those individuals who are outcasts and for reasons best known to the power that be in their days have been excluded from the society of central power. A close examination of the prophetic tradition in ancient Israel revealed that Elijah, Elisha and Jeremiah were peripheral Prophets. It is evident by their constant clash with the central government and religious functionaries of their time. They attempted to influence the socio-political space of their time with predictive prophecies. They effectively challenged the kings and religious establishment in their days with the view of bringing them back to the true worship of Yahweh (Matthews 2012: 58). Elijah and Elisha were able to influence the socio-political space because the people believed in their capacity to access the supersensible realm to collect oracles from Yahweh the king of all. In the same vein, Jeremiah confronted the political and religious leaders who made life unbearable for the ordinary people in ancient Israel. Jeremiah was prophet when Judah was in crisis. Efforts were made by the powers that be to counter the prophecies of Jeremiah so as not to displace the social order (Dada 2018: 186-187).

At this juncture, it must be pointed out that Prophets did not live in isolation but earnestly yearned for the transformation of their societies. According to Kraeling, the Prophets were public men who were primarily concerned with the political and social questions of their generation. They were keenly interested in social justice as well as religious orthodoxy. They spoke vehemently against in the high places and in the administration of justice (Kraeling, 1969:40). They did not shy away from the challenges that faced the society; they were part of the solution to them.

Prophecy is a social phenomenon because it is an activity carried on among and between people within a specific society which conforms to the social norms operative of such people (Dada, A. O. 2018:179). Israelite prophecy is taken as a socio- historical phenomenon shared across various ancient cultures. Prophecy is a form of intermediation between the divine and the human (Adagbada, 2018:169). Prophecy is a divine message from God transmitted to man through his appointed human agent to aid the human persons in their search or the reality of God (Awojobi, 2018:308). A look into the social values and institutions in which the prophets lived and operated can help in the proper analysis of the socio-religious and reformatory role of prophecy (Carroll 1991: 203-204).

In ancient Israel, one of the roles of prophecy was that it served as medium of social control and change. Studies in Old Testament prophetic ministry revealed that prophecy was usually employed by the marginalized elements to influence control the socio-political space in order

to engender social change (Dada, A.O. 2018:179). Prophets were believed to have received oracles from Yahweh on the situations of things in the land. They condemned oppressive regimes and leaders, and demand a fair deal and treatment for the poor. The concern of the Prophet was some forms of social control that would lead towards social reforms, to improve the pitiable social condition of the poor in the society in which they lived.

Prophets as Agents of Social Change in Ancient Israel

Since the ancient Prophets lived in societies during their life time, their role(s) would be best understood by the societal perception of them. In the light of this the Socio-religious role of the ancient Prophets in Israel cannot be over emphasis. As mentioned earlier, a Prophet is the one who received an oracle and delivers same to his audience. A true Prophet is expected to have a sender. In ancient Israel, a prophet was a messenger of Yahweh. The Prophet does not speak until he has received a message from Yahweh. According to Whybray (1993:621), an ancient Israelite Prophet was a man or a woman believed to be recipient of divine messages through audition, vision or dream, and they passed on such messages to others by means of speech or symbolic action. Their messages were addressed to individuals, particular groups of Israelites, the whole nation or even foreign powers. A prophecy is a message received. In other words, prophecy is a pronouncement or an announcement of God's mind by a divinely selected vessel. Prophecy is a divine message from God transmitted to man through his appointed human agent to aid the human person in their search of the reality of God (Awojobi, 2018:308). Prophecy is forth telling and fore telling. Forth telling deals with preaching, teaching and encouraging while fore telling deals with predictions of the future. By this definition of prophecy, every preacher is a Prophet.

In ancient Israel, Prophets were considered as agents of social change. They did not live in isolation but earnestly yearned for the transformation of their societies. They did not shy away from the challenges that faced the society; rather they were part of the solution to them. Prophets in ancient Israel addressed issues such as injustice, oppression of the poor by the rich, moral decadence, idolatry and others. Oracles were constantly delivered by the Prophets on such matters. The Prophets demanded repentance from the people concerned. They (the prophets) were considered by the king as the advocates of the poor. Prophets in ancient Israel were also social critics. They considered moral behaviour within a given society and the world at large central in complying with the wishes of Yahweh. For instance in the Judeo – Christian tradition, prophetic teachings are considered as attempt to denounce the injustices practiced against the weak and the powerless. (Sheppards & Herbrech Tsmeier, 1993:10). The Prophets condemned Israel for exploiting the poor and oppressing the weak. They (the Prophets) championed the campaign for the restoration of morality in the nation. As far as the Prophets were concerned, Israel was “guilty of denying justice to those who have been victimized and tolerating incest. The nation has given itself over to luxury, oppression, perversion of justice, cruelty, profanity, and eye-service.” (Digangi, 1984:38).

For instance, Prophet Amos spoke against Injustice in his days. Amos was displeased with the situation of the poor in Israel. Amos maintained that the Judges in Israel perverse justice (Amos 2:6). Amos declared that: “they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoe.” This is an indication that the judges after being bribed by the wealthy in the society deliver judgment against the innocent and poor people who have nothing to bribe the judge

with. Etymologically speaking the Hebrew word used for the poor is *ebyon*. This word is used for people who are virtually destitute. They are completely dependent on others for their daily survival. Unlike the western world that stresses the economic aspect of poverty, the Ancient Near East understood poverty in the context of security and social status made a person rich and the absence of these factors made a person poor.

According to Finley (2015:1), Amos' message on the issue of social justice can be seen under three categories: the nature of God, the role of individual and the role of social system. The book of Amos revealed the importance God attached to justice. God is the author of justice.

Prophet Amos summed it up when he declared:

Thus says the Lord ... I will not turn away their punishment; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes. They pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor, and turn aside the way of the meek. A man and his father will go into the same maid to profane my holy name. They laid themselves down upon clothes laid to pledge by every altar, and they drank the wine of the condemned in the house of their gods (Amos 2:6-8).

This Prophets cried against the extravagance of the rich who have mansions, summer houses and winter houses, but who were insensitive to the needs of the homeless and the destitute among them. They preached against self-indulgence of intemperate women, whose insatiable appetites push their husband to earn more – even if it means oppressing the poor and crushing the needy.

The ancient Israelite Prophets spoke against the perversion of justice through bribery and intimidation, aggravating the plight of the widows and the orphans. The nation was accused of complacency in Zion and indulging themselves in extravagant life style while others suffer hunger and thirst on the edge of the society. They condemned the advancement of business by force and fraud, using false weights and measures, cheating the consumers, all for their selfish struggle to amass wealth. The Prophets called the nation to an ideal moral order so as to escape God's judgment (Digangi, 1984:37).

The Nigerian Experience

The situation in ancient Israel in the days of the Prophets is similar to the Nigerian society today and thus makes the message of the Old Testament relevant for the contemporary Nigerian society. For instance, Israel experienced tremendous economic development in the 8th century BCE but it entered a state of social morass leading to gross abuses, oppression and exploitation of the poor and a state of gross injustice in the land. In the same vein, Nigeria by reason of oil boom experienced tremendous riches but today corruption, tribalism, nepotism and governmental ineptitude set in for our nation.

The crux of the matter is that the result of corruption in Nigeria is exploitation of the poor and the underprivileged. Corruption and poor economic management has brought about all forms of social injustice. Unemployment rate has gone up astronomically; many of Nigeria's citizens are deprived of good education, housing good roads, potable water and electricity. Nigeria has grown an exploitative class which is immoral, greedy, covetous and corrupt. The gap

between the rich and the poor are so widening and social injustices are not abating. There is exploitation and economic oppression in contemporary Nigeria, as it was in Israel. There is a wide disparity between the rich and the poor and this is the reason the nation is being thrown into its current economic, political and social mess. It appears that the contemporary Nigerian Prophets lack vibrancy and boldness. Some religious leaders in Nigeria are in ministry because of what they will eat. They have become acquiesced to the system and dine with the rich and government leaders. Like Amaziah, they have become part of the corrupt system and have been integrated into the cult of the rich, the powerful and political leaders and have lost the courage to confront the corrupt political leaders in Nigeria (Adebo 2018:46).

Also, a Prophet in ancient Israel was an individual called by Yahweh. Most Prophets in ancient Israel had evidence of divine call before operating in the prophetic office. According to Folarin (1994) some persons came to the prophetic ministry in Nigeria due to unemployment and a craze for supernatural and political power. At times some individuals became Prophets through hereditary conferment of prophetic powers. Emmanuel (2011) opined that some of the Prophets in Nigeria do not have the evidence of divine call. Prophets in this category were called by self, greed, and inordinate ambition to acquire wealth overnight. This has led to competition, unhealthy rivalry and corruption of all sorts in Christian service. This type of Prophets delivers oracles without divine message; they are materialistic, craze for title and engage in unethical activities (Ejizu, 2008).

In Nigeria today, there are many people who claimed to have been called to the prophetic ministry. All the time in Nigeria there is billboards, posters and hand bills advertising Prophets and their programmes. It appears today that an average Pastor in Nigeria is a Prophet. According to Ejikenkeonye (2007) the proliferation of prophets in Nigeria today in does not translate into godly living. This assertion was corroborated by Oluwawunsi, Bongotons and Ajiboye (2014) when they say that the Prophets in Nigeria are very corrupt. They maintained that their corrupt practices include miracle for sale; prophecy for sale; collection of unscriptural offerings; prayer contractors; diversion of church funds into personal accounts; sale of religious title and offices; sexual immorality; deception of people in the name of God; use of satanic power to do miracles, etc.

In Nigeria today, prophecy has been privatized, commercialized, highly merchandized as well as politicized. Some Nigerian Prophets have acquired private jets, helicopters, mansions while their members are living in abject poverty. Most of these Prophets are prosperity conscious rather than holiness conscious. Sopuru (2008) observed that the comportment and character of these Prophets encourage criminality and gangsterism. Ukpong (2013) corroborated this assertion when he declared that fraud, embezzlement and misappropriation of funds characterized some Prophets. Taiye (2010) opined that flattery stories and deceptions are the characteristics of the Nigerian Prophets. Similarly, Uzukwu (1996) claimed that Nigerian Prophets exercise tyrannical authority over their followers. Spiritual gifts are now used for self-aggrandizement by some of these Prophets (Taiye 2010). However, it is important to note that there are prophets in Nigeria that genuinely called, sincere, and maintaining a high standard of Christian life.

The prophetic ministry of the church in Nigeria has complicated the issue. As mentioned earlier, prophecy is forth telling and fore telling. Forth-telling is preaching, exhortation and counseling while fore-telling is prediction of the future. According to Dada the understanding of many Nigerian Christians and non-Christians of prophecy is in relation to prediction of future events (Dada 2018:188). It is a common practice in Nigeria to see people consulting Prophets to know what the future holds for them. Even political leaders are interested in predictive Prophecy. The popularity of predictive prophecies in the Nigerian society can be based on the fact that Africans are often eager to find out what the future holds for them.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to mention that there are Prophets in Nigeria that have taken it upon themselves to defend the defenseless and the vulnerable people. They confront leaders through their sermons and electronic media. Bishop Bolanle Gbonigi expressed his disapproval of the military administration of late Sanni Abacha. Gbonigi was undaunted and never felt intimidated in spite of threats by the military. Recently on President Buhari's foreign trips, Gbonigi counseled Buhari to stay more at home to attend to pressing national issues. He also accused the President of showing a lackadaisical attitude towards the activities of the herdsmen. Gbonigi condemned the proposal to establish grazing reserves in the South. On federal appointments, he said that the Southern part of the country was marginalized (Gbonigi 2016, www.punchng.com)

The current President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) spoke against the perceived selected fight against corruption, Boko Haram insurgency, incessant attacks by Fulani Herdsmen and killing of Christian in Southern Kaduna. Bishop David Oyedepo has radically opposed to any perceived attempt to Islamise Nigeria and attack on Christians. He declared that God has sent him to warn the nation and her leaders. He maintained that the wickedness of the wicked will fall on their head (Oyedepo 2018. www.vanguardng.com)

Also, prophetic oracles have the capacity of regulating and controlling human behavior. Sometimes those involved in vices have turned a new leaf to avert predicted calamities by the prophets. Robbers, murderers, thieves and the likes have changed from their wicked ways by reasons of specific predictions on the consequence of their action. Thus, prophecies serve as a way of controlling and regulating human behavior.

Furthermore, Nigeria with its array of ministers, Pastors, Priests, Prophets' Apostles who claim to speak on behalf of God, would have seen church leaders who would have been able to speak boldly against the current situation of injustice in Nigeria but the reverse is the case. As mentioned previously, prophets in ancient Israel like Amos, Jeremiah, Elijah, Micah and a host of others championed fight against corruption, injustice and the likes. But it is difficult to see Prophets in Nigeria raise their force against corrupt leaders in our society. Instead of rebuking corrupt leaders, some even praise them in the public. Some of the Nigerian Prophets are either fearful or have been bought over but the powers that be. In an attempt to please those in authority some gave prophecies that never came to pass. For instance, in the build up to the 2015 presidential elections different prophets predicted the outcome of the elections. Popular among them was Prophet primate Elijah Ayodele of the INRI Evangelical Spiritual Church, who predicted that the incumbent President, Goodluck Jonathan would continue to rule till 2019 but this, did not come to pass because it was Muhammadu Buhari that won the

election. Before the Nigerian election in 2019 some prophets predicted that will not return to power. Prominent among them was Prophet Moses Olagunju who predicted that Muhammadu Buhari will be dethrone in 2019 by Atiku Abubakar because he has failed to alleviate the sufferings of Nigerians but it was Buhari that won the election not Atiku(www.naija.ng/16080300-prophet-atiku-defeat-pmb-2019).

Conclusion

It is clear from our study that Prophets in ancient Israel were agents of social change. This is evident in the way they fight against and corrupt leaders and system. They boldly address the issues of injustice in the society in which they lived. They were considered by their audience as the mouthpiece of Yahweh and as such their oracle were accorded respect. However, in Nigeria today the social economic, political and religious sphere of the country have been bedeviled by numerous social vices such as corruption in both public and private places, poverty, which has propelled widened class difference in the society, manipulation, distortion and perversion of justice in favour of the wealthy and to the detriment of the less privileged. Worse still, the prophets that suppose to serve as an example of morality and champion the course of social justice are enmeshed in all kinds of corruption, ritual practice and all forms of social injustice. Preachers in Nigeria like the Prophets in ancient Israel must condemn in clear terms the unjust social structure and elements that are responsible for the present economic and political predicament in our nation.

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