

FALSE PROPHETISM IN NIGERIA: EFFECT ON THE CREDIBILITY OF THE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The study examined false prophets and the derogatory effect of their prophecies on the Ecclesial communities in Nigeria. The qualitative phenomenological method of research was adopted by the work. The study observes that in Nigeria today, there is upsurge of false prophets who claim to be God's mouth-piece. However, a careful look at their activities which range from false prophecies to even threats to many who would not yield to their silly pranks reveals that they are not actually who they claim to be. These false prophets prophesy peace when there is none, prosperity when people are living in abject poverty, encourage evil by telling the perpetrators of such evils that all is well. They tell people what they want to hear in order to gain cheap popularity and amass wealth. Their prophecy factories are multiplying on daily basis in the streets of Nigerian cities yet, evil is on the increase because these prophets are not condemning it and warning perpetrators to repent. Does it mean that God is not interested in warning Nigerians to turn away from evil anymore? With their teachings on prosperity which makes being wealthy a must, many people have been encouraged into dubious means of making money without any element of fear. It was discovered in this study that many people claim divine calling to prophetic office in order to have ends meet as a result of economic hardship and unemployment. How this phenomenon negatively affects the society especially the image of the Church in Nigeria therefore is the thrust of this paper. The study concludes that the Nigerian government should try and make job opportunities available to the teeming Nigerian youths to combat the problem of unemployment as lack of employment in the country is a possible precipitant for false prophetism. This would undoubtedly curtail the excesses of the millions of revelation claimers in Nigeria and restore spiritual sanctity to the Ecclesial communities.

Introduction

The rate at which prophecies are ravaging the Nigerian society is so alarming. Today, Nigerians are beginning to see more prophecy being misused and more falsification than ever before. Prophecy has become a profession for a lot of people who claim to be God's representatives and say, "thus says the Lord". Most of their pronouncements do not come to pass exactly as proclaimed, an indication that they are not sent by God. These deceivers are re-inventing prophetic meaning faster than it can be countered with correct understanding.

Many Nigerians today have been deceived by these false prophets whose prophecies are untruthful. Lindsay (2001) refers to the prophecies of these false prophets as, “Prophecies of seducing spirits” (p. 367). The teachings and prophecies of these false prophets are so misleading that many have gone astray. The damaging effect is that the spiritual walk and growth of many hearers have diminished. They teach that no evil will come upon the Church because it will be raptured off irrespective of what she does; they teach that everybody must be wealthy and this has led some into dubious means of making money since the matter of being rich is a must.

These false prophets are not interested in God’s warning to Nigerians to turn from evil ways, rather they encourage evil, saying all is well. They are always concerned with what they would get from the people and the means of achieving their goals often involve performing great signs and wonders, probably with black powers to get the people amazed and thereby get them deceived and exploited. They are very much unlike the biblical or Israel’s true prophets who would always speak the truth, caring less whose Ox is gored and ready to confront the people, even the ruling class with God’s warnings to turn from evil ways or face the wrath of God. They pay no attention to the true word of God and so they are responsible for the weakened spiritual condition of the people within their Churches. In spite of the fact that various prophetic ministries have sprung up in Nigeria like dandelions in the spring, evil is on the increase at various levels in the society as Abogunrin (1994) affirms that:

The fact that immorality permeates the Nigeria society today cannot be doubted. The existence of corruption in various stages of development is well-known. Bribery, corruption, embezzlement of public funds, acts of violence, favouritism, stealing and daylight robbery, oppression and exploitation of the poor, are prevalent in today’s Nigeria, yet, there are “prophets” and “pastors” claiming all is well. (p. 16).

Suffice it to say that false prophetism is antithetical to the objective of the prophetic office which according to Youngblood (1995) is to teach, reprove and correct in righteousness.

Conceptual Framework

A number of concepts came to mind in this work as it deals with false prophetism in contemporary Nigeria. Prophetism according to Hastings (1988) is the office and person of the prophet, the process and practice of prophecy. It is all about the prophetic character, function and authority of, or the system, practice and doctrine of inspired teaching or prophesying. It includes the behaviour of a prophet.

Scholars have made efforts to distinguish between prophetism and other related concepts like divination, occultism, magic, sorcery, fortune-telling, and witchcraft. Youngblood (1995) sees prophetism as an act of religion which is made possible only by the supernatural operation of God through the Holy Spirit. For him, divination, occult, magic, sorcery, fortune-telling and witchcraft all fall in the same category of evil practices under the control of evil spirits which were common among the pagan nations of the ancient world. He said, “Such practices under the control of evil spirits were expressly forbidden by the law of Moses (Deut. 18:10-11)” (p. 787). In an attempt to make this distinction more explicit, Menezes (2002), though sees prophetism and divination as being synonymous, draws a line of demarcation between the two concepts

when he said, “though ‘a diviner’ and ‘a prophet’ are synonymous, the former term is never applied to genuine prophets of Yahweh” (p. 25). For him, while prophetism as an act of religion involves the submission of the prophet to God, occultism as an act of magic involves the use of certain medium to manipulate God.

According to Uffenheimer (1999), a prophet is one who stands before God, attentive, waiting to hear God’s message and ready to go and deliver the message when he hears it. Thus, as collaborated by Obielosi (2012), a prophet is not only one who foretells the future but also one who speaks in the name of God and one who stands in front of an audience to address it. It would be important to know that a prophet is not expected to speak when God has not spoken because there is the tendency to speak something different or contrary to what God has in mind to tell His people. When a revelation claimer prophesies when God has not spoken to him, he cannot be regarded as a true prophet of God. It is in this sense that Martins (2001) said:

Many people among those who claim to be God’s messengers or mouthpiece have not stood attentively before God to hear from Him what to tell His people. Hence, they have spoken their own learned sweet words which make them false prophets. (p. 64).

The true prophet has the privilege to receive visions and words as wonderful gifts from God and to be under divine obligation to proclaim them as they are. According to Umeanolue (2014), “Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets received the word of Yahweh and saw visions” (p. 27). Vision, according to Strong (2001) signifies a means of divine revelation. According to Youngblood (2005) the call of the prophet requires that he not be intimidated or threatened by his audience (Jer. 1:7-8; Ezek. 2:6). The implication is that even when the prophet’s revelation from God requires a face to face confrontation with a despot, an unsympathetic or even antagonistic audience, he has no excuse than to deliver the message to whoever it is meant for. He has no business to pamper anyone or audience in order to get personal fame or material gains. He is not the one who represents a family, community, tribal or national constituency. It is in this light that Lindsay (2001) asserts, “Prophets are God-called, not man-chosen” (p. 329).

As regards prophecy, it is the divine message that the prophet conveys. This message most often could cover the past, present and future events or situations. According to Fisher (2007), true prophecy is only brought by the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth. Price (2006) said, “Prophecy is an inspired communication from God” (p. 396). From the biblical perspective, prophecy is regarded as an inspired word (message) from God through a prepared and sanctified vessel (a prophet). The message that the prophet conveys is not his message, it is God’s message delivered through the prophet. Since the message is not the prophet’s message, the responsibility for the consequences or the impact lies with God, not the prophet. To this end, Hill (1989) said:

The prophet is God’s messenger whose task is to deliver whatever God said to him. He is not simply a holy man, nor a man with a mission to reform the world or to accomplish any particular task of religious teaching or leadership. The prophet is simply a mouthpiece. (p. 25).

The prophet, therefore, must be one who is ready to deliver the full uncorrupted message from God as he hears it. He cannot lower his standard to please the people to whom the message is meant irrespective of their status or class. He must be bold and courageous and refuse to compromise or show undue respect for personal gains at the expense of God's message given to him to deliver. Hill (1989) enumerates a number of characteristics which enable one to describe a person as prophetic, for him these could be used as the criteria for testing the veracity of claimants of revelations: They do not make up their own speeches, they simply relay the words that they had been given. This can be verified by checking the word they speak whether they correspond with the Word of God; they do not give voice to their own ideas, they must be under the direction of the Spirit of God who orders their actions. This could be verified by the disposition of the character of the prophet.

The task of the prophets was to know the will of God so that they could convey it to the people or nation. Their ministry consisted in handling revelation, that is, the knowledge that God revealed to them. As regards the functions of a prophet, Youngblood (1995) affirms that:

The main role of the prophet was to bear God's word for the purpose of teaching, reproving, correcting in righteousness. Whether warning of impending danger or disclosing God's will to the people, they were similar in function to the modern preacher in the Church. Prophets were referred to as messengers of the Lord. (p. 1036).

Reasons for the Emergence of Prophetism in Israel

The issue as regards why prophets and prophecy in Israel may not be effectively treated in isolation from its origin which, according to theologians, is based on two worldviews (the conservative and liberal). For the conservatives, who believe that the act of prophecy was bestowed directly by Yahweh on the Old Testament prophets (cf. Joel 2), rather than copied from other people, what led to prophetism in the Old Testament was the inability of the priests to administer the covenant law in Israel. This school of thought traces the beginning of prophetism in Israel to the Mosaic era and according to Vawter (1970), there is no reason to reject this tradition. It is in this vein that Folarin (2004) asserts that "Old Testament prophecy receives its normative form in the life and person of Moses who constituted a standard of comparison for all future prophets" (p. 15).

According to Cohen (1928), while the priest was often seen primarily as the mediator between the people and God in the temple sacrifices, his larger duty was to teach God's law to the people (Lev.10:11; Ezra 7:10; Deut.33:10)" (p. 219). In Israel's history, however, the priests themselves often became corrupt and turned away from God, leading the people in the worship of idols (cf. Exod. 32:4-9). Prophets arose when the priests failed to teach God's law to the people. For instance, God raised the young prophet Samuel in Israel because the high priest Eli had failed to teach God's law to his children (1 Sam. 3:1-13).

One of Israel's greatest evils in disobeying Yahweh's law came in forsaking God's structure for living in the community as a distinct and holy people of God during the period of the kings. Ugwueye (2002) asserts that, "Israel's original covenant with Yahweh allowed no class distinction; a covenant faith in one God included the concept

of the brotherhood of all Israelites. (p. 38). In Israelites history, however, concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger in the land was replaced by oppression. Business practices overturned God's standard so that extortion, taking of bribes, and dishonest gain became common place. Leaders used power to destroy lives, and religious leaders despised God's holy things. Suffice it to say that the inability of the priests and kings in Israel to administer God' law and justice which was a very important aspect of God's law was the reason behind the emergence of prophetism in Israel.

Precipitants of False Prophetism in Nigeria

There is no gainsaying that Nigeria is faced with the problem of unemployment in the country. Many of the Nigerian teeming youths are rooming the streets because of lack of government employment. In a bid to have ends meet, they claim divine calling to pastoral and prophetic offices since there seems to be no one to question such a step to survival. In the light of this, prophetic Churches are then opened where prophecies and other religious-related elements are commercialized in order to earn a living. Nwadiakor (2015) affirm:

The problem of unemployment in Nigeria today is one of the most banal facts that have led to the proliferation of Pentecostal groups. Many unemployed youths have resorted to opening of Churches in every nook and cranny of the country in order to make ends meet. The net result of all these is inevitable commercialization of the gospel. (p. 1281).

Economic hardship and the quest for fame and quick riches have also been cited by many as precipitants for the rise of false prophetism in Nigeria.

The Bible and Identities of Some True and False Prophets

Throughout history, people have claimed to be prophets sent with divine messages. Various religions including Judaism, Islam, Christianity and others have had prophets. An important biblical identity of a true prophet is found in a statement from God to the ancient Israelites through Moses: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command Him" (Deut. 18:18-19). God was foretelling that, like Moses, Jesus Christ would come as a true prophet and God would speak through Him. The Bible explains that, in addition to true prophets, there would also be false prophets who would claim to speak God's words or who would teach errors, using His name and throughout the centuries, numerous false prophets have risen because of their own desires. In this section, therefore, some biblical identities of true and false prophets shall be looked at briefly.

Amos

Amos was one of the biblical prophets that received the identity of a true prophet. He came from Tekoa, a small village of about nine kilometres South of Jerusalem, lying in the desert between Bethlehem and the Dead Sea. He was a poor herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees living among the herdsmen of Tekoa. Okwesili (2001) said "He raised a special breed of fine-wooled sheep, and the sycamore figs; the product of his farm constituted an article of diet chiefly among the poor" (p. 57). From this extremely poor background of Amos stood the wealthy and prosperous Samaria, Bethel and Dan (where he used to sell his products). According to Ugwueye (2002), this

prosperity brought all kinds of social disintegration and moral decay in both Israel and Judah and it was to these evils that Amos directed his oracles. Amos was filled with furious indignation against Israel irrespective of the rich and ruling class but not so much for her wealth and prosperity as for her evil practices which were beyond remedy. This is very much unlike the revelation claimers in Nigeria today.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah is another biblical identity of a true prophet. He was a major prophet during the decline and fall of the Southern kingdom of Judah and author of the book of Jeremiah. According to Ackroyd (1968), Jeremiah's messages are of both doom and hope. Under the prophet's message of doom, issues of Judah's apostasy, the old covenant, and judgment were taught by Jeremiah. Similarly, under the message of hope, he referred to restoration, the new covenant and the Messianic hope. Most of the prophecies in Nigeria today, however do not contain the messages of doom and God's wrath, considering the evils that are perpetrated in the country. They are all about hope and peace even when there is no peace.

Micaiah

Although Micaiah was a non-literary prophet, he was a loyal Yahwist who had earned the hatred of King Ahab because of his truthfulness. Ugwueye (2002) asserts that "After the manner of Elijah, Micaiah fits the definition of a true prophet given by Jeremiah (Jer.28:8-9)" (p. 34). Micaiah predicted the death of King Ahab of Israel in the battle against the Syrians at Ramoth Gilead (1 Kgs.22:8-28; 2 Chron.18:7-27). This was against what the ears of the despotic Ahab itches to hear. Micaiah's prophecy was contrary to that of about 400 prophets, apparently all in Ahab's employment who unanimously predicted the King's victory. Ahab commanded that Micaiah be put into prison until the king's victorious return from Ramoth Gilead. Then Micaiah said, "If you ever return...the Lord has not spoken by me" (1 Kgs.22:28; 2 Chron.18:27). Ahab did not return; he died at Ramoth Gilead, just as Micaiah had prophesied. In other words, the Lord had spoken by him, one of the things that justify a true prophet of God. When will the Nigerian so-called prophets have such boldness to prophecy such truth to the despots like Ahab in the country?

Balaam

Balaam was a true biblical identity of a false prophet. Youngblood (1995) described Balaam as "a magician or soothsayer who was summoned by the Moabite king, Balak to curse the Israelites because they entered Canaan (Num.22:5-24:25; Deut.23:4-5)" (p. 153). Balaam clearly had the reputation of being able to successfully bless or curse people. Apparently, this ability was based on witchcraft. Furthermore, king Balak assumed him to be one who practiced magic, as his messengers brought with them a "diviner's fee" to give to Balaam if he would agree to curse Israel (Num.22:7). And the scriptural account plainly tells us that Balaam had sought to use "sorcery" (Num.24:1).

Faithful prophets of God do not practice sorcery or take diviner's fees. They are not paid fees for faithfully delivering messages from God. With this background in mind, Balaam undoubtedly falls within the category of false prophets.

Zedekiah

Zedekiah is another true biblical identity of a false prophet. He misled King Ahab of Israel by advising him to attack the Syrian army at Ramoth Gilead (1 Kgs.22:11). Zedekiah's flattery and unfounded optimism proved to be lies; the king was mortally wounded in the battle.

Hananiah

According to Jeremiah 23:16, a prophet who prophesies out of his own mind is not a true prophet but a fake one. An example of such a prophet who prophesied out of his own mind is found in Jeremiah 28. Hananiah spoke from his own mind what was in flat contradiction to what Jeremiah had predicted in chapters 26 and 27.

Identifying Some False Prophetism in Nigeria

Nigeria is blessed with great men of God who are true to their calling and exhibit heavenly wisdom. However, a lot of lies had been used to defame God. This is what happens when mortal men claim to hear from God when in reality, they hallucinate and lie indiscriminately in the name of God to deceive people to achieve their personal goals like mere businessmen. How then can one identify such claimers of revelations from God in a society like Nigeria that is infected by millions of these so-called prophets? One of the basic ways to proffer the answer to the question of identifying false prophets in Nigeria is to study the activities which include the prophecies of these prophets whether they are in line with the word of God. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus said "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Matt.7:16). In view of this, Pack (2012) asserts:

The key to identifying counterfeit money is to study the real money. The more you study the real money, the easier it will be for you to spot fakes. In the same way, the more you study the Bible – God's true and perfect word, the easier it will be for you to spot fake prophets. (p. 101).

In other words, the utterances or prophecies of these so-called prophets should be weighed in line with the biblical standard for testing the veracity or authority of the prophet.

Another mark by which a false prophet can be identified is what we refer to as "failed prophecy". Youngblood (1995) affirms "But fulfillment was, in fact the test of a prophet's genuineness (Deut. 18:20-22)" (p. 1036). This was collaborated by Umeanolue (2014) who said "The fulfillment of a prophecy is the mark of a true prophet" (p. 28). If a prophecy is not conditional, if it fails in fulfillment, that prophecy is false. For instance, if a prophet predicts that Mr. Odjugo Okoro's trial in 2014 would produce a guilty verdict, and that race riots would ensue as a result, and the verdict comes back not guilty and there are, of course, no race riots, this is a failed prophecy, disproving the genuineness of the prophet. This is the main idea found in Deuteronomy 18:21-22. According to Clements (2002), this is the simplest and most famous way of identifying a false prophet. In the light of this, Pack (2012) said:

If a man predicts an earthquake in 1994, or any other major event for a specific date, and it occurs even a few hours into the next day, and this happened with the one claiming to be a prophet, this is a failed prophecy, disproving the prophet's authority! Close is not good enough. (p. 48).

Following this stand, it would not be wrong to say that some prophets in Nigeria who have made public predictions with the prophetic oracle, “Thus says the Lord” in the past, which are yet to find fulfillment in the eyes of Nigerians fall into the category of false prophets. For instance, a renowned Prophet in Lagos, Nigeria prophesied about the over 200 school girls that were kidnapped by Boko Haram in April, 2014 thus: “Unless I am not called by God. I place my career and calling on the line, that these 200 plus school children kidnapped have to be released immediately, unharmed and unhurt”. Over a year later, these school children remained captive, with some possibly converted to Islam, and carrying out terrorists’ missions. He also prophesied that the missing Malaysia Airline would be found in 2014. However, observations have shown that all these prophecies made in 2014 never found their fulfillment in the eyes of Nigerians within the period predicted by this man of God.

A close look at the predictions of most of the prophets in Nigeria concerning political elections which had failed in fulfillment can help in identifying fakes among them as Olarewaju (2014) said, “There has been prophecies with political undertone, that were highlighted by the mass media which had failed in fulfillment; and these has made a lot of people to cast doubt on the prophetic ministries of some Churches” (p. 36). Another prophecy worthy of mention which can be regarded as failed prophecy is that of one of the most popular men of God with his prophetic ministry’s headquarters in Abuja. Before the 2015 presidential election, he prophesied thus:

No matter how powerful or well-organized the 2015 presidential election is, it will be faulted. I am not a politician nor belonging to any political party, I am just speaking God’s mind. The person sitting on the seat might not be perfect, but he will retain the seat. It is not guess work.

At the end of the said election, however, the person sitting on the seat as at the time of this prophecy, believed to be the then president Goodluck Ebele Jonathan never retained the seat as prophesied by him. A similar case of series of prophecies whose fulfillments Nigerians are still waiting to see includes those of another popular prophet with ministerial headquarters in Auchi. This Prophet is one of the most respected prophets in Nigeria and he had so much to say about the 2015 general elections in his prophecies released at the beginning of the year 2015 as follow:

I see President Goodluck Jonathan coming back but troubles; El Rufai should go and sit down, for abusing Jesus, he will not win Kaduna election; 2015 presidential election will be rigged, marred with violence and end up in court case; Presidential election inconclusive, yet Jonathan declared winner, APC pray!

All these prophecies with political undertones can be viewed as money and fame-making ventures. Being money and fame conscious are some of the characteristics of false prophets as Folarin (2004) affirms “The false prophets are popularity minded, they seek recognitions of men, which is why they boast and make much noise about their deeds and advertise their miracles and ministries on the radio, television and internet” (p. 18).

The main reason for advertising their prophetic ministries, prophecies and miracles on the mass media is to gain more followers and make more money from them through “the Sowing of Seeds” on the account of “what the Lord has done”. This is the main idea behind the rational choice theory which is built around the market theory of Kalu (2008) which sees the religious space as being similar to the market place where religious elements like the word of God, miracles and prophecies are sold in Ecclesial communities like market commodities in business centres. These prophets therefore act like businessmen who establish their firm (prophetic ministries) where they produce their products (prophecies) and sell to consumers (converts) with sowing of seeds as means of exchange.

Effect of False Prophetism on Ecclesial Communities in Nigeria

False prophetism has negative effect on the image or credibility of the Ecclesial communities in Nigeria. The phenomenon, to a very large extent has made prophetism in Nigeria to become no more an act of spirituality, where a man receives a message from God and deliver same, irrespective of the nature of the message and whoever it is meant for, but a means by which those who claim to be God’s mouth piece earns a living. This act has made the word of God to become like a market commodity that is exchanged or sold for money. Prophetic ministries are now being regarded as mere business centres instead of God’s house. What a derogatory nomenclature! The phenomenon of false prophetism has therefore defamed God. When God even reveals a word to some true prophets now, they are doubted by some critical minds as a result of false prophetism which is ravaging the society. This act has therefore diminished the spiritual walk of many well-meaning Nigerians including Christians.

Many Nigerians have become victims of false prophetic endeavors. Some families had been torn apart as false prophets accuse even innocent loved ones as being responsible for one’s ordeals, all in order to subtly make money. Suffice it to say that false prophetism is one of the means of encouraging and promoting commercialization of the gospel in Ecclesial communities. Commerce According to Abioje (2011) is believed to be one of the most mundane human activities. It appears contradictory, if not outrightly negative to Prophetism, an act of spirituality which evokes the idea of the supernatural. When prophecies are sold for money as it is in many of the Ecclesial communities in Nigeria today, the Church is profaned. Her credibility is derogated.

Conclusion

Frankly speaking, the act of false prophetism in Ecclesia communities in Nigeria has done more harm than good to the Church and society. This phenomenon promotes materialism and profanity. It is very obvious that false prophetism is antithetical to spirituality which is the main focus of the Church. Its prevalence has therefore left a demoralizing effect that derogates the credibility of the Ecclesial communities in Nigeria. This paper therefore seriously advice that people should closely examine prophecies of revelation claimers in Nigeria before accepting them in order not to become victims of false prophetism and restore the credibility of the Church and the value of Christianity. Also, the Nigerian government should try and make job opportunities available to the teeming youths since unemployment and economic hardship are among the precipitants of false prophetism.

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