Phenomenological Approaches to Religion and Spirituality

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Chapter 4
Reception of Prophetic Oracles in Ancient Israel and the Nigerian Context

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ABSTRACT

Scholars in biblical studies are divided into camps on the source(s) of prophetic oracles by prophets in ancient Israel and contemporary Nigerian society. This is because the prophets at one time or the other labeled one another true or false prophets based on the claim that the oracles of some of their colleagues did not come from God. Biblically speaking, an oracle is a divine message to a person or a group of persons through an appointed person. The thrust of the chapter is to investigate the source(s) of prophetic oracles in ancient Israel with the view of establishing its parallel in the prophetic ministry in the contemporary Nigerian society. Historical method was used for the research. It was discovered that prophets in both contexts claimed to have received their oracles from Yahweh. Also, true and false prophets are found in both contexts. Other sources of prophetic oracles are Satan, self, and circumstances. It is crucial that a prophet as God's mouthpiece receives his oracles from God before delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Prophecy is communication between God and Man. God was always eager to disclose something of himself, his will or his ways to his people, as they also were willing to receive from him. The channels through which God communicate his mind to

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humans are the prophets. Prophecy is a divine message from God transmitted to humans through his appointed human agent called prophets. Prophecy cut across all the religions in the world. In ancient Israel, the prophets do not belong to the same group and this is one of the reasons for conflict among them. They attack one another openly (Jer. 28:1-13). They inform the audience that some prophets were not called by Yahweh and as such God is not the source of their oracles. The question is: how do we differentiate between oracles that came from God and the one that did not come from God? This paper focus primarily on how prophets receive oracles. The question is: was there an approved method for reception of prophetic oracles in ancient Israel? Is God the source of all prophetic oracles? These and other relevant questions will be answered in this piece.

THE PROPHETIC OFFICE

Prophets were regarded as distinct people called to their vocation by Yahweh with a definite message. Prophets are considered as Yahweh's mouthpiece and bearers of His message. The prophets have the responsibility of delivering the message as received. However, prophets who delivered messages that did not come to pass were called false prophets. 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. However, there were prophets who compromised divine message on the altar of pecuniary benefits.

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. As mentioned earlier, a true prophet of Yahweh is that individual who receives oracle from him and delivers without editing. 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 Israelite their 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.

Today, prophecy is roughly synonymous with prediction of the future. Admittedly, prediction is one of the dictionary meanings of the word prophecy. The people holding to the idea of prophecy as prediction or foretelling of course of events in the final analysis substantiates the prediction stand of prophecy by relating current events such as rumours of wars, increase of knowledge, apostasy, etc, to be fulfillment of biblical prophecies (Scott, 1967). They claimed that it had been predicted that such will take place hence its occurrence. The people holding to this belief tend to give prophetic interpretation to virtually every segment of the Scripture.

The fact of the matter is that, an attempt to apply some prophetic passage in the Scripture to mean prediction of the future means "a revival of ancient heathen

practice of divining the future" (Scott, 1967). It often leads to unnecessary quest to unravel what future entails. To guide against cultivating such heathen practices, Jesus sternly told the disciples asking for the period of establishing his kingdom that it is not for them to know times and seasons which the Father hath set within His authority (Acts 1:17). In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Daniel is not included in the collections called "the Writings." (Scott, 1967). This is a pointer to the fact that prophecy and prediction though used interchangeable yet, differ in meaning.

One of the most significant areas in the prophets' experience was his conviction of being called by God to the task he had undertaken. Whether such man come from a priestly background or from out of an ordinary occupation, it seems that most of the prophets had a particular encounter with God who called them to his work. Often, the form of that call influenced the course of their ministry (Evans, 1992). It is obvious that prophets are different from priests and Levites because they did not receive the office by inheritance. Instead, it was through a special call from God. Undoubtedly, prophets were not as many as priests and Levites. But prophets were selected because they were men with unusual gift, vision and dedication. God's assignments led them to many places and situations often difficult and dangerous (Wood, 1986).

There are three things that happen to a person who receives the divine call to be a prophet. The first is that he experiences a break with his past social life. The second is the deepening of his knowledge and worship experience with God. Unlike what happen to his social relationships, the prophet's past experience with God is carried over to his prophetic vocation, but this happened at a more intense level (Folarin, 2004). The third thing is that the prophet is now under divine compulsion to proclaim the message of Yahweh. Whenever a prophet receives a message, he or she is expected to deliver it to the appropriate audience without delay. In Amos 3:8, the prophet cries out, "The Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy." This means that it is not possible to understand the Old Testament prophets from their encounter with God only but their willingness to serve. This proclamation and actions should not be simply when we understand the prophet in relation to God (Folarin, 2004). In support of the above, J. Goldingay claims that taking up a prophetic office means willingness to accept the cost to serving God. It means accepting the tension of two fold identification with God in his anguish and high calling. It means to stand boldly in confrontation with men without ever been quite able to prove that the words which he declares are those which he has overheard in Yahweh's council (Goldingay, 1984). The prophet was a spokesman for God with the distinct call to be an ambassador. Taking up a prophetic office is not by inheritance, it came as a result of a distinctive call of God to a man who conformed to God's standard.

RECEPTION OF PROPHETIC ORACLES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Scholars have different opinion as to the actual state of a prophet when he did receive the divine word. Three inadequate views sometimes suggested how prophets in Israel received their revelation. The first point is that the prophets knew that there is no communication which existed between them and God. But since they wished to impress the people that their teachings were true, they actually pretended that it came from God. The two problems with this point are that it is too modern for the antique cost of mind and it is morally inexcusable. This is because such prophets would not be justified for accusing some other prophets who prophesied their minds and not the mind of God (Folarin, 2004).

Another hypothesis is that God implanted only an essential kernel of the truth in prophet but it is left to the prophet to work out the kernel into a subjective prophetic reflection (Folarin, 2004). The third hypothesis is that the prophet employed divination as a means, which was used in receiving their messages. This theory is particularly devised to explain the predictive element of the prophetic writings. It should not be forgotten that the Bible commands the Israelite diviners be put to death (Deut. 18:10; 14-15) (Folarin, 2004).

Many ways by which a prophet received message from God are recorded in the Old Testament. These are by dream, vision, audition, and when in the state of ecstasy. One of the ways by which Old Testament prophets received their messages is through dream. Dream is mentioned in the foundational passage (Num. 12:6). "There is a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself know to him in a vision! Speak with him in a dream" Jeremiah 2:28 promises dream in connection with the feature outpouring of prophetic gifts (Winward, 1983).

Messages were also received by the prophets sometimes as the combination of vision and audition. The account of the call of Isaiah who has the combination of vision and audition is a good example (Isaiah 6:1-8). On the other hand, the call of Jeremiah is described largely in term of things heard, and only at the conclusion of the dialogue does he see the hand of God outstretched to his lips (Jer. 1:4-10) (Grudem, 1979).

The third way in which the prophets received their messages from God is when they were in the state of mental and spiritual exaltation. In some occasions, this exaltation of the prophet was such intense that such prophets usually ceased to be aware of the ordinary circumstances and relationships of life and they were intensely aware of God when the revelation was imparted. Though the personality of a prophet was not ignored it was raised to a new intensity through their encounter with God and they become the medium of divine revelation (Winward, 1983).

The manner of receiving prophetic message has received serious consideration by biblical scholars. Some scholars believe that prophets are in ecstatic state whenever

they are to receive prophetic message. Wood is one of the scholars who believes in the fact that ability to become ecstatic is essential; to be accepted as an authentic prophet (Carl, 1990). Passages such as Numbers 11:25-29 and 1 Samuel 10:1-3 among others are used to buttress this fact.

However, there are clearer evidences to prove non-ecstatic state of Hebrew prophets in receiving their messages. It is suffice to say that the passages referred to as indication to ecstatic state of prophets had been subjected to quite different interpretations than what ecstatic really entails (Carl, 19900. Unlike Canaan form of prophetism which scholars with ecstatic perspective of Israel's prophecy liked Israel type, it is noted that Israel's prophetic form of receiving messages has these features.

Israel prophets show no indication of self stimulation in the process of receiving message. This observation nullifies claims of ecstatic condition of prophets. While musical instruments are employed in some instances, such had been used for sacred gatherings hence its usage does not signify automatic contact with revelation. David and the entire citizen of Israel had sacred procession employing musical instrument with no attending revelational experience, hence usage of instrument does not form self stimulation (Carl, 1990).

Moreover, there are no indications of initiating revelational experience. God and no the prophets initiates revelational experiences. It took Eli's intervention before Samuel got the idea that God was initiating a contact. Also Moses was looking at the burning bush through which God initiated revelational contact with him; he did nothing to initiate such (Rad, 1967).

Israel prophets did not lose their rational power while receiving prophetic message. It is evident that prophets retain their rational consciousness at point of reception of revelation. Moses could rationalize his slow in speech to explain being unworthy to be sent. Isaiah 6:1-8 depicts Isaiah's rational ability in explaining his sinfulness.

While Israel's prophets may not be in ecstatic state to receive revelation or information, it is clear that the experience of receiving a word is occasioned by a high degree of excitation but obviously not in ecstatic form in its proper usage. The end product of such divine stimulus will be audio or visual information and at times it may be both. The audio kind could be inspired thought or impressions.

At this juncture is it important to consider the ways by which prophets delivered their oracles. There are three major ways by which prophets in Israel delivered their messages. These are: through spoken word, written word and also through symbolic action. The oral prophets delivered the word of God to individual who came to inquire from them, or to whom they themselves were sent. Most of these messages however were delivered in the public. This spoken message of the prophets, which were divinely inspired are known as oracles. They were usually concise and rhythmical and are frequently introduced by the phrase, "thus says the Lord; hear the word of the Lord" (Winward, 1983:23-24). Prophetic messages are also

transmitted through written word. Folarin cites the example of Jeremiah who had his prophecy written down and was read three times in the temple court before princes and King Jehioakim (Jer. 36) (Folarin, 2004). Don Fleming asserts that of all the prophecies that have been written down, most of them were written in prophetic form. The reason behind this is probably because poetry is better able to empress a person deeper thoughts and feelings. It is also easier to memorize than prose, and this would help people in remembering and passing on the message to the coming generation (Fleming, 1979:6).

The third way by which the prophets delivered their messages was through symbolic action. That means they would perform certain actions which they would explain to be symbolic of truths they wished to convey. For instance Elisha one day told King Josiah of Israel to short arrows through an open window. The king did so and Elisha gave the symbolic indication (2 Kings 13:17-19) (Wood, 1986).

PROPHETS AND THEIR ORACLES

In this aspect, our concern is to answer question such as how the Old Testament prophets themselves did viewed what they were doing in fulfilling their prophetic call from God. Though closely related, this actually differs from the role, which the Old Testament prophets' played (Staurt, 1980). Douglas Staurt gives four points in respect of this. They are:

1. The prophets considered themselves vehicles through which God Himself spoke. In Exodus 7:1, Yahweh says to Moses, the paradigm prophets in the Old Testament spoke with an authority not of his own. So it is their consistent contention and the contention of the biblical descriptions about them, that they spoke God's word, not theirs. Truly, it is God who decides who shall be a prophet (cf. Exo. 3:1-11). Indeed, if one were to take this office of prophecy upon himself, this would give evidence that he was in fact a false prophet.
2. They considered the content of their message unoriginal. The prophets as said earlier were spokesman for God. What he spoke through them was almost exclusively related to the original covenant He had given to them through Moses. If there had not been a covenant, it is hard to say. In the absence of any previous covenanted relations, perhaps they might have developed and promulgated some sort of relatively enlightened, social ethic as a counter force to the oppressive characteristic of the society they lived.
3. They considered themselves as occupying a divinely appointed social office, correcting by divine word, illegal belief and practices. When the prophets were called to excoriate Israel or other nations, what they attacked in effect are crimes

against the covenant. It was not anything that the prophets themselves initiated. However, Yahweh's word was the agent of correction, not the prophets.

4. They understood what they preached. By this affirmation, one does not intend to imply that the prophets were fully cognizant of every conceivable implication of the word of God gave to them. For example, one cannot assume that they understood exactly how and when God would perform the promise for Israelite's future beyond the level of detail that the prophetic oracle themselves contain. We do wish to suggest that they did not preach word fully or partly meaningless to themselves, the significant of which can now be understood by modern exegetes (Staurt, 1980:9-13).

RECEPTION OF PROPHETIC ORACLES IN NIGERIAN CONTEXT

Nigerians are very religious. Worship houses are full to capacity on Fridays and Sundays. Religious meetings are held during the week days in many places across the country. Nigerians are seen in their hundreds seeking divine interventions from prophets on issues of concern. There are many prophetic preachers and teachers. Many of these prophets engaged themselves in end of the year/ beginning of the year prophecy most especially touching on political economy and national issues. Some of them include: Enoch Adejare Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), T. B. Joshua of Synagogue Church of All Nations, Ejike Mbaka of Roman Catholic Church, Enugu, Primate Theophilus Olabayo of the Evangelical Church of Yahweh and a host of others. Nigerians irrespective of religious beliefs consult prophets for oracles on spiritual, physical, political, social, and economic matters.

Today many Nigerians may not do anything or take any step without prophetic guidance. Prophetic oracles or messages have become lucrative and popular in the Nigerian society today. Many Nigerians do not bother about the source of a prophetic oracle. They are only concern about finding lasting solutions to the issues that are confronting them on a daily basis. Some travelled miles away from their homes to see or attend programmes where prophetic oracles will be released. They spend time and money in search for prophetic oracles. People look forward to yearly predictions by some renowned prophets in the nation. (Adetunmbi, 2081). It is common to see politicians, traditional rulers, people seeking positions, military/ Para-military officers, career officers and sick persons, those whose businesses have run bankrupt who desire to know what the future hold for them patronizing prophets. Some of these prophets are found on mountain tops, in camps, in their homes and in church building.

Gleaning from the Old Testament, prophets and their oracles were given prominent place by their audience. The prophets dictated the religious and political space in ancient Israel. Throughout the Old Testament era, prophecy was never taken with levity because it was the medium through with God made his mind known to his people. Apostle Peter declared that: "Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). This suggests that no man was authorized to speak on behalf of Yahweh without receiving a message from him.

Like their counterpart in the ancient Israel, prophets in Nigeria claimed to have been called by God. They see themselves as ambassadors and mouthpiece of God. These prophets consider themselves as God's unction to reconcile the people back to God. While this is true of some of them, there are those who have no evidence of divine call. This is clearly seen in the way they operate their prophetic ministry. Like the false prophets in ancient Israel, the lives of these prophets are characterized by low and unethical conduct. They are involved in drunkenness (Isa. 28:7), adultery (Jer. 23:14), treachery (Zeph. 3:4), and lies (Mic. 2:11). These categories of prophets are in the ministry because of food. They have no evidence of divine call. It is true that they receive oracles but the source of their message is questionable.

Also, the source of their oracle is difficult to ascertain. Although all the prophets in Nigeria claimed to have received their message or oracle from God but their audience is confused on the source of these oracles. It should be noted that most of the oracles they delivered to the people are correct and accurate. However, their audience is confused because the content of their lives and character do not match with the biblical standard of a true prophet of God. Some are believed to have prophesied through satanic means. It is believed in some quarters that some prophets in Nigeria wash their faces with special kind of water so that they can see beyond the ordinary (Awojobi, 2018).

Besides, one of the characteristics of biblical prophecy is that it must agree with the Scripture. In other words, every prophecy must be Bible centered and based. The theme and the content of a prophetic oracle must tally with the Bible. In ancient Israel, the words from the prophets encouraged the people to turn to God in repentance. Prophets in Nigeria have the responsibility of bringing the erring leader and citizens to repentance through their lives and oracles. Every prophetic oracle must conform to the Bible.

Moreover, like their counterpart in ancient Israel, prophets in Nigeria claimed to have received their oracles through dreams, visions, audition and when in the state of ecstasy. In most of the prophetic services the researcher attended, the prophets claimed that they heard from God the message they were about to deliver. Some claimed that they saw a vision or had a dream. Sometimes the prophet mentions

what an individual is going through without prior knowledge or an encounter. This is also common in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 9:3-10).

Furthermore, one of the acid tests for prophecy is when a prophet said something and it came to pass (Dt. 18:21-22; 1 Kgs. 22:28). Death penalty was stipulated for prophets whose oracles were not fulfilled. This is because the people believe that oracles that are from God must surely come to pass. This is what distinguished between true and false prophets. Many predictions by some Nigerian prophets today fall in the category of false prophecy because their oracles were not fulfilled. Some Christians in Nigeria are being cautious about accepting the messages of their prophets because many of their messages have been proven to be completely wrong (Adetunmbi, 2017). A good example is the prediction by Primate Theophilus Olabayo of the Evangelical Church of Yahweh in 1980 that: if Prince Okunade Sijuwade does not contest for the vacant stool of the Ooni of Ife, he will be strikingly rich and would be second to none but if he decided to ascend the throne, he would not last for three years. Sijuwade ascended the throne on December 6, 1980 and joined his ancestors on July 28, 2015 after 35years on the throne (Sijuwade, 2001). Another example was that of Prophet T. B. Joshua who predicted that a woman will win the Presidential election of the United States of America (USA) in 2017. However, this did not happen for Donald Trump emerged the winner.

Apart from the issues raised above, circumstances or the current situation in Nigeria is the reason for the emergence some persons as prophets. Due to economic recession and unemployment in the country some persons have become prophets in Nigeria. There are no jobs for many graduates in Nigeria. Those who consider the prophetic ministry lucrative enter into it not as a calling but as a means of livelihood. These categories of prophets can do anything to achieve their goals. They cook and sell prophecy to the people. They do not care if their oracles come to pass or not. Their main concern is how to make money and live big. They sell prayer elements like oil, water, mantle or handkerchiefs, and so on at exorbitant amount to those approach them for prayers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Anyone going into the prophetic ministry must be sure of divine call before dabbling into it. It is also important that the Prophet receives a message from God before speaking to any audience. A would be Prophet is expected to have undergone some training before the commencement of his prophetic ministry.

CONCLUSION

From the fore-going a Prophet was one who had been called and commissioned with a message. He is the mouthpiece of Yahweh. A prophet is to declare what he has received to his audience. Prophets were the link between Yahweh and the people. Prophets received oracles through dreams, visions and audition (Num. 12:6; Isa. 30:10; Hos. 12:10). It is clear from our discussion that God is not the only source of prophetic oracles in ancient Israel and Nigeria. Other sources include Satan, Self and Circumstances. Some persons are in the prophetic ministry today because of what they will eat. These prophets prophesy without receiving divine message. The study revealed that divine call was necessary for a prophet before dabbling into the prophetic ministry. The contemporary prophets must make God the source of their oracles for their ministry to make the expected impacts in the lives of their audience.

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