

An Ethical Appraisal of Religious Bogus, Prophetic Monstrosity and Precarity in Nigeria: Towards Individual and National Security

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is faced with more security challenges today than ever in our history (Wale Ajayi 2023). In the quest for National Security, religion is believed to be instrumental through various scriptural means. But events of the recent times have placed some doubt on this fact due to the criminal activities among some religious men and women in the country (Michael, N.Nwoko 2023). In ancient Israel, prophecy had always stood conspicuously in the religious, socio-economic and political life of the Israelites. Over the years, the church in Nigeria has been regarded sacred, a solace of divine presence and security, and within the church disposition, the prophetic arm is highly bequeathed with this onerous task (Ugwu 2009). However, in contrast with popular prophetic Jewish tradition, many scholars have noted how prophecy in the recent time has suffered a substantial set-back. In fact, there is no ulterior motive to say that prophetic ministry in Nigeria today has been riddled with immorality and abnormal behaviour. The country is blessed with great men of God who are true to their calling and exhibit heavenly wisdom. However, with no mechanism for self-correction, self-study or self-understanding and no commitment to theology, sound theology anchored on a sound and balanced biblical worldview, the stage is set for the creation of a monstrosity, “a religion divorced from earnest and lofty thought that has always down to the whole history of the church, tended to become weak, jejune and unwholesome”. In the recent time, the media has been filled with stories of terrible crimes committed by some supposed clerics in the country. It is either they involved in one fraudulent act or the other, or they are charged for sexual assault against their members. They pronounce false prophecies to draw attentions to themselves. Predictive aspect of prophecy nowadays has become highly lucrative in Nigeria, a society densely populated with gullible worshippers. This prophetic hallucination also hurts in Nigerian politics, as the country’s socio-political landscape is wantonly besieged by a barrage of prophecies, prophetic postulations and calculations. It is apparent in our society today that prophecy is thriving, yet evil and vices are thriving, which certainly call for sober reflection. Previous studies on insecurity in Nigeria focused largely on socio political perspectives, with little attention paid to religious dimensions. This paper therefore explores the effects of prophetic monstrosity on security in Nigeria, focusing on the possible solutions. Using historical-critical method, the paper recommends prophetic revolution as viable sine qua non for curbing the menace of prophetic monstrosity and insecurity in Nigeria.

Keywords: Reflection, Religious Bogus, Prophetic Monstrosity, National Security, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Prophets, in ancient Israel, were divinely appointed moral and ethical preachers and teachers of spiritual religion. However, the axiological nature of traditional Israelite prophetism and its altruistic philosophy remain elusive principles among the gamut of contemporary prophets or pastors. In other words, the church which is expected to be sacred, a solace of divine presence and security, has been desecrated and turned to dens of lions and spiritual robbers, a fertile ground for the horrendous demons that hold sway in religious matters. The

reports of atrocities perpetrated by supposed ‘holy men’ in sacred places today are quite alarming. This certainly calls for sober historical reflection as it poses great challenge to individual and national security. Therefore, this paper examines monstrosity and insecurity in Nigerian prophetic ministry, with particular emphasis on its effects and possible solutions.

PROPHETISM AND FALSE PROPHECY IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Prophets as Religious Functionaries and Advocates of Socio–Political Justice

In ancient Israel, as earlier noted, prophets were divinely appointed moral and ethical preachers and teachers of spiritual religion, calling the nation to obedience in conformity to the Mosaic Law. They fearlessly rebuked vices, idolatry, infidelity, oppression, unfaithfulness, iniquity and social, moral and political corruption where it was to be found. Also, in pre-classical prophetism, especially in Elijah – Elisha legends, the prophets were portrayed as miracle workers and healers. In some instances, Elijah and Elisha raised the dead, healed the sick and also restored life and vitality to the nation after long drought. Prophecy is a social phenomenon – an activity carried on among and between people within a specific society, and which conforms to the social norms operative of such people (Dada 2018:179). One of the functions of prophecy in ancient Israel was that it served as a medium for instituting social change and reforms. From the extant Israelite prophetic tradition, it is evident that the prophets were agents of social change. Thus Israelite prophets, as social critics, functioned as agents of social change and medium of social and environmental justice.

False Prophets and Prophecies in Ancient Israel

The possibility of false prophecy is inherent in any society that tolerates the existence of prophets (Sears, 2009). Israel was not exempted from the presence and influences of false prophets (Keith, 1982). Obviously, this issue was of great concern of the author of the Hebrew Bible. Not only was it a capital crime, but also a host of other apostate practices are associated with it. In a close study of the false prophets in pre-exilic Israel, we encounter some of Israel’s difficulties in recognising them, and thus illustrate our own struggles to keep away from being misled. It was during the period of the divided monarchy that we see the rather sudden emergence of false prophets as a problem for Israel. The picture is entirely revealed in the pre-exilic canonical prophets. Prophet Isaiah accused false prophets of teaching falsehood (Isa. 9: 15); Ezekiel said they prophecy of their own inspiration (Ezk.13:2). Micah saw them divining for money (Micah 3:5); and Zephaniah called the false prophets reckless and treacherous (Zeph. 3:4). Jeremiah was most forceful and precise in his indictment of false prophets. He said they willfully practiced deceit (Jer. 8:10) out of the deception of their minds. They are immoral (Jer.23:14) and prophesy lies, be it from auto-inspiration, self-deception or strong drink (Jer. 28:20). It is now clear that 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 3:5 that “that prophet shall be put to death” (Deut. 18:20). It was with this authority that Elijah slew the 450 prophets of Baal (Iyanda, 2018:123).

PROPHETIC MONSTROSITY AND INSECURITY IN SACRED PLACES IN NIGERIA

Gullible Nigerians and their Enigmatic Prophets

We now live in different times with religion and clerics in Nigeria. Time was when church titles like Pastor, Reverend, Bishop and others were reserved for reverend gentlemen who were real servants of God, true to their callings. In every way, they lived up to their titles and were hardly found engaging in anything that could soil their dignity or question their integrity. Then, before one could be ordained for spiritual leadership, it was a very tough process, unlike now when everyone who loves the titles can just tag himself as one, garner few members of the congregation and start preaching whatever his soul desires. It is now a worse situation that we find ourselves that it is quite difficult to identify fake ministers who have perfected their acts and taken advantages of the freedom for anyone to establish worship centers. Today, acts such as fake miracles, rape, extortions and killing of human beings for ritual purpose have been recorded by some unscrupulous elements

who hide under the umbrella of ‘man of God’. The media has recently been suffused with stories of terrible crimes committed by some supposed clerics in this country. It is either they involved in one fraudulent act or the other, or they are charged for sexual assault against their members. Instead of ministering to the needs of these people who come seeking solution to their problems, some ‘pastor’ or ‘prophets’ take advantage of them. They twist the scriptures to exploit them with all kinds of false theology. They pronounce false prophecies to draw attention to themselves. This poses great danger on the people, church, religion and society at large. Some of the atrocities committed by many church leaders are revealed as follows:

(i) Fake Miracles: - Fake miracles are now common in many places of worship and human beings, especially Nigerians, are gullible in religious matters. One of the recent cases of fake miracles by ‘prophets’ or ‘pastors’ is that of an unnamed ‘pastor’ and two others, who were arrested by the 2 Brigade of the Nigeria Army, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, for alleged fake miracles and healing to deceive church members and the public (Usman & Omonisa, 2016). The Army Public Relations Officer (PRO) of the command, Captain Eli Lazarus, said the Pastor and his companions conned several members, deceiving them with false miracles. The ‘Pastor’ and his collaborators, whose names were not mentioned, were arrested following a tip-off from a member of the church, who complained of immoral and fraudulent activities going on in the church. The twenty-seven years old ‘pastor’ and founder of the church allegedly confessed to have paid his collaborators undisclosed amount of money to share fake testimonies. The suspect also confessed of duping unsuspecting members of the public various sums of money (Usman & Omonisa, 2016). Many other religious circles today are suffused with fake miracles.

(ii) Extortion and Dubious Practices :- With false prophets, virtually nothing can be done in their ministry without money, even in spite of their claims to be working under the influence of the power of the Holy Spirit. The most perilous aspect of this is their prosperity preaching, a contemporary gimmick adopted to squeeze money out from members of their congregations (Bennny Hinn, 2019). In April 2010, Sunday Onyegu, a 37 years old ‘pastor’ in Lagos, was detained for allegedly duping one Ibarahim Shettima, a trader. Onyegu collected the sum of N150, 000 from Shettima who came to him for spiritual assistance to enable him recover his money from his debtors. The ‘pastor’, after collecting the money, gave Shettima the specific time his five debtors would turn up with the money. When the time elapsed and the debtors did not show up, the man alerted the police (Usman & Omonisa, 2016).

(iii) Using Diabolical Power for Miracles:- There are sad tales of Nigerian clerics using diabolical means to perform miracles and healings. They acquire power through fetish means and never perform any God-ordained miracle. In late 2015, the General overseer of Holiness of Heaven Ministry, located at Orlu, Imo State, was caught and paraded around the town by angry youths for using diabolical means to perform miracles and healings. The ‘pastor’ was said to be very powerful that top politicians, contractors, businessmen, barren women, the sick and the downtrodden, troop to his church, seeking for one miracle or the other. People often left satisfied with miracles, not knowing that the ‘pastor’ had a very powerful native doctor, popularly called ‘Dibia’ behind what appeared to be his great powers (Usman & Omonisa, 2016). Also, in December 2015, the Nigerian police arrested one ‘pastor’ for allegedly burying charm in his church premises in Benin. The identity of what the ‘pastor’ buried was unknown, even though residents around the church located along Esigie Street in Benin alleged it was a live animal. The police took away the suspect to avoid being lynched by the angry residents who stormed the church location. One of the eye-witnesses, Mr Chinedu Nnamdi, said his father woke up around 2am on the fateful day to watch what the ‘pastor’ was doing. He said the ‘pastor’ buried something in front of the church and later perform a little ritual by walking round the church several times (Usman & Omonisa, 2016).

(iv) Publicizing Ministry Through False Prediction:- predictive prophecy has become a viable means of gaining popularity, prestige and the attention of people to religious matters in Nigeria today (Iyanda, 2018:124). The ugliest aspect of it is that the predictions almost always center on business, sport and politics or political leaders. The motive behind this is to make their ministry more fascinating and well known. However, the truth is that false prophecy rarely comes to fulfillment. Take for instance, Rev. Simeon Ononogbu, an Ebonyi based ‘pastor’, predicted in an interview that the Nigerian Falcons would reach the

semi-finals of Women's World Cup in France while the host, France, would place fifth. He later blamed "deceitful" spirit when the prediction failed:

It is a pity that the prediction on the Falcons failed which means that it was not a revelation from God. We have so many spirits that deceive people and if we are not careful, we will make mistake such as this.

The roles which prophets, 'prophetic punditry' and 'prophetic eaters' played in Nigerian elections, especially before 2019, is quite disheartening. Nigeria's political landscape has been wantonly besieged by a barrage of prophecies, prophetic postulations, predictions and calculations which often exacerbate tension within the political sphere and spread confusion among the populace (Adefisoye, 2017). Pastor Samuel Akinbodunse, a Nigerian pastor based in South Africa, prophesied that Buhari would not emerge winner in 2019 election, and that he would die. He said:

Please Nigerians, warn Buhari that he is going beyond his boundary. That the Lord said his tenure is one and not twice. If not, he will not see the election. If you know him and how to email the Presidency of Nigeria, please write him a text. If he made a mistake to campaign for election before they vote, he will die. And I am saying the truth, I am saying the truth. Tell him the same voice that spoke when people said Jonathan would be the president of Nigeria, the same voice is speaking to him that he must not make that mistake. Let him eat whatever he wants to eat inside sugar that he is now and leave the sugar 'jejely'. If not, he will die. That is just the message.

Similarly, Bishop Wale Olagunju, the presiding Bishop, Divine Seed of God Chapel Ministries, Ibadan, Oyo State, prophesied that Buhari would lose the 2019 election to Atiku Abubakar. In his prophetic revelation, he said:

Let me congratulate President Muhammadu Buhari for winning the ticket of his party, the All Progressive Congress, and let me also make it clear to him that he will lose to Atiku Abubakar. Let me also congratulate Atiku in advance because he will win the next presidential election, come 2019.

There is no doubt about whether these prophecies were punctured by the outcome of both the match of Women's World Cup in France and that of the 2019 general elections. In essence, politics and religious faith today remain interlocked in an unholy matrimony in Nigeria's politics (Adefisoye, 2017).

(v) Saying and Teaching Imprecatory Prayers-False prophets or pastors are naturally arrogant, aggressive, cruel and wicked. Closely following the logic of their deliverance ministry is the imprecatory prayers. This involves using prayers as instruments of vengeance and destruction on enemies. Christians who are enemy-conscious and demon-conscious often fall victim of those false prophets with this kind of prayers. Take for instance, one man in Oke-Igbo area of Ondo State promised a 'pastor' sum amount of money but when the man could not fulfill the promise, the 'pastor', in one of their prayer meetings, asked the congregation to join him pray against the man for disappointing him. In fact, another man in that particular church said he left the church because of that habit.

(vi) Adultery, Rape, Incest and Other Sexual Immorality: - It is quite unfortunate that many so-called 'prophets' or 'pastors' today are charged for reckless, scandalous and unbridled sexual lives. Women's struggles against sexual violence in sacred places are neither new nor limited to a particular faith or denomination (Ajayi, 2019). Several religious ideologies have made sacred places sites of precarity and violence for women and girls. The 'pastors' or 'prophets' sexually exploit vulnerable women with the promise of 'spiritual cleansing' (Agazue, 2016). Women are the predominant followers of these male religious leaders. The General overseer of Holy Trinity in Unmudikwere Community, in the University town of Nsukka, Enugu State, Timothy Ngwu, was arrested for allegedly impregnating married woman and young girls in his church. He said he was directed by the Holy Spirit to sexually abuse female members. The alleged sexual exploits of the self-acclaimed 'man of God' was blown open by his estranged wife, Veronica Ngwu, after she reported the act at the Anti-Child Trafficking Unit of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), Enugu, leading to

his arrest. Veronica told the detectives that she escaped from the ministry with one of her daughters after her husband impregnated her Niece on grounds that he acted under prophetic revelation. (Usman & Omonisa, 2016). In addition, a 46 years old 'pastor', Ifeanyi Bernard, was arrested by the Nasarawa State Police Command for allegedly raping a 13 years Old girl in Karu Local Government Area of the state. The teenager went for a deliverance session in the 'pastor's' house, only to be raped. At the end, the 'pastor' warned the girl not to tell anyone and threatened to kill her if she did. But when the bubble burst, 'pastor' admitted to the claim, but blamed his indulgence on the handwork of the Devil (Usman & Omonisa, 2016). Other sexual and immoral perversions observable among ministers today include bathing for women, anointing their private parts, touching their breast and other sensitive organs while praying for them, kissing, hugging or lying on them for miracles.

(vii) Murder: - Some clerics kill their members for ritual. Besides, some deceive them with fake revelations to kill their supposed enemies who could be friends, parents or other relatives for being responsible for their misfortune. One can remember Favour Daley Oladele, a final year student of the Lagos State University (LASU), Ojoo, who went missing on the 8th of December, 2019 and was later found killed for ritual purpose in a church, in Osun State. That followed a revelation of how her boyfriend, Adeeko Owolabi, allegedly connived with a self-acclaimed 'pastor' to kill her for ritual. Owolabi, 23 years, his mother and Segun Philip, 42 years, were arrested and Owolabi disclosed that he lured the lady to the 'pastor's' church in Ikoyi –Ile, Osun State. He explained how the lady was killed that "while she was sleeping, the 'pastor' gave me a pestle to smash her head. Thereafter, he (pastor) used a knife to cut off her neck. He ripped her chest and removed her heart which he used to prepare concoction for my mother and I" (Usman, 2019). Another example of a respected 'man of God' and Founder / General Overseer of God's Power City Church, 'Pastor' Gideon Idio who was arrested by the Akwa Ibom State Police Command, for allegedly murdering a female church member, Joanna Okon, during an altercation that occurred in his office for an undisclosed assignment which later turned violent and he allegedly strangled her to death.

The morale of all these atrocities committed in sacred places in Nigeria is that there are wolves in sheep clothing and not every so-called 'Holy Place' in this nation is God-ordained and approachable. Many are shrines and "by their fruits you shall know them".

Prophetic Monstrosity: A threat to Church and National Security

The effects of prophetic hallucination on church and National security include the following:

(i) Prophecy and Prophetic Ministry Becoming Less Valuable: - False prophecy has reduced the value of the prophetic ministry today. Thus, there are lots of derogatory comments about true prophetism. In other word, prophetic ministry is no longer seen today as sacred, but a coven of deceit and unrealities.

(ii) Proliferation of Religious Centers with Falsehood: - Craving for miracles, and more miracles, has led to the establishment of more religious centers where people are being deceived. Besides, since people are prosperity - conscious, love of money has been involved, and hence, prophetic ministry has now become the fastest - growing business for those involve in it. And one should not forget that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1Tim. 6:10).

(iii) Prevailing Social Disorderliness: - Another effect of falsehood in prophetic ministry is disorderliness in the society, ranging from family to the entire community. Many couples have been separated as a result of false revelation. Some children even disowned their parents and vowed never to come back home again. Many people have become selfish and over ambitious after hearing false prophecies concerning their future. Some become lazy and idle in the course of following prophets to different religious programs. Others become arrogant and proud, considering themselves too sacred to speak with, or even correct in the society.

(iv) Pauperizing Lives and Destroying Destiny: - Being ignorant of God's words and plan for their future, many people have been dogmatically subjected to perpetual slavery, reduced to beggary, having their destiny unfulfilled.

(v) Painting Religion to be Opium of the People: - False prophets and their harbingers now define religion as a consolation for the poor who are the vulnerable and cannot help themselves but to accept whatever happens as their fateful plight. God, through Prophet Hosea, said “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6).

CURBING THE MENACE OF MONSTROSITY IN NIGERIAN PROPHETISM

The most viable means of curbing prophetic monstrosity in any society is to identify and disdain false prophets. It is not a blasphemy to say that prophecy today in Nigeria has become a potent tool for self - indulgence. However, in spite of this ministerial affront, every prophet still claims to be called, anointed or inspired by God. This certainly makes it difficult to distinguish the true from the false prophets. Sears observed that:

Prophecy is essentially a process by which an intermediary (the Prophet) facilitates communication realms. In various ways, the prophet receives divine messages and then delivers them to human recipients. However, the prophetic experience is basically a private one, even though the prophet may describe it publicly. In the end, the prophet's audience can never be sure that the experience took place as described or that the prophet is accurately reporting the divine messages (Sears, 2009).

We can deduce from the above submission that the reliability of any prophecy can be questioned or critically evaluated as the threat of false prophecy is always present. In the light of this, below are some possible clues for steaming prophetic phony and insecurity in sacred places in our societies:

(a) Priority of God's Word: - The Holy Bible should be considered God's infallible word, final and authoritative for any decision. This implies that prophetic activities should always be subjected to biblical tests, and thus, any contradictory message or prescription should be discarded (2John 1:7 – 11); and such prophet should not be celebrated whatsoever (Gal. 1:8 – 9). God cannot contradict Himself. He, for example, forbids adultery and so He cannot instruct His prophet to see, as a woman, your nakedness talk less of having sex with you before giving you children.

(b) Pre-emption of Life Challenges: - False prophets often capitalized on people's mystery and misfortune, using these as baits to lure and defraud the vulnerable ones who are enemy-conscious. The viable mechanism for stemming the rising tide of problem-oriented and ritualistic gospels of those deceivers is the pre-knowledge of the fact that every man is born to experience life challenges that punctuate human existence (Job. 5:6 – 7). Next to this mechanism is personal and man's understanding of God's unique nature, which is required; one, to avoid self-inflicted problems; two, for divine assistance while passing through human invented problems; three, for divine revelation about God's calendar which is quite different from man's order of times and events so as to be patiently waiting on Him. Naturally, life is full of challenges, some of which are purposeful and uncontrollable.

(c) Principle of Morality: - There are moral principles guiding every society. Generally, we all know that hatred, anger, fighting, killing, lying, cheating, fraud, stealing, cursing, fornication, adultery, rape, etc., are immoral acts. The attitude of a supposed prophets or pastors should always be evaluated in the light of these moral principles; and any immoral preacher should be seen as fake and avoided at all cost.

(d) Prophet's Marriage and Family Life: - Some false prophets are divorcees while some keep away their wives from their ministry so as to be free to commit all sorts of atrocities. Women generally are jealous, but softhearted. In their extreme cupidity, they cannot keep calm beholding their husbands having sex with other women. Beside, women are foisted with human feeling and cannot stomach their emotion while wickedness is perpetrated, particularly ritual killing in the church. In essence, people can investigate why their prophets or pastors are not living with or supported by their wives.

(e) Prophetic Syncretism: - Though no religion in Nigeria is free of syncretism, people can still find out whether their spiritual leaders are true or false minister through this means. This implies that a Christian leader

who is found using materials solely known with herbalists can be seen as false Christian cleric. Take for instance, a prophet or pastor found with human parts, charms or sacrifices, reciting incantation is not a true Christian leader. Hence, one should not have relationship with such cleric.

(f) Prophet's Message: - One can discern whether a prophet is true or false by subjecting his message (preaching, teaching or prophecies) into biblical tests. A Christian cleric whose message does not build up faith in God, holy living and sacredness of human life, but often centers on mundane things is truly a false minister.

(g) Purported Self – evaluation: - As a Christian, you can ask yourself what spiritual qualities have you gained from your prophet? Since you have been following such cleric, is your life better spiritually than before you met him? Then, as a product of that prophet, are you really happy and joyful for being a true Christian? Does the life of the preacher often draw you more closely to Christ, or only to himself and his ministry? And beyond your immediate self, are there other true believers, holy and heaven-minded Christians under your supposed prophet or pastor? Answers to these questions will help discern whether your minister is truly known by God.

(h) Perpetual Hatred for Evil: - This attitude is scarcely seen among the contemporary Christians because many of them love the life of opulence. However, it is certain that those who hate whatever appears evil will hardly fall into the hand of false prophets. Conversely, those who love cheap miracles easily fall victim of fraudsters.

(i) Public Comments: - One can discern whether a preacher is true or false by paying attention to public comments or testimonies about such cleric. No secret can be kept away from the public unless people don't want to reveal it.

(j) Passionate Reliance on God: - Human being, including "man of God", is fallible, and therefore, we must rely on God and on Holy Spirit alone. Many self-acclaimed clerics of this generation are desperately wicked, having physical and spiritual potential to destroy lives and families of their members, and even that of any casual miracle seeker. They do this to feed their greediness and to satisfy their insatiable lust for pleasure and love for money. Hence, Christians must not rely on prophet or pastor absolutely for everything, as the bible rightly says "curse is he who relies on the arms of flesh" (Femi Fani –Kayode, 2013).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This paper explored a reflection on prophetic monstrosity and precarity in Nigeria, focusing on its implication for personal and national security. The work revealed that Israelite prophets occupied an important position in the nation and they serve in various capacities. They were powerful and very influential leaders of religious, social and political lives of the Israelites. Thus, they fearlessly rebuked vices, idolatry, infidelity, oppression, unfaithfulness, iniquity and social, moral and political corruption in the land. In the similar vein, prophetic arm of the church in Nigeria today is bequeathed with the responsibility of standing conspicuously in the religious, socio-economic and political life of the nation. However, prophetic ministry has suffered a considerable setback as a result of moral decline among the so called prophets and preachers in Nigeria. The study recommends that church needs to urgently enhance her effectiveness so as to live up to the expectation of being the conscience of the society. Prophetic recklessness or falsehood must be addressed. In other words, curbing the menace of prophetic monstrosity and insecurity in Nigeria, there must be revolution in prophetic tradition in Nigeria. Besides, the reliability of prophets and their prophecies must be critically evaluated in the light of socio-biblical principles.

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