

Contemporary Prophetism in Ghana in the light of Old Testament Precedents

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Abstract

Ghana has recently witnessed an unprecedented surge in Christian prophetism. The impact of prophetic ministry on the religious landscape of the country cannot be overlooked. Through prophetic activities, many life challenges have been dealt with. Yet, this kind of ministry is frequently characterized by several physical and spiritual abuses with associated negative effects on followers. Consequently, varied concerns have been expressed by the public concerning the biblical foundations for contemporary prophetic practices and the overall effect this ministry has on the religious and socio-economic lives of Christians. This literature-based research was therefore undertaken to explore how ancient Israel prophetism should inform contemporary Ghanaian Christian prophetism. The study argues that Ghanaian prophetic ministry is similar to prophetic ministry in ancient Israel in terms of the manifestation of the presence of God's Spirit, performance of miracles and healings, use of music and dancing, use of symbolic ritual acts and symbols such as robes, staffs, the demonstration of power, gender inclusiveness and provision for practical needs of the people. However, there is the need to check excesses such as the commercialization of the gospel and human rights abuses which sometimes characterize Ghanaian prophetism.

Keywords: Ancient Israel, Christianity, Ghanaian, Prophetism, Old Testament

Introduction

Ghana, like other African countries, has experienced remarkable growth in the Christian religion in recent decades. The 2010 Population and Housing Census

revealed that 71.2 percent of Ghana's population profess Christianity (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012, p. 63). Ghanaian Christianity is dominated by Pentecostals and Charismatics (hereafter referred to as Penteco-charismatics) comprising Christians who lay much emphasis on the experience of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The Charismatics are usually made of the elite group in Ghanaian society, but this is not always the case with the Pentecostals. Pentecostals are Christians who place a strong emphasis on salvation as a life-changing experience produced by the Holy Spirit and places high value on pneumatic phenomena (such as "speaking in tongues', prophecies, visions, healing and miracles in general") which believers must consciously and earnestly seek as these phenomena are indications of God's enabling presence among his people (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:12). In Ghana, Charismatic Christianity emerged from Pentecostalism, the two sharing many similarities (including emphasis on the Spiritual experience, democratization of gifts and others). The charismatic movement, however, focuses on city ministry, uses English as the main means of communication, is mainly led by "charismatic" individuals, and attracts more youth and upper-class people in the society. Later in the paper, the point is made that prophetism is more common among Penteco-charismatics than in mainline historic mission churches.

Ghana has recently witnessed an unprecedented surge in Christian prophetism with its huge impact on the Christian community. The prophetic activities have been authenticated by many testimonies from Christians. Consequently, prophetic ministry is highly patronized in Ghana and other parts of Africa. Yet, this kind of ministry is often characterized by several physical and spiritual abuses with associated negative results on followers. There are now theological and pastoral concerns regarding the overall effect of this kind of ministry on the religious and socio-economic life of Christians. The present author contributes to the public discourse on Ghanaian prophetism by assessing contemporary prophetic practices through the lens of Old Testament prophetic ministry. The overall purpose of the study is to investigate how ancient Israel's prophetic ministry should inform and shape contemporary prophetism in Ghanaian Christianity. The study is a literature-based research based on data obtained from books, journal articles, and other sources, discussed with a historical perspective on Ghanaian prophetism. Biblical data is used to assess contemporary Ghanaian prophetic ministry in the light of prophetic ministry in ancient Israel. The

comparative study then serves as the basis for drawing implications of the study for contemporary Christianity.

The Rise and Development of Prophecy in Ancient Israel

The Old Testament uses four different Hebrew terms to designate a prophet, namely, *ro'eh*, *hozeh*, *'ish 'elohim* (or *'ish ha-'elohim*), and *nabi*. The term *ro'eh* (the earliest of these terms), a participial form of *ra'ah* has been translated “seer” or “diviner” (1 Sam. 9:9) (see Petersen, 2002, p. 6). The second term, *hozeh*, meaning “seer,” derives from the root *hazah*, meaning “to see” (2 Sam. 24:11). The third term, *'ish 'elohim*, (a man of God) or *'ish ha-'elohim* (the man of God) refers to a holy person, someone “attested in numerous religious traditions” (Petersen, 2002, p. 6) (1 Sam. 9:6-10). The final term *nabi* (plural: *nebiim* or *nebiim*) derives from *nabu*, a loanword from the Akkadian, meaning “to call... to speak,” “to proclaim,” “to name” (Petersen, 2002, p. 6). *Nabi* therefore refers to one who has been called and designated by God as his spokesperson (2 Kings 9:1; 2 Chron. 12:5; Jer. 1:5). The Bible regards prophecy as an inspired word (message) from God through a prepared and sanctified vessel, the prophet. Biblical prophecy is both foretelling and forthtelling.

Foretelling/prognostication means the act of predicting the future or some course of events that will transpire in the future while forthtelling involves proclaiming a message to the reader’s present situation. Ancient Israel prophets engaged mostly in forthtelling. In the process of forthtelling, they spoke about socio-religious issues such as bad leadership, idolatrous practices, false prophetic practices, abuses in priesthood, ungodly economic practices, and corrupt judicial systems, among others, and warned the unrighteous about God’s judgement (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, 1996, p. 229). At the same time, they comforted and gave hope to God’s people, assuring them of future deliverance and restoration of a remnant (cf. Amos 9:13-14). Petersen (2002, p. 4) summarizes this as follows: “the notion of seeing into the future, of predicting what will happen, is only one facet of what Israel’s prophets were about. To be sure, Israel’s prophets could and did speak about the future, but they mainly addressed the present and referred as well to the past.” In ancient Israel, the prophetic office as such arose with the ministry of Samuel (Sparks, 2000, p. 8, 15). However, the role of the “prophet” could be seen in the Pentateuch. The origins of biblical prophecy may be traced to the first Messianic prophecy in the Garden of Eden after humanity’s fall (see Gen. 3:15). Old Testament historians also mention people such as Enoch (Gen. 5:22;

Jude 4); Abraham (Gen. 15; 20:7); Moses (Deut. 34:10; Hos. 12:13); Aaron (Exod. 7:1); Miriam (Exod. 15:20; Mic. 6:4); Eldad, Medad, and the seventy Elders (Exod. 24:9-11; Num. 11:24-29); and Deborah (Judges 4:4-5) as pre-canonical prophets who experienced divine revelations and auditions (Waltke, 2007, p. 808). Even though the above personalities can be classified as prophets, prophetic ministry in ancient Israel did not receive prominence until the ministry of Samuel and the institution of the monarchy.

Two main factors necessitated the rise of the office of prophet and prophetic literature in ancient Israel. First, prophetic ministry arose due to threats to the worship of Yahweh, for example the emphasis on the worship of Baal under King Ahab (869 - 850 BCE) and his queen, Jezebel, who actively oppressed Yahwism (1 Kings 18:4). God raised up the prophets in order to check the threat of a king leading Israel in a manner corresponding to the Ancient Near Eastern practices of kingship (Coogan, 2008, p. 78). God instituted the prophetic ministry to serve as his voice to the king. Second, God raised prophets to speak for the voiceless in the society. Sometime after their settlement in the Promised Land, the economic and social developments in Israel and Judah gave rise to a stratified society in which the upper class oppressed the ordinary people (Amevenku and Boaheng, 2020, p. 96-97). Without the prophets no one could speak on behalf of the underprivileged. The prophet Amos is outstanding in his role as the voice of the voiceless and he demonstrated that justice and righteousness are absolutely parts of the presence of God as the life-bestowing force (5:6-7). He made the people understand that Yahweh had no interest in rituals (5:21-27) but instead sought justice and righteousness (1:17).

The account of Samuel's choice of Saul as king of Israel contains the first appearance of the prophets as a group. They are depicted as a group of people who came down from a sanctuary to the accompaniment of musical instruments like flute, timbrel and harp, and responding to this abundant musical tune with ecstatic cries (1 Sam. 10:5-6). The contagious nature of the ecstasy made Saul also prophesy when he saw them (1 Sam. 10:10). André (1982, p. 191) explains ecstasy as "an intensive experience which totally engages the individual, a psychical state characterized by the fact that the person is much less open to outward stimuli than in a normal state." In addition, Old Testament prophetic ministry was characterized by use of music and dancing, use of symbolic ritual acts and symbols such as robes, among others (see 2 Kgs 3:15; Anderson, 2003, p. 181-182).

Prophetic ministry in ancient Israel changed markedly in the eighth and seventh centuries BC. While prophets of the tenth and ninth century are more often presented as “advisors to the kings” who helped the kings to discern the will of God, most of the eighth century prophets (following Amos) paid more attention to the people, the nation Israel and sometimes other nations (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, 1996, p. 226). After the eighth-century prophets came the prophets who ministered in the latter period of the Divided Kingdom and also acted as historians, documenting the chronicles of the Jewish people (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, 1996, p. 227). Much of what is known about the monarchy came to us from the prophetic perspective. Their contribution in this direction has, to a large extent, influenced the use of the expressions “Former” and “Latter Prophets” for some cluster of books in the Old Testament. The Old Testament testifies to this fact in 1 Chronicle 29:29 where Samuel the seer, Nathan the prophet and Gad the seer are said to have documented events concerning king David.

The foundation of ancient Israelite prophetic ministry is divine calling which refers to God’s invitation to people to play a part in, and enjoy the benefits of, his gracious redemptive purposes. God decides and determines who will be his spokesperson. Therefore, nobody could claim to be a prophet without first of all receiving a call from God. The call to be a prophet could come through another human being (for example, God used Elijah to call Elisha; see 1 Kings 19:16). In the case of Jeremiah, his call was predetermined by God even before his birth (cf. Jer. 1:1-3). The call of Moses came in a spectacular circumstance (Ex. 3:1-15). Samuel’s call came in his childhood through God’s audible voice (1 Sam. 3). Divine calling came with a specific assignment to be accomplished through divine influence.

Old Testament prophets were empowered by God’s Spirit for their specific tasks. The importance of God’s Spirit in the prophetic ministry is seen in the Elisha’s request to Elijah. The whole of Elijah’s ministry was characterized by God’s Spirit, that could carry him away at any time (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16). Only God was able to accomplish the miracles performed by Elijah through the Spirit. When Elisha is given a last request by Elijah, he asked for a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kings 2:9, 15). While this request is not explicitly for God’s Spirit, Elisha must certainly refer to God’s Spirit, whose power and influence he had observed in the ministry exploits of his master, Elijah. Because of the Spirit, the two prominent figures of Elijah and Elisha were able to stem the tide of apostasy during the Omride dynasty. Their ministries were characterized by supernatural activities.

In addition, the prophet's encounter with God's Spirit gave him a compelling sense of call for which reason Micah (for example) could say "I truly am full of the Spirit of the Lord" (Mic. 3:8). Old Testament prophets were very conscious of the Spirit's presence with them and were confident of the authority they possessed in their prophetic ministry. Zechariah's assertion that the nation hardens their hearts against Yahweh's word given by the Spirit through the prophets (Zech. 7:12) underlines the fact that the prophets knew the word they carried was from God through his Spirit.

Even more importantly, ancient Israel's prophets were covenant enforcing mediators who sought to ensure that the Sinaitic Covenant remained the foundation of Israelite religion (Ex. 19—24). They encouraged the people to be righteous before God and to look after the weak and vulnerable members (Bandstra, 2009, p. 95). According to Stout (2003, p. 10-11), God always declared through the prophets how he wanted his people to conduct themselves before him— with fidelity, obedience and holiness: "When the people disregarded the intention of the covenant, their treatment of the poor and the powerless—the orphan, the widow, and the stranger—were indicators of the disease of their society" and ancient Israelite prophets had the courage to confront them. Courageous prophets like Nathan and Elijah stood up to the royal families, insisting that even powerful kings like David and Ahab must obey the covenant and ensure justice (see 1 Kings 19; 2 Sam. 12:1ff). The messages delivered were mostly warnings to Israel and other nations to repent in order to avoid God's impending judgment. For example, the prophet Amos criticized the rich for trampling on the poor and the perversion of justice (Amos 5:21-22). Later the exilic prophets gave messages of hope and restoration. They reminded the people of their covenant with God and the faithfulness of God to deliver them from the hands of the captors if they turned to God in repentance. Post exilic prophets encouraged the people to rebuild the temple and restore the worship of God in its true sense (Hag. 1:3-11).

Furthermore, true ancient Israelite prophets were characterized by high moral integrity. Even though information about the holiness of the prophets is rare, it is generally accepted that God would use holy people as his prophets. It might be argued that God saw fit to use people whose moral behavior was not always beyond reproach in other offices, such as Moses the law giver, Aaron the high priest, and David the king. Yet, it is also clear, for example, that Nathan would not have had an effective word of reproach for David if he himself had been a man of unbridled passions. An immoral prophet was considered false because a true prophet was expected to set a

high moral standard, to speak against sin, to shun evil and to stand for social change in ancient Israel (Jer. 23: 9-15, 23-32).

With this brief introduction to prophecy in ancient Israel, the study proceeds to consider prophetism in Ghana.

Brief Account of Ghanaian Prophetism

Scholars trace the origins of Ghanaian prophetic ministry to the period between 1900 and 1950. Different reasons (including social, political, or religious conditions, or a combination of these) have been assigned by different scholars for the emergence and continuing existence of prophets in Ghana (Baëta, 1962, p.3). The African world view served as a catalyst for the emergence of the prophetic phenomenon. According to Tutu (1995, p. xvi) religion permeates all aspects of the life of an African. As a result, people find spiritual reason(s) for every event that occurs in life. The death of a person, chronic disease in one's life, childlessness of a woman and other similar situations are all believed to have spiritual causes. The African worldview was further strengthened by the missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa. The missionaries introduced a personalized devil and associated traditional gods with demons, a situation which eventually strengthened Africans' belief in witchcraft and demons. Consequently, African Christians find it extremely difficult to expel belief in supernatural powers from their minds (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2002, p. 29-34).

Unfortunately, therefore, after publicly professing faith in Jesus Christ, some African Christians return from church only to make libations to various traditional deities. Thus, there is an "injection of elements of the African primal religion and beliefs into Christianity" (Amevenku and Boaheng, 2015, p. 90). African Christians frequently live in fear of attack from the spiritual world. Such a state of those converted to Christianity serves as a fertile ground for the emergence and acceptance of prophetism in Ghana.

The first major prophetic activity in the country was by Prophet William Wade Harris, a Liberian, who in 1914 appeared in Nzema area of south-western Ghana. Harris was a prisoner serving a sentence for allegedly involving himself in a protest against the repressive policy of the Americo-Liberian government toward the Grebo people when God called him into ministry (Larbi^{2001, p. 58}). While in prison, an angel visited him and commissioned him as a prophet of God. Apparently, the Spirit descended upon Harris

thrice after which he burst into tongue-speaking (Larbi, 2001, p. 58). The activities of Harris were characterized by a very high uncompromising attitude towards tribal gods, adaptation of indigenous way of worship, a high evangelistic drive, and demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit.

After Harris came Prophet Sampson Oppong, a native of Akontanim in the Bono Region of Ghana. He was an illiterate fetish practitioner who was converted to Christ through a dramatic encounter with God in which he was instructed to burn all his fetishes (Larbi, 2001, p. 66). This happened while he was in prison for embezzlement in Ivory Coast (c. 1913). He resisted this and other admonitory experiences over several years until 1917, when as a result of a particularly vivid vision, he began an itinerant preaching career, calling for destruction of fetishes and abandonment of magic and witchcraft. His activity as a destroyer of talismans earned him the accolade “Osebetutu”, remover of talisman (*osebe*). Though he was illiterate, God endowed him with a remarkable knowledge of the Bible. In 1923, the Methodist Church claimed to have twenty thousand (20 000) converts through the activities of Oppong (Larbi, 2001, p. 67). From that time, prophetism became part of Ghanaian Christianity. The rise of Penteco-Charismatic churches also increased prophetic phenomena in Ghana. Today, prophets have become renowned for their teachings on prosperity, prophecy about people’s personal lives and miraculous deeds. Stories about prophetism fill the airwaves, newspapers, television stations and social media.

Some Features of Contemporary Ghanaian Prophetism

1 Prophetism and Human Existential Issues

Prophetic ministry in Ghana usually employs the problem-solving approach to ministry. Followers of prophetic ministry experience many benefits from the movement. For example, in the full view of their congregation, some prophets have caused cripples to walk, the dumb to speak and so on. All kinds of sickness (including cancer, hepatitis, hypertension, stroke, diabetes, HIV/AIDS) are healed through this ministry. Some prophets even claim to have the ability to raise the dead. The poor are relieved of their plight through so-called “miracle money,” where people find money in their bank accounts which they have not previously deposited and hence cannot account for. Some prophets offer miracle babies who are conceived through supernatural power.

The prophetic ministry has a large following due to help they offer followers (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013).

Yet at the same time, over-concentration on finding solutions to life challenges eventually has negative consequences for church members. Ghanaian prophetic activities are mainly meant to solve life problem of followers, often at the expense of making committed disciples of Christ. Asamoah-Gyadu (2005, p. 80) rightly notes that the over-emphasis on the immediate benefits derived from prophetism results in the lack of committed Christians in most prophetic-oriented churches. It must be noted, however, that not all prophetic-oriented churches use the problem-solving approach to ministry. In those churches where solutions to human problems are overemphasized, people leave the church after finding solution to their problem because such churches lack effective teaching that enhance effective discipleship. One hardly hears the prophet preach effectively. Therefore, most followers of such prophetic-oriented churches, after realizing that their spiritual growth cannot be enhanced by these churches, go back to their former churches after their problem is solved. This is the reason why such churches fail in the long term (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005, p. 80-82).

Contemporary Ghanaian prophetism is also about foretelling. Ghanaian prophets claim the ability to tell the followers what lies ahead of them in life. There is a recent trend in Ghanaian prophetism where prophets use their 31st December Watch Night Services to deliver people from past demonic influences and to prophesy longevity, prosperity, good health, God's favor and other blessings upon people's lives. At these services many prophets also reveal imminent calamitous events such as the death of prominent figures in the nation. Rev. Isaac Owusu-Bempah (founder of Glorious Word and Power Ministry church), for example, on 31st December 2018 predicted the death of the national chief Imam Sheikh Osman Nuhu Sharubutu in 2019 (Niba, 2019, online article) which failed to happen. In the view of Asamoah-Gyadu (2020, p. 6) many people consider prophecies of this nature as "prophetic blackmailing for material gain" because "most of the personalities to face misfortune tend to be high profile public figures." The reason for this reasoning by Asamoah-Gyadu is that in most cases these prominent people about whom prophecies are given seek spiritual assistance from the prophets to avert the calamities that are about to befall them. The spiritual assistance given is usually associated with *akwankyerɛ*, meaning spiritual direction or literally, showing the way. The beneficiary pays for the services rendered by the prophet.

2 Prophetism and Spiritual Renewal

Prophetism in ancient Israel was meant to bring spiritual renewal to the people. The prophetic message was meant to turn people's heart from other gods to God and to encourage them to let their vertical relationship with God have a corresponding impact on their horizontal relationship with other people. Similarly, the purpose of Christianity includes the renewal of the believer through the power of the Holy Spirit. Prophetism in Ghana is often accompanied by renewal that takes place "in the form of personal, often dramatic, conversions, miraculous acts demonstrating the power of the Holy Spirit and the manifestation of Pentecostal phenomenon, embodying charismatic or spiritual gifts into Christian practices" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005, p. 37). The democratization of the *charismata pneumatika* (spiritual gifts or things) which is a key focus in prophetic-oriented churches (spiritual churches or *Sunsum sore*) was not given much attention in the mainline historic churches (that is, mission churches) in Ghana until recently. The experience of the Pentecostal phenomenon and the development of spiritual gifts has been the priority of prophetic churches since their emergence. In the prophetic churches, every believer must appropriate the spiritual gifts as fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (2:28-30).

Some mainline historic churches initially reacted negatively to prophetism when Pentecostal (spiritual/prophetic) churches emerged. For example, the Methodist Church of Ghana described the spiritual phenomenon of one of their members (Egyanka Appiah) as "occultic" and even placed an injunction on him. Appiah's conversion resulted in the manifestation of the Spirit through speaking in tongues, recourse to intense prayer vigils and divine communication through dreams and visions (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005, p. 45). Having been expelled from the Methodist Church, Appiah founded the Musama Disco Christo Church. It is interesting to note that the spiritual/prophetic churches eventually influenced the liturgical and pastoral practices of the mission churches. For example, speaking in tongues, clapping and dancing at churches services, are some of the practices that mission churches later adopted from spiritual/prophetic churches. The reforms that the activities of spiritual churches brought in the historic churches highlight "their invaluable contribution to the changing face of Ghanaian Christianity" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005, p. 37). Prophetic churches provide more innovative, exciting and stimulating services that tend to catalyze the spiritual experiences of their followers.

Consequently, many people drift from mission churches to prophetic churches to enjoy the kind of service which they believe is meaningful and relevant to their situation. Prophetic churches are “more enjoyable” because of their effective inculturation. Here, “inculturation” refers to the sensitivity that Prophetic churches show towards the African primal worldview and African realities in the mediation of the Christian gospel. These churches are able to synthesize Christianity and African religio-cultural worldview and therefore make Christianity applicable to the existential issues of the Christian (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005. p. 39). For example, these churches respond better to the spiritual needs of the followers than mission churches. In the Ghanaian worldview, there are myriads of evil spirits around the human person. Everything that happens physically (including, protracted illness, accident, death, or any other misfortune) is said to have spiritual antecedents. For this reason, a key aspect of African religious expectation is to have protection from spiritual forces. Prophetic churches take this African cosmology seriously and provide their followers with the needed assistance. On the contrary, most mission churches (based on the theology they inherited from their Western counterparts) either fail to accept the existence of these forces or fail to provide theological and pastoral response to them.

Prophetic churches are attractive to Ghanaians because they provided the needed spiritual resource to overcome evil forces which tend to cause havoc in people’s life. Victory over charms, medicines, divination, witchcrafts, sorcery and other evils are often attributed to the spiritual empowerment received through the prophetic ministry. The prophetic churches have also distinguished themselves in the area of healing and deliverance. Healing is very important because it releases people from an obstacle to human fulfilment (Milingo, 1984, p. 24-25).

There are, however, some cases where the messages preached by some contemporary prophets fail to achieve spiritual renewal. Some prophets over-concentrate on prosperity such that followers tend to think that life is all about acquiring wealth and living affluently. Atiemo, for example, has observed that some Penteco-charismatic prophetic activities have failed to promote individual and societal moral transformation, especially in terms of “concrete acts of justice, obedience, mercy, compassion, honesty and loving deeds” (Atiemo, 2016, p. 7). Other Church traditions such as the Methodists, the Presbyterians and the Roman Catholics are not completely exempted from the emphasis on prophetism, though these churches do it in moderation as compared to Penteco-charismatics.

3 Prophetism and the Call into Ministry

Ghanaian prophetic figures have always claimed to have been called by God for the propagation of the gospel. I have already mentioned that Harris received his call through supernatural experience. As reported, “while in prison, he had a trance-visitation from the Angel Gabriel who called him to be a prophet, to preach the gospel of repentance, to destroy “fetish” worship and to baptize” (Shank as cited in Johnson, 2016, p. 6). Harris once defended his call in these words: “I am a prophet of God above all religions and freed from the control of all men.” (Shank as cited in Johnson, 2016, p. 32). The prophet was called to preach repentance just as prophets of ancient Israel were called to do. Also, Harris was to destroy “fetish” in the same way that prophets of ancient Israel were called to destroy the idols of the surrounding communities. The call of most Ghanaian prophets is credible when their ministries are assessed in the light of biblical principles. The fruit of “genuinely-called prophets” usually result in mass conversion to Christ. For example, Harris’ ministry in just two years brought one hundred and twenty thousand souls to Christ (Bediako, 2000, p. 85).

However, the call of some contemporary Ghanaian prophets is more dubious. In 2009, Akomadan-Afrancho-based traditional priest, Kwaku Bonsam stormed a church at Kato (a suburb of Berekum in the Bono Region) to retrieve juju (the use of as amulets, and spells in religious practice for evil purposes) that he claimed to have given to “Pastor” Collins Agyei-Yeboah (popularly known as Papa Yopoo), founder of the Vision Charismatic Ministry (see Nrenzah 2015, p. 115). “Pastor” Agyei-Yeboah allegedly went to Nana Bonsam to assist him to succeed in his church business but persistently refused to honour his annual obligation of paying five hundred and fifty Ghana cedis (GH¢550.00) to Kwaku Bonsam’s deity, “Kofi oo Kofi.” According to Bonsam’s claim his fetish was the source of power with which the pastor performed his magico-religious activities to attract followers. Instead of destroying idols, these prophets rather seek power from them and yet claim to be Christians.

4 Prophetism and Morality

The main message of the biblical prophet is to call people to repentance. The prophet therefore speaks vehemently against sin. Some contemporary prophets show high ethical standards in both private and public lives. But some other contemporary

prophets exhibit a very high level of immorality. Sexual abuse involving contemporary prophets is frequently reported. There are ministers who engage in sexual affairs with their Church members, associate ministers' wives and sometimes even defile children.

Apostle Kofi Nkansah-Sarkodie, in the October 25, 2011 issue of *The Chronicle*, is reported to have drawn attention to cases of fornication, rape, armed robbery, adultery, stealing, and fraud, among other vices allegedly involving some “men of God.” Not long ago, two self-styled prophets, namely Joseph Braimah, 22, and Derick Kweku Sakyi Baisie, 31 (alias Kweku Money) were arrested for allegedly defrauding many people to the tune of two hundred and eighty thousand Ghana cedis (GH ₵298,000.00) by giving them fake prophecies (Abbey, 2017, online article). They are said to have used prophecies of death, accidents, spiritual attacks on businesses and family members, among other dangers, to extort money from their victims in the name of saying special prayers for them. Baisie was arrested at Nana Boame's shrine (a renowned fetish priest shrine at Akyem Abirem in the Eastern Region) where he was seeking protection and powers to avoid arrest (Abbey, 2017, online article). This confirms Obeng's assertion that deliverance practices in Ghana are characterized by “the demand for monetary support from the vulnerable in exchange for blessing...” (Obeng, 2014, p. 14). Some prophets “charge exorbitantly, sometimes even before attempting a cure. The patient's generous donation in the form of a tithe is sometimes made a prerequisite for healing” (Umoh, 2013, p. 663). Rather than allowing members to give freely and cheerfully, most contemporary prophets manipulate the followers during offering time. Some prophets ask that the offering be placed at their feet so that no one can give a “small” amount because no one would like to be associated with the least offering. Special prayers, supposedly carrying more blessings, are offered for those who are able to give higher amounts. In effect, they have turned the service of God into a gold mine by exploiting unsuspecting members of the public. Some of these people are “fake” Christians who are operating in the name of God. Others are Christian “prophets” who may belong to any denomination (whether mission churches, Pentecostal movements or Charismatic movements) who take advantage of the vulnerability of their followers to exploit them for personal gains.

Implications for Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity

This discussion so far underscores the fact that Ghanaian prophetic ministry has a huge impact on the Christian landscape. The prophetic ministry is highly patronized

because of it helps its adherents to deal with human existential issues. The Church needs the prophetic ministry for its edification and growth. The prophetic ministry has, however, attracted criticisms because of the “bad nuts” among contemporary prophets. Instead of throwing the bathwater with the child, this author argues that the “bad nuts” must be separated from the good ones to bring out the usefulness and significance of the good ones. It is in this light that the study offers some principles below for testing the validity of the prophetic ministry.

First of all, there is the need to question the source of authority of people who claim to have been called into the prophetic ministry. This is important because a fake call is bound to result in fake ministry. The study has noted that there are some Ghanaian prophets whose calling into ministry have been challenged by some traditional African priests. In this light it is important to state that the fact that one’s ministry produces results (alone) does not mean that his/her ministry is authentic. The devil has also called people to use miracles to deceive believers. A key test for the source of authority for a prophet may be the “fruit test” which Jesus gave as a principle for judging those who claim to be doing the work of God (Matt 7:16-17). This test is particularly concerned with the impact the ministry of the prophet has on the church. Any prophetic ministry which does not have the overall effect of building up the body of Christ is fake.

The fulfilment of prophecy is another key test for the authenticity of a prophet (Morrison, 2014, p. 65-78). A true prophecy is bound to be fulfilled (cf. MacArthur, 2003, 228-229). The Israelites asked the Lord, “How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?” (Deut. 18:21). Moses told the Israelites: “When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken” (Deut. 18:22; cf. Jer. 28:8, 9). The evil character and conduct of false prophets would be revealed by the failure of their prophecies to come true (Comfort and Lins eds., 2001, p. 36). While this is a good test, it is often difficult to apply because not all prophecies are short-term. There are some prophets who gave within their long-term prophecies a short-term one that was quickly fulfilled (Jer. 28:16, 17). The obvious question is: For how long should we wait before saying that a prophecy has not been fulfilled? A prophecy may not come to pass in the life time of the prophet or his audience and yet may be authentic. This principle is therefore more suitable for prophecies that are time bound. Another difficulty in applying this rule is that the predictions of a false prophet could also be

fulfilled (Deut. 13:1, 2). Therefore the “fulfilment” principle alone is not enough to determine whether a prophecy is from God or not. Also, some prophecies are conditional and if the conditions are not fulfilled, they cannot be fulfilled (Jer. 27:8-10; see Newton, 2010a, 65). Jonah’s prophecy was authentic but was not fulfilled because the people of Nineveh changed from their evil ways (Jonah 3). Another problem with this test is that some Old Testament true prophecies were given by “false” prophets (for example, Balaam’s prophecy in Num. 23-24; cf. Newton, 2010b, p. 61).

As a public phenomenon, ancient Israel prophetic ministry was built on sound theology. Therefore, every true Ghanaian prophetic ministry must also be based on biblically grounded theology. Prophets must also speak for the voiceless and the marginalized. There is the need to study the Bible diligently and to give authentic and biblically grounded teachings to enhance discipleship. Theological formulation (by both prophets and non-prophets) must be subject to the scrutiny of God’s word. For example, since God’s law prohibits worshipping idols (Ex. 20:4-5), an Israelite prophet who led others to worship other gods was a false prophet (Deut. 13:2).

Idolatry in our modern society may be in the form of worshipping wealth. Prosperity theology, propagated mostly by those in the prophetic ministry, has the tendency of making people idolize wealth. Prosperity theology states that “God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ and every Christian should now share the victory of Christ over sin, sickness and poverty” and that one can have access to these blessings through “a positive confession of faith” (Gifford, 2007, p. 20). Such prosperity theology, which most Ghanaian prophets propagate, promotes wealth accumulation, and makes people measure the success of one’s life by the person’s wealth. In Ghana, like other parts of Africa, Prosperity Theology is highly patronized because many people live in abject poverty (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015, p. 174). None one can deny the fact that God blesses his people materially (see for example Gen. 13:1-2 for evidence of Abraham’s material prosperity). However, the problem in the Ghanaian situation is that Prosperity teachers place too much emphasis on wealth and tend to consider it as basis of human worth. There is also weak hermeneutical basis for some of the claims of Prosperity teachers and so Asamoah-Gyadu (2015, p. 174) asserts that “prosperity thinking usually relies too much on proof-texting and so tends to interpret the Scriptures in a selective manner, without due attention to context. Its message tends to be one-sided.” The point here is not that Prosperity teachings are entirely wrong or that prosperity is only propagated by

prophet-led churches. Rather, the point is that prophet-led churches place huge emphasis on prosperity and hence tend to ignore other relevant aspects of the Christian gospel.

If prophecies have to agree with God's revelation (Isa. 30:8) and the people hearing it have to judge it according to God's word, then the audience of prophecy must have a deep personal knowledge of God's Word so that they can use that knowledge to test the truthfulness of the prophecy. Knowledge about God's word comes through effective studies. Therefore, the Church must be a teaching Church. Any church that does not have an effective teaching ministry deprives its members of the opportunity to have access to the word of God and use it to judge messages proclaimed in the church. This test is more difficult to falsify, though it is not totally immune against falsification (see 2 Cor. 11:13, 14). Nonetheless, those with adequate knowledge of the truth as revealed by Christ will not be easily deceived.

Another important implication of the study is that true prophetic ministry must be ethically sound. This ethical test is one of the most effective tests for judging knowing which prophet works for God and which one is for Satan. False prophets may mention the name of Jesus in the ministrations, they may help other people in various ways, but they do not live up to the God's laws and do not clearly speak out against sin. Their works and ministry tend to make sin appealing to their followers. Ezekiel makes a similar point when he accused false prophets of strengthening the hands of the wicked, so that they do not turn from their wicked ways to save their life (Eze. 13:22). In the broader context of the Bible, false prophets are characterized by arrogance (2 Pet. 2:18), deceit (Acts 13:6-10), and the commercialization of the gospel (2 Pet. 2:3, 13). They may give the impression of being holy, even saying all the right things, yet they are only wolves dressed in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). It is important that the believing community applies their gift of discernment to distinguish between true and false prophets. The Holy Spirit gives such ability to believers and so it is also the responsibility of Christians to rely on the Spirit to guide them in this regard. This principle is, however, imperfect because no one can know all about a person's character except God; therefore, one cannot rely on only the known aspects of a person's life to give a complete judgment on the person's ministry (Newton, 2010a, p. 65).

The foregoing discourse makes it clear that there are limitations in using human criteria to judge the authenticity of one's ministry. Final Judgment should therefore be left to God. The above principles may, however, be applied in order not to make avoidable mistakes in following fake prophets. One would agree with Newton (2010a, p. 65) that not all these principles would apply in every situation, but a prophet who fails in any of them is suspect.

Conclusion

The study has pointed out both negative and positive aspects of prophetism in Ghanaian Christianity. Prophetism resonates well with the African worldview and provides solutions to many African existential issues. Prophetic ministry in contemporary Ghana also does well to contextualize the Christian faith to make Christianity very meaningful to believers. Through the prophetic ministry many people have converted to Christ including people who were fetish priests. The impact of prophetism in the growth of Ghanaian Christianity can therefore not be overlooked.

However, there are some excesses associated with the ministry of some modern prophets, including the commercialization of the gospel, human right abuse, syncretic tendencies and others.

In the view of the author, the abuses associated with the ministry of some prophets should not make anyone downplay or discount the importance of the prophetic ministry. Like any other kind of ministry, not everyone's ministry may be authentic and, the non-authenticity of one or two ministers does not invalidate the ministry of others. Therefore, "negative instances" of or excesses in prophetic practices should not obliterate the initiative of prophetic-oriented churches as genuine attempts aimed at reviving Christianity in the Ghanaian setting.

Even more importantly, determining whether a prophet is true or false is not that simple due to the complex nature of the prophetic ministry. Modern prophets need to bear in mind that the call into ministry is a privilege that comes along with certain demands on their life, both inward and outward. The call demands purity of life, serving as a model to others and pursuing God's agenda no matter what the cost. This paper contends that it is very likely that some contemporary prophets have called themselves into ministry to pursue their self-centred ambitions or to serve the course

of Satan under guise of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, contemporary Christians must shine their light to expose darkness.

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