

Biblical Prophecy: A Catalyst for National Transformation

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Abstract. Biblical prophecy in its character and form comprises the classical unity of prediction and proclamation, of foretelling and forth telling. Prophecy is a message from the divinity to humanity. Prophecy is the art of creating a bridge between the natural and the supernatural order. In most cases prophecy is directed at a particular person or group in a given situation. The main aim of prophecy is a positive change of attitude towards God or Man. The aim of this paper was to investigate the role Biblical prophecy played in the transformation of ancient Israel with the view of establishing its relevance in the Nigerian society. Historical method was used. It was discovered that Prophecy was used and still being used to regulate and control human behavior in ancient Israel and in the Nigerian society. The paper established that Prophecy has been instrumental to the growth and transformation of Nations. Prophets are therefore enjoined to use their office to foster unity and peace that will bring growth, development and transformation to the nation in which they serve.

1. Introduction

Prophecy is an age long practice in both biblical and non-biblical traditions. Prophecy simply means God speaking to his people. A careful study of the prophetic books revealed a concern not only for the future events, but also for the contemporary affairs. Most of the prophet's predictions were based on their observation of the present. They saw the coming calamity but with God, they expressed hope. Prophecy is not just the product of intellectual attainment or rational debate. Prophecy is the revealed truth that came from God to man. This paper considers prophecy as a gift from God to humans. Prophecy is God's way of transforming humanity to fit divine purpose.

One of the main functions of prophecy in ancient Israel is that it serves as a medium for transformation.

This was because; the nation of Israel was born through prophecy (Gen. 12). From time to time, prophets in ancient Israel delivered oracles on how the nation will be sustained. Prophecy was used as a channel of communication between God and Man. Prophecy was used as an instrument to regulate human behavior and to control religious, political and economic space. This paper explored prophecy as a Catalyst in the growth, development and transformation of ancient Israel with the view of establishing its relevance in the Nigerian society.

2. Prophecy in Biblical Literature

Prophecy is inseparable from the religious life of Israel that antedated it and brought it into being. Biblical prophecy comprises prediction and proclamation, of foretelling and forth-telling. According to J.P. Baker, foretelling and forth telling serve as the primary nature of the Old Testament prophecy (Baker, 1980:1286). In other words, Old Testament prophecy has two sides. They are: forth telling- exhortation, counseling and prayer, and fore telling- prediction of the future. The prophet will first inform the audience of the way God is seen them and then proceed to tell them of the consequences of their actions. He will later advise them to turn a new leave to God and will be followed by what God will do depending on their response to God's word.

Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 9-20 are usually pointed to as the passage that speaks with some details about the origin of prophetic institution. Here, God promised to raise a prophet who will act as a mediator between the people and God. It also submits that the prophet would speak unto them all the words, which God would place in his mouth. Two things are pointed to in this passage; that there would be a body of prophets, an institution and one great prophet who alone would be like Moses and he is the Messiah (Oludahunsi,2007:177).

However, during the mosaic era, they held the opinion that prophecy was bestowed directly by Yahweh on Old Testament prophet and not copied from other people; this view is linked to the fact that Moses was the standard of comparison for prophetic personages among the Jews. It is clear that prophecy is not limited to the Israelites; prophecy existed among all other nations. We must look further back to see the prophecy movement in Numbers 24:29. There is a story about the spirit of Moses which was transferred to the elder of Israel and enabled them to prophesy ecstatically (Erb, 1968:27).

It is a fact that a new form of prophecy began in Israel with Samuel. It was in his time that one began to hear of group of prophets and during this same time prophets in Israel increased numerically (I Kings 13:11; 20:20:35; II Kings 4:38; 6:1-7 etc). Samuel gathered about himself a prophetic band over whom he must have wielded considerable influence (I Sam. 19:28-24). It is quite likely that Nathan, Gad, and other prophets active in David's time received their impetus from Samuel (Schultz, 1960:121). The fact remain that, before Samuel there was only a little revelation from God (I Sam. 3:1), this suggests that when Samuel became a prophet, he trained others in the prophetic ministry as sons of ht prophets (Folarin, 2004:15).

However, we have what is called classical prophecy and these are the prophets who have their oracles in form of writing and they are also called the writing prophets. The great era of prophecy came with the rise of Amos and Hosea in the eight century B.C. Amos' prophecy is focused on the social condition of the people (Amos. 2:11-3:7), while Hosea's prophecy focused on the religious condition of the people, he gave an illustration on how God loves the Israelites and showed them how they were unfaithful to Him (Armerding, 64).

About half a century after Amos and Hosea, two prophets arose with a message of judgment for Judah. Isaiah of Jerusalem, one of the greatest of the writing prophets, directed his message of God's glory and ultimate triumph against all of the neighboring of Judah. Isaiah prophecy is in the light of the holiness of God as understood by the prophet through his own call, is "guilty" Along with the message of doom came the promise of a savior (9:6ff). Both Isaiah and Micah were contemporary and they use the future as an encouragement and consolation for those who will heed the message of judgment (Armerding, 65). Old Testament prophecy had the supreme element that differentiate the religion of Israel from other contemporary religion, and gave it a survival value

that other contemporary religion did not have or possessed. The prophecy in Old Testament would be incomplete without mentioning Jeremiah and Ezekiel, both of them make several references to "the hand of Yahweh being upon them" (Scott, 1967:87).

Also we have Habakkuk, Obadiah, Nahum, and some other as writing prophets and they were also called classical Prophets in the Old Testament (Scott, 1967:88). However, the issue of prophecy is not limited to the Old Testament alone but there is continuity of prophecy in the New Testament.

Prophecy and prophets form the greatest line of continuity between the Old Testament and New Testament. This is evident from the attitude of Christ and the apostles, to Old Testament prophecy, from the continuation of the phenomenon of prophecy both up to and after the ministry of Jesus, form the prophetic character of his own ministry, from the placing of the inspiration of New Testament, and prophets alongside that of Old Testament prophets, and from the general outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of prophecy came upon the church, leading to a continuous acceptance of prophets and prophesying in the New Testament churches (Baker, 1980:1285).

As a matter of fact, the Old Testament prophetic lien did not end with Malachi, but with John the Baptist, as our Lord expressly declares (Matt. 11:13). Prophetic utterance of John's father Zechariah, and of Anna, Simeon and Mary at the beginning of Luke's Gospel all bear witness to the continuance of prophetic inspiration (Lk. 1:46-55; 67-79; 2: 26:38) (Baker, 1980:1285).

Since the beginning of the church age, it was signified by a remarkable awakening of the spirit of prophecy and the experience was Joel.

And it shall come to pass after wards that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and daughters shall prophecy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days I will pour out my spirit... for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the Lord has said, and in the remnant whom the Lord shall call (Joel 2:28-32) NIV.

Moreover, the Lord Jesus Christ himself had seen in His own equipping for ministry the fulfillment of the promise of the spirit when he quoted 61:1ff of Lk. 4:17ff. The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the

broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives raise from darkness for the prisoners (Isa. 62:1 NIV). To the people of his time Jesus was a prophet, strong in action, and utterance. He was acclaimed a prophet both by the nature of his preaching and teaching and by the miracles that he performed. And occasionally he referred to himself in the same way (Matt. 13:57; Mk. 4:24) (Napier, 1962:919).

It is evident that the whole Jewish apocalyptic literature of the period testified to the general expectation of the drawing of the "last days" and the bestowal of the spirit of prophecy. Thus the demonstration of the spirit on the day of Pentecost was the opening of a new era in the religious history of mankind. Tongues were loosed and the impulse of prophecy spread like wild fire among the converts to the new faith of Christianity. Jesus Christ Himself says he came not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17), and he indeed based his understanding of his mission upon their predictions (Onsachi, 79).

The persecution which followed the stoning of Stephen scattered the disciples widely and multiplied the number of those who sought to interpret "the sign of the times." It thus came about that each little community of believers heard those among them who "spoke as the Holy Spirit gave them utterance and they were regarded as prophets of the Lord (Mitchell, 1930). Notable in Acts of the Apostles is prophet Agabus in chapter 11:28, 21:10, he predicted the great famine throughout all the world which came to pass in the day of Claudius Caesar and the arrest of apostle Paul by the Jews in Jerusalem. The church in Antioch according to the account in Acts 13:1-2 shows that prophets and teachers among who are Banabas, Simeon called. Niger, Lucius and Saul. Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32) were all prophets who exhorted the Gentile Christians with many words and were confirmed (Mitchell, 1930).

However, as far as Paul is concern, prophecy was of God's greatest gifts to His church for edification (I Cor. 14), and he ranked the prophet second only to an apostle in honor and importance (I Cor. 12:28-29). By "prophecy," Paul understands intelligible preaching that builds up the church in faith (Rom. 12:6), He explains mysteries, and impart knowledge (I Cor. 13:2). In (I Pet 1:10), the prophet's concern is the searching of scripture for the witness of Christ, and the book of revelation make us understand that, witness to Jesus is the "spirit of prophet." The entire book of revelation is a classic example of Christian prophecy (Rev. 1:3; 22:7; 18-19) (Gray, 1962:919).

Though cast in an apocalyptic form, it is the proclamation of a man in the spirit" who expounds

from the imagery of the Old Testament the new relation of God's victory in Christ and in those who belong to Christ. Therefore, the issue of prophecy is also present among the Christian up till today and it is one of the gift of the church.

3. Biblical Prophecy as Catalyst for National Transformation

It is important at this juncture to define the word Catalyst and Transformation. A Catalyst is something that causes a change or events to happen (1992:174). In other words, a Catalyst brings about a change in individuals and in a given society without its self-changing. Catalyst increases or speeds up the rate of change. The word Transformation means a total change of something or individuals. Transformation means complete change usually into something with an improved appearance or usefulness. It is a process of changing something for the better. The Greek word for 'transform' is *metamorphoo*, a combination of two Greek words: *meta* meaning 'change' and *morphoo* meaning 'form'. Therefore, *metamorphoo* means to 'change' into another form (Ajala, 2009:23).

Also, the word means a change of condition. According to Groenewald (1999:18), to 'transform' is to change in form or appearance; in condition, nature or character. Transformation or change can occur as a result of revolution, emergence of common purpose, external influences such as culture contact or conquest as well as fortuitous occurrences. As mentioned earlier, prophecy is both foretelling and forth telling. Prophecy is God communicating with Man. Prophecy acted as a Catalyst in the growth and development of ancient Israel. Prophecy as the word of God does not change. In most cases prophetic oracles were meant to bring about a positive change in humans. For instance, God declare through Isaiah the Prophet in Isaiah 1: 18-20:

Come now let us settle this, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool. If you will only obey me, you will have plenty to eat. But if you turn away and refuse to listen, you will be devoured by the sword of your enemies. I the Lord have spoken! (NLT)

It is clear from this passage that God wanted a change for the better from the nation of Israel. It is this change that will bring peace and prosperity in the land. It was through prophecy that Israel knew the mind of God. Israel will prosper through prophecy. Disobedience to prophetic message earned Israel

captivity, sufferings of all sorts, sickness, death and all forms of misfortune (Jer. 26:8-16). The prophets in ancient Israel distinguished themselves by their proclamation of punishment for sin and restoration through repentance. Their message was predominantly a call to repentance and turning back to God as the absolute source of morality. They stressed that God would punish the people with exile, due to their lack of the fear of God (which manifested in various forms of vices) but if they repent and turn to God, they would be restored to their land.

A prophet is that individual who prophesies. A prophet is first and foremost a preacher, who calls people to repentance. Prophets discharged their duties when they are inspired. Sometimes the prophet often criticized individuals who violated God's command. For instance, a prophet rebuked David for adultery and murder (2 Sam. 12:4) while Amos berated women who oppressed the poor, crushed the needy, and lorded it over their husbands (Amos. 4:1) (Shield, 2002:66-88). God chose the channel of prophecy to reach out to Man with definite instructions. Divine instructions are for the good order and governance of the people. Whenever prophetic oracles are obeyed, there is peace, progress and development in the land. Israel suffered exile many times because she jettisoned prophetic oracles (Jer. 25: 1-11).

The Bible establishes the fact that God created Man in his own image and intended him to attain to his likeness. Furthermore, God often share communication with man in the Garden of Eden. Communication was another bond between man and God. God instructed man not to eat fruits from a certain tree but man contravene divine instruction. This led to separation from God. It is through the instrumentality of prophecy that man will be restored. Communication means sharing and this means prophecy. Prophecy is a part of divine self- disclosure or self-revelation to man to increase man's knowledge of God and the understanding of his ways (cf. Ps. 103:7). God was eager to disclose something of himself, his will or his ways to his people, as they were also willing to receive from him.

Israel is a product of prophecy. God called Abraham with a promise to make of him a great nation (Gen. 12). The covenant God cut with Abraham was prophecy- laden (Gaebelein, 1990:115-116; Collins, 2005:61). As a prelude to the formation of the nation, the God of Israel sought for himself a prophet to entrust his instructions, directions, judgment and states to him. According to Hosea the prophet: "The Lord used a prophet to bring Israel up from Egypt, by

a prophet he cared for him" (Hosea 12:13, NIV). Hosea also indicted Israel for its rebellions against the Lord who had been good to her (Hosea 12:14). From the fore going it is clear that prophecy is an essential ingredient for growth and development of Israel.

In ancient Israel, the prophets assumed the role of divine assessors of the nation's life, conduct and relationships. In this role they complemented the priestly functions with their spontaneous critique of the social order. This is evident from the writings and actions of the prophets. Through the prophets Yahweh made his will and demands known to Israel as the covenant people. Whenever Israel was disloyal to the terms of the covenant, Yahweh raised prophets to bring the people back into his kind of relationship. To the prophets, Israel's history was a continual chain of sin and fruitlessness (Howard, 1969:191). As far as Anderson was concerned, "the prophet speaking under the influence of the Yahweh's Spirit was able to interpret the meaning of events and proclaim the will of God in concrete terms" (Anderson: 1975:231). Thus, prophets challenged people to right living by demanding a religion that translated into the socio-political and economic dimensions of life. Whenever Israel complied with Yahweh's instruction there was growth and development in the nation.

Also, it was a normal practice in ancient Israel for people to consult God in difficult situations through the prophets. People from all walks of life consult prophets for divine direction and intervention in their existential concerns. Prophetic consultation ranged from private matters such as a word about lost donkeys (1 Sam. 9: 3-10), the outcome of an illness (2 Kgs. 1:2; 8: 7-15) to national or international issues (1 Kgs. 22:6). Some prophecies were received heartily but others were rejected because they did not answer the presuppositions of the inquirer. This was the case of monarchical consultations with the prophets.

Furthermore, a careful study of the prophecies in ancient Israel revealed that prophets were concerned with justice and fair play. The prophets condemned oppressive regimes and leaders, and demanded a fair deal and treatment for the poor. The prophet aimed at some forms of social control that will result in reforms and development, to improve the pitiable social condition of the poor. The prophets were concern with the political and social questions of their generation. They were interested in social justice as well as religious orthodoxy. They rebuked unequal and unkind practices in the administration of

justice (Awojobi, 2018: 118). The prophets declared that God is interested in justice for all and sundry. In line with God's action of benevolence and fairness, God expects that humans would display similar behavior or rather replicate his fairness and magnanimity among the humans and nations (Amos 1:3-2:5). Israel and other nations of the world will be judge because of their sinfulness (Sweeney, 2000, 200-203; Sunukjian, 1985: 1428-29). God's declaration of judgment is tied to His irrevocable right over the nations as the creator and as the standard of justice for mankind (Finley, 2015:1).

Besides, the prophets were Yahweh's mouthpiece. According to Leon J. Wood, the prophets hold a unique place in the history and development of Israel and the ancient Near East. This is evident by their writings which have been of great importance in world history (Wood, 1979:13). Wood also observed that they were specially called people. They did not come to office by inheritance, having been born into a prophetic tribe or family; nor was a son of a former prophet automatically made a prophet because he was the son of such a person. Each person was chosen by God to do a specific assignment (Wood, 1979:1). Prophets spoke in the time of historical and moral crisis. There would not have been the need for prophets if not for crisis at one time or the other. When the literary prophets are posted, it will be noted that they are clustered around critical historical events or eras (Bullock, 1986:28).

Moreover, prophecies in ancient Israel were oracles of hope of resuscitation and restoration. For instance, the oracles of Ezekiel were deeply rooted in hope for the nation in exile. Charles Lee Feinberg captured the entire book when he observed two purposes for the book: "(1) to remind them of the sin which had brought judgment and exile upon them and (2) to encourage and strengthen their faith by prophecies of future restoration and glory" (Feinberg, 1974:13). It should be noted that the house of Israel at this time was looking forward to restoration which Ezekiel saw in the vision of the resuscitation of the dry bones (Ezek. 37). The message of Ezekiel in chapter 37 is an indication that God who is sovereign remains faithful to his people in exile with a hope of rebranding them in form of resuscitation, restoration, development and deliverance from suffering (McConville, 2002:102).

It should be noted that from the time of Saul, Yahweh has always prophetic oracles from the prophets to influence political decisions of the nation. Israel went into Assyrian and Babylonian captivity because she ignored warnings from the prophets. It was Prophet Samuel that enthroned Saul and David. Prophet

Nathan gained position of great influence in the royal court during the reign of David. Nathan's oracle on Yahweh's covenant with David had lasting effects on Israel's life and thought. However, when King David abuses his power, Nathan did not spare him (2 Sam. 12: 1-15). In the time of political crisis and aggression of foreign nations that threatened Israel's national life, prophets do deliver oracles of victory to Israel and enjoined her to put her trust in Yahweh alone.

Also, as noted earlier in the study, a prophet in ancient Israel was an individual called by Yahweh and given a message for a particular person or group. There were false prophets in Israel as well as in Nigeria today. These are persons who claimed to have been called by God to the office of the prophets but are not. The false prophets are fetish, materialistic and commercial preachers. Their interest is in pecuniary gains and not national growth and development. They extort money from the poor and the rich.

In Nigerian society today, the impact of prophecy on the growth, development and transformation of the nation cannot be overemphasized. From time to time prophets in Nigeria are consulted by the people to know what the future hold in stock for them. At the end of the year, some prophets in Nigeria predict what will happen the following year. As mentioned earlier, prophecy is a divine message from God transmitted to man through his appointed human agent. The state of human relationship, as well as man's relationship with God is of utmost importance to the way God views his dealings with man. God works through the prophets to disclose, his attitudes, intentions, or expectations to man. Israel as a covenant nation was expected to guard her relationship with Yahweh jealously. However, Israel erred many times in keeping the terms of the covenant but God will always send series of warnings to them to avoid tragic consequences, or admonitions in the face of adversities to encourage the afflicted and spur them on to victory. The prophets in Nigeria are to emulate the prophets in ancient Israel by communicating divine messages to the people from time to time. The ancient Israelite Prophets proclaimed their messages faithfully and God backed them up with divine power. It was the divine power that working with the proclaimed message that transformed the hearts of individuals, and by extension, the entire community.

It is believe that there can be no meaningful development without ingredients like justice, faithfulness, righteousness, true love, peace and

holiness among the citizenry. The prophets have the responsibility of addressing the factors that want to militate against these ingredients. It would be recalled that prophets in ancient Israel demanded justice for the oppressed in the land. The situation in Nigeria is similar to that of the ancient Israel. Political leaders in Nigeria are involved in any form of injustice against the poor. Injustice meted against the poor and the needy are always the product of the rule of evil men and women who consequently set aside God's righteous laws. They bribe their way through in everything. The judicial processes have been compromised. Justice is now for the highest bidder. True prophets in Nigeria should concern themselves with social justice. It is a good thing to have pity on the victims of injustice and change the evil social structures and unjust situations that we see on a daily bases in the streets, cities, courts, government institutions and so on. Like their counterpart in ancient Israel, prophets in Nigeria are to champion the fight against any form of injustice in the nation.

It is only when people are transformed that they can make meaningful contribution to the society. For no society can rise beyond the level of its morality. The faith based organizations have the responsibility to inculcate moral principles in their members. The impact of Christianity on Africa is believed to be a variant of globalization. Consequently, moral transformation of Nigeria is considered as a positive influence of globalization (Famulusi, 2013:247). Transformation is not merely a set of ideas or theories. It means empowerment, justice, healing, reconciliation and freedom. Transformation has to do with building character. It is becoming obvious that that the message about transformation is missing in the Nigerian Church today. The real goal of the Church is to see that Christ is formed in people within the Christian Community. When this happened, the Christian community will then become agent of transformation in the Society. Besides, prophecy regulates and control human behavior. For instance, if a prediction is negative the recipient will pray to avert it. If a prediction is positive recipients are seen praying to speed up the fulfillment of the prophecy. In Nigeria today, those who have been living carelessly will suddenly turn a new leaf to God to avert calamities predicted. Murderers, thieves, and rouges have been known to change from their wicked ways for fear of the bad things predicted as consequences of their actions (Dada, 2018:190).

4. Conclusion

It is clear from our study that prophecy was a Catalyst to the growth, development and transformation of nations. Israel was born and sustained through prophecy. Prophecy was used as a channel of communication between God and Man. Prophecy was used as an instrument to regulate human behavior and to control religious, political and economic space. The prophets are expected to declare the mind of God to their audience. Prophetic oracles were aimed at transforming the recipients. Anytime Israel erred God will send his prophets with message of repentance and if she refuse to yield message of punishment will follow. The transformation experienced in ancient Israel was due to her response to prophetic oracles. In the same vein, the Nigerian society is expected to give appropriate response to the messages from true prophets so as to experience transformation. The messages of the prophets in the Church in Nigeria today, must be accompanied with life transforming power which is capable in changing the lives of the people morally and socially.

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