



An Exploration of the Prophet and Prophecy in Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity in Light of Old Testament Theology

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ABSTRACT

Prophets and prophecy are not strange phenomena in most religions and communities around the world. Ghana's experience with the prophetic phenomena has been ambivalent and paradoxical. There have been times and places where the prophetic movement and ministry have been widely embraced. Whereas in some others, the phenomena have been criticized and called into question by many people in Ghana. The abuses perpetrated by some so-called prophets, and executions of prophetic excesses have been the main factors leading to such public outcries. It was in this vein that an attempt was made to examine the prophetic phenomena in Ghanaian Christianity, using the Old Testament as a framework. As a qualitative study, the Old Testament text and other scholarly works that reflect on the phenomena of prophets and prophecy in Ancient Israel and Ghana were reviewed. In addition, a researcher's observation on the ministrations of the so-called prophets in Ghana was done in order to gather relevant information that could facilitate the intended Old Testament-Ghanaian prophetic parallels. The paper contends that though the phenomena in the Old Testament context are somewhat nuanced, which makes theologizing quite challenging, the authors of the Old Testament corpus have provided adequate information on the prophetic phenomena that can evolve a framework for Ghanaian prophets and prophetic ministrations. This paper is relevant for scholarships in relation to Old Testament studies, prophetism, neo-prophetic, Christianity in Ghana, contextual theology, and Christian religious excesses.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of prophecy has become a major issue in the contemporary Ghanaian society. Throughout history, the question has not been whether or not these phenomena have historical antecedents in the religious milieu of the existing religions of the world but the criticisms have centred on the very role they claim to play within certain religious ontological caste and praxes. While some sections of the church in Ghana consider it to be an expression and exercise of a gift of the Holy Spirit and an office in the ministry of the church, others have viewed contemporary African prophets' gifts and practices as a nuisance to the church and the general society.¹ Interestingly, many observers consider the

¹ Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Prophecy in Ghanaian Pentecostalism: A Tool for Social Confusion," *Journal of Pentecostalism Studies* 11 no.5 (2018): 51–66.

activities of biblical prophets and their prophecies to be different from what is being practised by contemporary Ghanaian prophets and their prophecies.

The concepts of prophecy and prophets in the Bible have proven to be of considerable interest to Christian researchers and even readers outside of Christianity and academia.² The contemporary Ghanaian Church is currently experiencing an unprecedented surge in activities of prophets and prophecy with considerable impact on the religious life of the people in general and Christians in particular.³ This is, in part, located in the claims of both prophets and patrons of prophetic activities of the witness of changed lives, not only religiously, but also economically and socially among many Ghanaians. Hammond explains that God intends to raise the awareness of contemporary Christians regarding the usefulness of prophetic ministry in order for the prophetic activities and the administration of prophecies to be properly recognized in the running of the Church.⁴ In Ghana, the prophetic ideation is galvanising grassroots support and at the same time, stirring controversies, as several Christian subscribers search for solutions to their perplexing existential problems regarding the manner with which God mediates these human challenges through the operations of the prophetic, and how one needs to respond appropriately to the messages they solicit from the prophets. There is, therefore, the need for a biblical understanding of the role of prophets and prophecy and how that impacts the social life of contemporary Ghanaian Christians.

Per the operations of the contemporary Ghanaian prophets, prophetic activity emphasizes identifying and countering evil by prophets for the success of their patrons. Prophetic utterances among contemporary Ghanaians are simply predictions, as patrons constantly consult with prophets to foretell events in their lives and to receive *akwankyere*, “directions,” to know how to steer their lives for economic success and other betterments of life. This accounts for the centrality of the person of the prophet in contemporary Ghanaian prophetic ministry. Gifford underscores why Ghana’s new religious movements flourish mainly because their prophet-leaders “claim to possess answers to the most pressing existential problems and economic survival.”⁵

That notwithstanding, there are several abuses, both physical and spiritual, that have been observed among some prophets and their patrons in the contemporary Ghanaian Church and society. There have been reports about some so-called prophets duping their clients, charging exorbitant fees before ministering to people, and some, sexually abusing their clients.⁶ These raise questions about the character and role of prophets and prophetic utterances in the present-day Ghanaian Church in light of the teachings of the Bible. Thus, there is a need to explore and understand what the Bible relates to prophecy, prophets, and their role in reforming societies.

A cursory look at the activities of Pentecostal churches in Ghana reveals that the contemporary Ghanaian church has been influenced profoundly by the so-called “prophets” and their “prophecies.” Christian prophecy is an important topic for discussion and a source of concern for many people in Ghana today. For instance, the rise of routine and panic-inducing prophecies in Ghana prompted the then Inspector General of Police –Dr. George Akuffo Dampare to prescribe some guidelines for “prophecy-giving” pastors of Ghana to follow, to avoid making utterances that have the potential to cause fear and panic in the society in 2021.⁷ In that directive, “prophets” who would ignore the directive, stood the risk of being arrested by the police and being tried in a law court for “causing fear and panic” in the society. Interestingly, people who were well-known for giving doom and calamitous-inclined “prophecies” (messages) during every December 31 special church service, refrained from

² Victor Umaru, “Historical Overview of the Old Testament Prophecy and Prophetism: Its Application to the 21st Century Church,” *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2023.

³ Asamoah-Gyadu, “Prophecy in Ghanaian Pentecostalism: A Tool for Social Confusion.”

⁴ Bill Hammond, *Prophecy, Pitfalls and Principles* (Pennsylvania: Destiny Image, 2001).

⁵ Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity, New Edition: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 9.

⁶ Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh, “Mission Financing: The Case of Contemporary Prophetic Ministry in Ghana,” *Pentecostalism, Charismaticism and Neo-Prophetic Movements Journal* 1, no. 4 (2020): 67–78.

⁷ Mabel Aku Banasseh, “Dealing with Religious Intimidations and Fearsome Prophecies,” *Daily Graphic, Issue: 366478*, December 22, 2021.

broadcasting their messages on social media that year while others resorted to the use of proverbial and metaphorical expressions, so they would not fall foul to the law.

Realizing from the narrative of the Bible, a prophet is God's spokesperson or messenger. This is evidenced in two aspects: foretelling the future and forth-telling the present. Foretelling is essentially predicting the future. The core of the prophetic ministration was not a prediction for prediction's sake. Their predictions concerned the consequences of the present behaviour of the people of God. Thus, their prophetic intent was to reform the people in order to escape the wrath of YHWH foretold.⁸ McKenzie asserts that the basic essence of biblical prophecy is critique.⁹ When prophets predicted the future, it was usually the immediate future of ancient Israel and its neighbours, a future that concerns God's plan for them. Forth-telling on the other hand, is the proclamation of the message of God concerning the will of God for the lives of the people to resolve social issues, exhort them to repent and go back to God.¹⁰

In Ghana, Christian prophetic utterance, a kind that is seen or heard in many churches, traditions and society as well as in the print and electronic media, simply amounts to predictions made by self-styled "prophets" regarding the economic, political and social lives of their patrons and those from whom they can derive personal and economic benefits. Aryeh affirms that in Ghana, the contemporary trend of prophecy entails the act of the so-called prophets revealing past events, present existential life issues, and foretelling the future occurrences concerning their clients; and prescribing *sunsum mu akwankyerε*, "spiritual direction," to avert any bad omens and position them for a better future.¹¹ This paper contends that despite the abundance of prophecies and prophetic activities in Ghanaian Christianity, prophecies have not led to a reduction in political and social corruption or immorality in the country. Thus, the prophetic phenomenon in Ghana needs a critical examination. Failure to critique the excesses and abuses would leave that ministry lame and may give credence to those who question its usefulness in the church and society.

The foregoing narrative definitely calls for an investigation into the nature of prophecy and its significance in Ghanaian Christianity and the implications on social reforms and good Christian living. Biblical prophets spoke the truth concerning God's will to their audience regarding how things were and how people lived with their neighbours.¹² Such prophets called for a response from the people, mainly by way of repentance per the will of God. This often compelled the prophets to make proclamations and harsh criticisms against evil and evildoers, whom they urged to "change their way of life or prepare for evil to ensue from their actions."¹³ The primary intent of biblical prophecy, therefore, is not to merely foretell the future but to forth-tell the present to address certain circumstances of social, political, and religious significance in the lives of contemporary people that have serious implications for their future lives.¹⁴

The question everyone would obviously like to ask is how different is contemporary Ghanaian prophecy from the biblical prophecies and whether or not contemporary Ghanaian prophetic ministry can be described as biblical. This study explores the general concept of biblical prophets and prophecy and their implications for Ghanaian Christians. This paper seeks to address these issues from the perspective of the Bible, concerning the essence and outlook of prophecy and the implications of biblical prophecy on the Ghanaian Christian. The study brings about some characteristics of the prophets, seen in the Bible and carefully compares them to the activities of contemporary so-called prophets in Ghana and some parts of Africa. This paper aims to explore the nature, significance, and implications of biblical prophecy to the Ghanaian Christian. The goal is further divided into exploring the meaning and the general concept of prophecy in the Bible, understanding the significance of

⁸ Emmanuel K. Asante, *The Prophetic and Apocalyptic Phenomena in Israel: A Theological Introduction* (Accra, Ghana: SonLife Press, 2015).

⁹ Steven L. McKenzie, *How to Read the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ McKenzie, *How to Read the Bible*.

¹¹ Aryeh, "Mission Financing: The Case of Contemporary Prophetic Ministry in Ghana."

¹² Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*, 9.

¹³ Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*, 9.

¹⁴ Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*, 9.

biblical prophecies to the audience and examining the implications of biblical prophecies on the contemporary Ghanaian Christian.

METHODOLOGY

This paper used an exploratory research method and a descriptive approach. Exploratory research is a methodological approach exploring research questions that have not been studied in depth.¹⁵ Major sources of information were sourced from books, journals, biblical commentaries, expository manuals, and speeches. The research was limited to the explanations of the concept of biblical prophecy as against the casual interpretations of prophecy in the Ghanaian Christian worldview. The interpretation of prophecy outside Christianity and contexts outside the boundaries of Ghana has not been considered in this study. As an important area of study, this research serves as a springboard for further research. The study also serves as a tool for general Christian education and enlightenment in the church by helping Ghanaian Christians understand the concept of prophecy and how prophets ought to conduct themselves, following the teachings of the Bible. The primary data was collected using researcher observation of the ministry of some so-called prophets in Ghana. The information gathered was analyzed and is presented thematically.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Prophecy: A Conceptual Description

The term “prophecy,” typically describes a message that the communicator (prophet) claims to have received from a deity or other objects of worship.¹⁶ This takes the shape of guidance, correction, a demand for penitence, justice, etc. Essentially, prophecy is about speaking forth and making predictions or foretelling the future. It refers to the declaration of God’s message under divine inspiration.¹⁷ The communicator or prophet is referred to in Biblical Hebrew as the *nabi*, which denotes, a spokesperson, mouthpiece, or an oracle.¹⁸ In the Ancient Near East (ANE), a prophet serves as the people’s representative to their God and the people’s messenger from God. Thus, their role was somewhat precarious because they had difficulty in keeping in balance their ability to face man and being faced by God.¹⁹

In the Old Testament, Abraham is the first to be designated as a prophet (Gen. 20:7). Aside from him, are several people described as prophets. It was a term used largely to describe the proclamation of the divine message. Many of them were raised to confront the issues of their day that had ramifications on the relationship between Israel and YHWH. They had the responsibility of drawing the nation’s attention to the statutes of their covenant with the LORD. With varied means, the prophets called the people back to faithfulness towards the covenant faith.

The word “prophet,” is also defined explicitly in both Greek and Hebrew translations as the spokesperson for a group of people and one party to another.²⁰ However, this definition of prophecy as solely being tied to foretelling and forecasts is insufficient to define the idea.²¹ Every prophet’s foremost interest is in the current events in their social and political circumstances. They emphasize social injustices, religious idolatry, public morals, and the abuse of power by the society’s upper class. Accordingly, the prophet’s role includes speaking not only of judgment and damnation but also of future hope, encouragement, and kindness.

The word “prophecy,” in English is a derivation from Greek, which is taken from the words, “to say” or “to speak” and a prefix, *προ pro*, which can have a variety of meanings depending on the

¹⁵ M. Saunders, P. Lewis, and A. Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students* (Edinburg Gate, Harlow: Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2007).

¹⁶ Umaru, “Historical Overview of the Old Testament Prophecy and Prophetism,”

¹⁷ Asante, *The Prophetic and Apocalyptic Phenomena in Israel* xxiii.

¹⁸ Asante, *The Prophetic and Apocalyptic Phenomena in Israel* 5.

¹⁹ J. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

²⁰ Emil G Hirsch, J Frederic McCurdy, and Joseph Jacobs, “Prophets and Prophecy,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12389-prophets-and-prophecy#New_York_et_Londres, (1905), 213.

²¹ Carolyn Osiek and I. L. Hoppe, *Anselm Academy Study Bible: New American Bible Revised Edition* (Winona, MN: Anselm Publishing, 2003).

context in which it is used.²² Therefore, the phrase *προ pro*, “speak before,” can be used to describe someone who announces something in advance or who speaks on behalf of another person. In all instances, it is implied that the speaker serves as the representative, a delegate or mouthpiece of another individual or being. The term, “god-speaker,” in Greek lexicology, denoted a person who represented a god and communicated that gods’ will to humans.²³ A traditional Greek prophet is described by Brown, as “a person who by direct inspiration or by the interpretation of sounds and omens, declares the will of the gods to a person who asks for advice.”²⁴

In the words of Plato, “Prophecy, along with other similar role labels of intermediary functionaries like diviners, shamans, mediums, or mystics, is thus essentially a religious genre in the rubric of revelatory disclosures from the divine realm to the world of humanity and is thus an epistemic category of intermediation between divinity and humanity.”²⁵ That is to say, all cultures have and do embrace the concept of intermediaries, mediating communications between divinity and humanity. However, the labels, as well as their *modus operandi* differ from culture to culture. The many labels for intermediary roles do not necessarily describe the same occurrence or function across all cultures and periods, making them imperfect universal signifiers of the diverse functions. This is affirmed by Brunner, who cites Plato that in the ancient Hellenistic culture, the conflation of the various intermediary categories, and their trans-rational epistemic motifs, is aptly portrayed in Plato’s postulate:

God endowed human stupidity with the ability to use divination. True inspired divination cannot be accomplished by a man when he is in full control of his reasoning faculties; rather, it can only be done when these faculties are impaired by sleep, illness, or divine inspiration. It is customary to assign the tribe of prophets, τῶν προ τῶν γέν, to judge these inspired divinations. They are even given the name “diviners” (μάνται), by people who are completely unaware that they are actually “interpreters of the mysterious voice and apparition,” for whom the name, “prophets of things divined” would be more appropriate.²⁶

A practical definition of prophecy emphasizes the core nature of the phenomenon, while a role-label approach restricts the definition to instances of the role-label within specific cultures and literature. In ancient Hellenistic culture, divination was often divided into *artificiosa divinatio* and *naturalis divinatio*. The former referred to divination through technical methods, such as analyzing events or phenomena to reveal the will of the gods. The latter, on the other hand, involved receiving divine messages through inspired speech, often during states of trance, ecstasy, or vision.²⁷ Thus, to Plato, a prophet is needed because other people encounter mysteries such as dreams and visions and look for interpretations. One could however say that Plato’s description falls short of what one observes to be the role of the prophets in the Old Testament (OT).

Similar categories can be found in the history of ancient Israel, where the priests, for instance, frequently enquired of YHWH through the symbolic *urim* and *thummim* (Exod. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 28:6; Eze. 2:63). In other instances, divination was communicated orally through inspiration. For instance, while the harpist was playing, the hand of YHWH came upon the prophet Elisha, causing him to speak what might be referred to as inspired speech. He stated, “This is what YHWH says...” (2 Kgs. 3:15, 16). While Elisha’s inspired method of divination appears to be closer to the Hellenistic *naturalis divinatio*, or intuitive divination, the *urim* and *thummim* mode of divination resonates with the Hellenistic *artificiosa divinatio* or inductive divination. It is believed, however, that the defining characteristic of prophetic intermediation, which sets it apart from other forms of

²² Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Paternoster: Carlisle, 1986).

²³ Henry George Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, vol. 2 (at the Clarendon Press, 1925).1539-1540.

²⁴ Brown. *The New International Dictionary*, 76.

²⁵ Plato, “Phaedrus,” in *Prophecy in the Postmodern Christian Era*, ed. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²⁶ Emil Brunner, *Reason and Revelation: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, ed. O. trans. Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946).

²⁷ Niels C. Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy: The Post-Biblical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

intermediary phenomena, is a divine initiation that not only delivers a revelatory message but also provides an immediate experience of God's presence.

The Biblical Perspective of Prophecy

In the framework of the religious beliefs of Ancient Israel and the broader religious context of the Ancient Near East (ANE), the occurrence of prophecy was typically interpreted as the human conveyance of divine messages, so revealing the divine will to people.²⁸ Even though the phenomena of prophecy are shown in the Old Testament in many different ways, intermediary transmission, thus the proclamation of divine messages to a human audience is widely considered to be the essential element of OT prophecy. The impetus for prophecy is always divine because of the divine-to-human nature of the flow of the prophetic intermediary directive. According to Lindblom, a prophet in the Old Testament "is a person who, because he is conscious of having been specially chosen and called, feels forced to perform actions and proclaim ideas which in a mental state of intense inspiration or real ecstasy, have been indicated to him in the form of divine revelations,"²⁹ which is the key characteristic of intermediary transmission of divine messages. Here, God literally takes over that person's whole body, and makes use of his/her mental faculties in disseminating the divine message, using every means possible.

However, other biblical scholars disagree with Lindblom's definition, contending that it undermines the exigencies of the prophet's human endowments and reasoning in the creation and dissemination of the prophetic message by placing too much emphasis on divine influence.³⁰ A different perspective on prophecy in Ancient Israel and the ANE contexts emphasizes the prophet's logical cognitive role. As postulated by Barstad:

A person, male or female, who is made the object of a revelation by one or more deities through a cognitive experience, a vision, an audition, a dream, or the like and is aware of being chosen by the deity or deities to communicate the revelation verbally or through metalinguistic behaviours to a third party who will receive the message.³¹

The prophet in certain prophetic oracles uses the phrase "thus says the LORD" (e.g., in Isa. 37:21, 50:1, and 56:1), giving the impression that the prophet is merely acting as YHWH's mouthpiece. However, at other times, the prophet speaks as a narrator, giving the prophet's perspective on the prophetic proclamation, an anthropological element. The prophet Amos, for instance, frequently begins his narratives with the phrase, "This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me" (Am. 7:1; 8:1). "The prophet absorbs the mysterious experience into his humanity, filtering it through human modes of apprehension and evaluation, and causing it to issue the message in a linguistic form which is human and not divine."³² Here, Amos reveals that he received the oracles through visions. Yet, the communication of the prophecy to Israel, Judah and the neighbouring nations was done based on his intellectual, linguistic and metalinguistic capacities.

The Sinaitic theophany, when a covenant relationship between Israel and YHWH, the God of Israel, was finalized and ratified by means of a covenant code (Exod. 20:23–23:19), is where the OT locates the etymology of Old Testament prophecy.³³ The Deuteronomist describes the covenant-making incident (Deut. 5:1–33) and then explains how the Israelites' need for an intermediary to speak on YHWH's behalf, rather than YHWH speaking to them personally, is where the Israelites' prophecy originated:

²⁸ Marti Nissinen, *Writings from the Ancient World, 12: Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

²⁹ Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1962).

³⁰ Harold Henry Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965).

³¹ Hans M Barstad, "No Prophets? Recent Developments in Biblical Prophetic Research and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 18, no. 57 (1993): 39–60.

³² William McKane, *Jeremiah*, vol. 1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986).

³³ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

YHWH, your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, “Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.” The LORD said to me: “What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words into his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him” (Deut. 18:15-18).³⁴

Thus, the origin of OT prophecy is represented as a mediated revelatory presence of an inspired Almighty God to human finitude that would otherwise be overpowered by an unmediated overwhelming divine presence –thus:

YHWH descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called... when the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, ‘speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die (Exod. 19:20; 20:18-19).

Mysterium tremendum, or the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures, is how Rudolf Otto characterizes the sensation of being overpowered by divine presence.³⁵ Both a prophetic charism and a prophetic vocation are depicted as aspects of the phenomena of prophecy that are attested in the Old Testament. Important or well-known OT prophets like Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel are not only referred to as *nebi'im*, “prophets,” but their entire lives are marked by the practice of prophecy as a ministry or profession (1 Kgs. 18:36; 2 Kgs. 9:1; Isa 37:2; Jer.1:5; Eze. 2:5). Their prophetic expressions are often either intrusive or non-intrusive in character. The prophetic manifestation falls under the first category and is a declaration that is made as soon as it is inspired, seemingly without any prior thought on the side of the prophet. The chief of the thirty, Amasai, for instance, spoke after the Spirit fell upon him (1 Chron.12:18). In intrusive prophecy, according to Max Turner, “the Spirit is conceived of as strongly stimulating the speech event itself and granting some kind of immediate inspiration of its revelatory content.”³⁶

In essence, non-invasive prophecy is a prophetic report of a previous revelation in which the prophet seems to have thought back on the revelatory contact with God and reported what God had shown to him or her. The prophecy that Elijah delivered to King Ahab in 1 Kings 21:20–24 seems to fall under the category of non-intrusive prophecy. The seemingly benign prophecy is said to be the result of a prophet having stood, or having gained access to a heavenly council, denoting a previous contact with YHWH. The heavenly council is described by the prophet Micaiah in his account of his experience: “I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left” (1 Kgs. 22:19). For instance, the prophet Jeremiah uses rhetoric to attack false prophets in his polemic against them by asking, “But which of them had stood in the council of YHWH to see or to hear his word? YHWH responds, “But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my word to my people” (Jer. 23:22a), in response to the statement in Jeremiah 23:18.³⁷ Even when the New Testament (NT) author reminds his readers that the OT prophesy did not start from human will or human thinking (2 Pet. 1:20-21), the implication here is that the entire Old Testament prophetic corpus was initiated by God.

There are other prophetic occurrences in the OT as well, and they seem to be connected to liturgical worship. For instance, the Chronicler describes numerous individuals who were part of the Davidic temple cults and had been chosen by King David for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied

³⁴ John Penney, “The Testing of New Testament Prophecy,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 5, no. 10 (1997): 35–84.

³⁵ Penney, “Testing of New Testament Prophecy,” 84.

³⁶ Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Wipf and Stock, 1996).

³⁷ Turner, *Power from on High*, 98.

by harps, lyres, and cymbals (1 Chron. 25:1b; 1 Chron. 6:31–48; 25:1–31; 2 Chron. 20:14–17). The term prophecy, as used by the Chronicler, may have had a wider hermeneutical significance than simply the proclamation of divine oracles; prophecy as a mediated revelatory presence of God could also include such liturgical activities as music. However, their “prophetic” activities appear to have been sporadic and part of their liturgical service in the temple. Although no explicit prophetic activity is ever associated with Miriam in the Bible aside from her leadership in the liturgical “Song of the Sea,” this is perhaps the role that gave her the title of a prophet (Exod. 15: 20).³⁸

Therefore, liturgical music is portrayed as being essential in the mediation of divine presence, as also shown by the story of Elisha (2 Kgs. 3:15, 16). According to Amos Hakham, in the case of the “Levitical prophecy,” prayer and praise were essentially the first words that God revealed to the prophet:

The Levites who sang and prayed in the temple were called “prophets,” for when they prayed, and sang, and played, divine inspiration descended upon them ... prayers to God consist of words that God has put in our mouth... thus some Jewish sages regarded the entire book of Psalms as a work of prophecy.³⁹

Thus, liturgical worship is seen as a metaphorical reaction to the sense of God’s presence. Worship, according to Crichton, is described as “a reaching out through the fear that always accompanies the sacred to the *mysterium*, conceived as *tremendum*, but also *fascinans*, because behind it and in it, there is an intuition of the transcendent.”⁴⁰ As a result, according to this definition, worship is related to prophecy because it does not only prepare one’s spirit for divine encounter but also expresses an intuitive sense of the mysticism of divine presence. For this reason, Crichton added, “Christian worship is best discussed in terms of response; in worship, man is responding to God or speaking words that have been given to him by the Lord.”⁴¹

All of this is to say that Old Testament prophecy was intricate and nuanced. The many types and styles of prophetic functions continued throughout the OT period, despite the Hebrew term, “prophet,” appearing to have gained prevalence as the general name for the intermediary officials.⁴² It is therefore impossible to develop a consistently homogeneous prophetic theology that underlies the diverse sorts of prophets and prophesies recorded in the Old Testament.⁴³ However, the main themes of OT prophecy are that ancient Israelite prophecy was a revelatory experience of divine presence, that the prophet served as the human conduit for receiving and proclaiming the divine revelation and or message, and that it is plausible to view divinely-inspired liturgical utterances as prophecy in the sense that they also mediated the immediacy of divine presence and divine agenda.

Different theories exist to explain the occurrence of prophecy seen in the New Testament Church. There is a general consensus among scholars that there were ongoing forms of prophetic manifestations in the NT incipient Church, some of which were essentially a continuation of the OT prophetic forms. This is contrary to some theological scholars who advocate a dispensational approach, which holds that prophecy was intrinsically related to the dispensation of the formation of the biblical canon and therefore ceased with the formation of the canon.⁴⁴ For instance, to Panagopoulos, “The manifestations of prophecy in the NT church are best understood in the light of their background in Israel and in the mission of Jesus.”⁴⁵ Jesus Christ is portrayed as God’s supreme revelatory presence in the NT apostolic writings (1 Tim. 2:5, Heb. 8:6, 9:15, and 12:24). The Apocalypse of John also

³⁸ “Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam performed for them. (Exod. 15:20- 21).

³⁹ Amos Hakham, *The Bible Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mosad HaravKook, 2003).

⁴⁰ James Dunlop Crichton, *A Theology of Worship in the Study of Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1978).

⁴¹ Crichton, *A Theology of Worship*, 7.

⁴² Ronald E. Clements, *Prophecy and Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975).

⁴³ Clements, *Prophecy and Tradition*, 23.

⁴⁴ B. Richard Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, (Philipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Press, 1979).

⁴⁵ Johannes Panagopoulos, *Prophetic Vocation in the New Testament and Today* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 46.

describes Jesus Christ as the pinnacle of divine revelation, and his revelatory presence is what gives New Testament prophecy its distinctive character (Rev. 19:10).⁴⁶

When the word “prophecy” is used in the books of the New Testament, there are 144 instances, 123 of which refer to Old Testament prophets. The remaining instances, however, refer to Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, early church prophets like Agabus (Acts. 11:28; 21:10), the prophets at Antioch (Acts. 13:1-2), Judas and Silas (Acts. 15:32), and daughters of the evangelist Philip (Ac. 21:9).⁴⁷ Other references to prophetic appearances among early church members also exist. As an illustration, when Paul laid hands on several disciples in Ephesus, it is said that “they spoke in tongues and prophesied” (Ac. 19:6). However, it appears that Jesus Christ, the ultimate prophetic-revelatory presence of God, has authority over all types of New Testament church prophecy.⁴⁸ That is, Christ is the standard of the prophetic in the NT corpus.

Although a few people seem to have served as prophets in the early church’s ministry, the Early Church prophecy as understood from the NT passages seems to have been, typically, intrusive prophetic manifestations in congregational settings.⁴⁹ However, it is ideal to think of the phenomenon of prophecy pertaining to two forms: a temporal and apostolic-canonically approved form of prophecy that was in keeping with the OT understanding of prophecy, and a less authoritative but more persistent form of congregational prophetic utterances and manifestations.⁵⁰ The Apocalypse of John is considered a canonical prophecy in keeping with OT canonical prophecy (Rev. 1:3; 22:18) as well as the other NT writings that are placed on the same pedestal as OT prophetic texts (2 Pet. 3:15-16). Conversely, one observes that in the Corinthian Church (1 Cor. 12-14), some prophetic utterances during church services were considered as a less authoritative form of prophecy which needed to be thoroughly examined to ascertain their veracity and appropriateness in the church (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:19- 21).⁵¹

Opoku Onyinah admits that there are prophets in the New Testament.⁵² Onyinah again agrees that in the New Testament, the potential exists for each person to prophesy.⁵³ According to the view of Onyinah, the gift of prophecy “is the most popular gift among all the spiritual gifts.”⁵⁴ This is because some persons possess the gift of prophecy while still others are in the business of ministering as people called into the “office” of the prophet. Onyinah traces the prophetic ministry from the Old Testament to the New Testament. However, his work does not say much about the prophetic ministry and social reform in contemporary times, thus, providing a gap this study seeks to contribute to filling. He does not also explain what he means by “office of the prophet,” but assumes that his Ghanaian readers would understand. However, taking the ministry of the prophet as an office could be problematic. Should we consider it as an office like the chief, director of a company, and head of state, etc.?

In *Prophets and Prophecy*, Richard Oswald Commey, who claims to be a prophet with a call to train other prophets, locates the significance of the prophetic ministry describing it as “a very powerful and very important ministry in Christendom, but unfortunately, not much is known about the prophet.”⁵⁵ According to Commey, true prophecy originates from God.⁵⁶ He observes that, “the word prophecy can be broken down into two, *pro* and *phemi*. *Pro*, means “forth” and *phemi*, means “to speak.” Prophecy, therefore means “to speak forth.”⁵⁷ Commey, thus, offers a useful definition of

⁴⁶ Bogdan G Bucur, “Hierarchy, Prophecy, and the Angelomorphic Spirit: A Contribution to the Study of the Book of Revelation’s” *Wirkungsgeschichte*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 1 (2008): 173–94.

⁴⁷ Francis A Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004).

⁴⁸ Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal*, 94.

⁴⁹ Panagopoulos, *Prophetic Vocation in the New Testament and Today*, 46.

⁵⁰ Louis H Feldman, “Prophets and Prophecy in Josephus,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 41, no. 2 (1990): 386–422.

⁵¹ Feldman, “Prophets and Prophecy in Josephus,” 389.

⁵² Opoku Onyinah, *Apostles and Prophets: The Ministry of Apostles and Prophets throughout the Generations* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022).

⁵³ Onyinah, *Apostles and Prophets*.

⁵⁴ Onyinah, *Apostles and Prophets*.

⁵⁵ Oswald Richard Commey, *Prophecy and Prophets* (UK: Independent Publishing Network, 2018).12.

⁵⁶ Commey, *Prophecy and Prophets*, 13.

⁵⁷ Commey, *Prophecy and Prophets*, 13.

prophecy as “forth-telling.” According to Commey, “Forth-telling means that prophecy can come in the form of preaching. It has to do with a simple declaration of a message from God. It may not bring any prediction and may not say anything about the future; it will just tell of things to do with the present.”⁵⁸ Commey also talks about what he terms, “Prophetic Preaching,” as he observes that a preacher may preach “prophetically,” in the sense that one may not have prepared notes beforehand. This according to him is very popular to the prophetic ministry.”⁵⁹ On prophecy as foretelling, Commey contends that the anointing of God comes upon a vessel, especially a prophet, and he declares events in the present and future.

Commey however, outlines the characteristics of false prophets and that their practices can bring destruction to the people of God and cites divine warnings against false prophets. He avows, “Due to divine warnings given to the Old Testament assembly and the New Testament Church, the Church must know thoroughly who a false prophet is, in order to avoid deception.”⁶⁰ His work, “Prophecy and Prophets,” is a useful material in the study of the prophetic ministry. It does mention forth-telling as an aspect of biblical prophecy. However, not enough detail is given to prophetic forth-telling and its role in social reform. It, rather, dwells so much on aspects of prediction and prophetic ministration to the congregation of the church and has little to say on how prophets and prophecy affect the larger society. It would have been beneficial to have reflected on prophetism and its relevance to society in contemporary times in the concluding chapter, especially as he identifies himself as a practising prophet, rather than end abruptly on the characteristics of false prophets.

Sharp defines who and what the Old Testament prophets were, and their significance and relevance for us today. Sharp develops the theological themes present in the prophetic books and relates the relevance of the prophetic message to us in contemporary times. Sharp also offers a brief introduction to each of the prophets and their prophetic books. He talks about how prophets relay God’s word to leaders or to the people, seeking out God’s purpose in specific situations.⁶¹ The forms that intermediation takes depend on the social context in which the prophetic gift is exercised and the expectations about prophecy that a particular group experiences. Sharp contends that through visions and dreams, prophets see God’s purpose not only for Israel but also for the whole earth. That is, to the OT prophets, YHWH’s kingdom was not limited to Israel, rather, it was an international and cross-cultural one; and his standards were to be upheld across the world. Thus, strikingly, Scripture portrays the prophetic word as compellingly authoritative, and yet in another breath, prophecy appears to be a crucial call that the people could choose to embrace or disregard.⁶² This highlights the cantankerous issue of false prophets and genuine prophets. Sharp observes that it is not only in the Old Testament that antagonism existed between genuine and false prophets. The same situation prevails today. “Prophetic voice is claimed by many today who seek to influence the direction of church tradition or social policy. And these folks do not always agree with one another.”⁶³

From the viewpoint of Victor Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and Their Social World*, he introduces the Hebrew prophets and the social world of their contemporary times. Matthews makes a chronological examination of the prophets and locates them and their message in their respective historical context. He then relates these to our contemporary situation. Matthews observes the long history of prophetic activity in the ANE as practices associated with divination and interpretations of omens by professional cultic officials and priests.⁶⁴ However, Hebrew prophecy was not analogous to such practices of the ANE. Contrary to those of the ancient Eastern Near East, Old Testament prophets were not professionals who learned the trade of interpreting visible symbols of the gods. These were men specially chosen by God himself to be his spokespersons in critical social, religious, and moral situations of Israel and the nations.

⁵⁸ Commey, *Prophecy and Prophets*, 15.

⁵⁹ Commey, *Prophecy and Prophets*, 16.

⁶⁰ Commey, *Prophecy and Prophets*, 143.

⁶¹ J. Carolyn Sharp, *Old Testament Prophets Today* (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2009).

⁶² Sharp, *Old Testament Prophets for Today*, 13.

⁶³ Sharp, *Old Testament Prophets for Today*, 15.

⁶⁴ H. Victor Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and Their Social World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

The authority of the prophet is authenticated by the event of his call and the call is the distinctive event that marks the occasion in which a person makes the transition to become a prophet. To some people, a detailed description of a call in the OT is usually intended to enhance the importance of the prophet and his message, investing the new prophet with special powers, a message, and a mission. The Old Testament prophets however, were critics of their societies, condemning religious and social practices and institutions of their time that were at variance with YHWH's teachings and statutes, and; the nature and style of a prophet, owe much to the historical context of his message. Elijah, for instance, speaks directly to King Ahab, not to some future monarch of Israel. Haggai's pronouncement on the need to reconstruct the Jerusalem temple fits only into the immediate postexilic period and the rule of Governor Zerubbabel (between 520 and 515).

On false prophets, the Deuteronomist traditions caution against prophets who call on the people to follow other gods and that a true prophet is one who speaks in YHWH's name, whose words exalt him, whose messages exhort the people unto covenant relationship and one whose predictions come true.⁶⁵ Apart from touching on the themes of social justice and prophetic forth-telling, Matthews observes that social justice is a common theme in prophetic literature. It reflects a real concern with the society's lack of interest in and abuse of the weaker elements in their culture (idealized as "orphans, widows, and strangers").

The Prophet and Prophecy in the Ghanaian Context

One might be right to infer from the definition of a prophet that prophets have long existed in Ghana and other African nations without receiving official acknowledgment as prophets. According to Asamoah-Gyadu, the role of the prophet was seemingly seen in the traditional African priests popularly known as *edunsifo*, whose function was to foretell what was going to happen to individuals and societies.⁶⁶ In fact, today, *edunsifo*, typically refers to herbalists, not prophets. A more general and useful term is *akɔmfɔɔ*, "traditional priests," who act as both priests and prophets in African Traditional Religion. Asamoah-Gyadu asserts the existence of individuals in the likeness of prophets and thus indicates that the concept of prophecy has been a part of the Ghanaian people, despite acknowledging that such individuals who operated as *edunsifo* or *akɔmfɔɔ*, were influenced by the spirit of lesser gods and therefore cannot be equated to the function of the biblical prophets. It is important to state that with the emergence of the prophetic ministry, several Christian denominations have experienced a split. However, they have also benefited from the phenomena by arguing for religious reforms that align with the viewpoints of the congregation or members.⁶⁷ Thus, though some persons and churches have considered it as a force in enhancing holistic Christian ministry, others have viewed it as an equivalence to the African Traditional Religious practice which generally imparts negatively on its victims.

Opoku Onyinah argues the existence of prophetism as an African activity, carried out in various forms from ancient regimes by pinpointing the history and operations of witch demonology in Pentecostal exorcism. Protection from witchcraft activities has become a prevalent worry, as it was in the past. In the past, a traditional priest of the gods, as well as sorcerers and medicine men, were sought after for such protections. However, various exorcist practices (anti-witchcraft shrines) have dominated African states since the early 20th century.⁶⁸ Witchcraft practice re-emerged from the African Indigenous Churches (AICs) and in a form of movement through the traditional Pentecostal churches even after colonial rulers prohibited it because they believed it hindered the advancement of the local people.

According to Amarkwei, one of the notable aspects of the history of Christianity in Ghana is the prophetic ministry. Without acknowledging the roles that several prophets performed, it is

⁶⁵ Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and Their Social World*.

⁶⁶ Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Pentecostalism in Africa and the Changing Face of Christian Mission," *Mission Studies* 19, no. 1 (2002): 14–38.

⁶⁷ Cephas Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism: A Study of the Development of Charismatic Renewal in the Mainline Church in Ghana*, ed. Jan A.B. Jongeneel (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Boekencentrum, 2002), 67–73.

⁶⁸ Opoku Onyinah, *Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology in Ghana* (UK: Deo Publication, 2012).

impossible to discuss the development of the church. Therefore, prophetism needs to be confirmed alongside the development of the early church. However, just like in the early church, there are issues with modern prophets, such as abuse of the term and misuse of the gift. Amarkwei examines current Ghanaian prophetism critically and discusses this subject by looking at the context in which Jesus places prophetism.⁶⁹ If considered in the framework of how the apostles accepted and applied prophecies, one could arrive at the sense in which Jesus situates prophetism.

In a similar manner, prophetic proclamations are also issued to many groups, including churches, religious groups, cities, towns, political parties, corporations, and countries around the world, including Ghana. These contemporary prophets serve as a manifestation of God's power regarding the scope of the Christian mission in Ghana and throughout Africa. The prevalence of prophetic ministries shows that the majority of Christians possess or aspire to possess spiritual or prophetic gifts.⁷⁰ Additionally, it shows that the Holy Spirit's prophetic mission is still active. With the help of the Holy Spirit and through the work of Jesus Christ, God has created an ever-present and evergreen ministry. It is also decentralized in the Ghanaian context since the prophetic ministry of the Holy Spirit is accessible to many young people as well as older people, rich and poor, women and men, and individuals of various colours, nationalities, and other ethnicities. This means that the change from a unilateral to a multilateral redemption at the beginning of the New Testament is related to the prophetic environment in Ghana. However, free access and operations of spiritual gifts such as prophecy have evolved religious excesses that need to be checked.

The Way Forward

In light of the preceding discussions and findings on the prophetic phenomenon in contemporary Christianity, several recommendations are proposed to address current challenges and enhance theological clarity and pastoral oversight:

- 1. Demystification of Prophetic Terminology**

Theologians and scholars should seek to demystify key terms such as *prophet*, *prophecy*, *prophetic*, and *prophetism*. Clarifying these concepts will contribute to a more balanced and biblically grounded understanding of the prophetic ministry.

- 2. Integration of Prophets into Local Church Structures**

Individuals who claim a prophetic calling should be encouraged to minister within the context of their local churches. This enables oversight by experienced church leaders and promotes accountability, mentorship, and doctrinal soundness.

- 3. Theological Education and Training**

Academic and theological institutions are encouraged to give increased scholarly attention to the study of prophecy. This will provide a structured avenue for emerging prophets to receive formal training, grounding their ministry in sound biblical theology and ethics.

- 4. Congregational Education on Biblical Prophecy**

Church leaders and pastors should intensify educational efforts on the biblical principles governing prophets and prophecy. Such efforts will equip congregants to discern true prophetic voices from false ones, strengthening the spiritual health of the church.

- 5. Regulation and Legal Enforcement**

Civil authorities, particularly law enforcement agencies, should continue to enforce legislation related to the incitement of fear and panic. As demonstrated in 2021, this serves to regulate the activities of charlatans who exploit the prophetic ministry for personal gain or manipulation.

- 6. Scripture as the Final Authority**

Ultimately, all prophetic utterances must be measured against the authority of Scripture. The Bible remains the definitive standard by which the authenticity and validity of any prophecy must be assessed.

⁶⁹ Charles Amarkwei, "The Church, Prophetism and Ministry of the Prophets in Ghana," *Pentecostalism, Charismaticism and Neo-Prophetic Movements Journal* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1–12, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.38159/pecanep.2023411>.

⁷⁰ Amarkwei, "The Church, Prophetism and Ministry of the Prophets in Ghana," 11.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the concept of prophecy within Pentecostal Christianity, focusing on its biblical foundations in Ancient Israel and drawing parallels with prophetic practices in Ghana. Using the Old Testament as a framework, it explored the identity, role, and authenticity of prophets, emphasizing their function as mediators of God's message to His people. The study highlights the diverse ways prophecy was communicated—through preaching, teaching, song, or writing—yet centers on the prophet's core purpose: to reflect God's moral judgment and call people to repentance. While foretelling is part of prophecy, it is conditional on the moral state of the people in light of their covenant with God. The paper concludes that despite the complexities of defining prophecy theologically, the Old Testament offers valuable insights that can guide Ghanaian Christians in discerning and practicing genuine prophetic ministry today.

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