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CHAPTER 9

PROPHET EZEKIEL ON FALSE PROPHETS IN THE CONTEXT OF NIGERIA

DR. C. O. OGUNKUNLE

INTRODUCTION

The fact that Ezekiel was a true prophet, called and commissioned by God is demonstrated in the book that bears his name¹. One important aspect of the message of Ezekiel deals with the holiness and transcendence of God². Certainly, Ezekiel is concerned with the holiness of God and expects the same from his people. But unfortunately, the people of Israel are known to be sinful as demonstrated in the message of Ezekiel³. John B. Taylor notes:

The people have been idolatrous, they have made alliances and played the harlot with foreign powers ..., they have not fulfilled their covenant responsibilities, they have not kept to the ordinances and judgments which the Lord gave them at Sinai⁴.

The above gloomy situation becomes worse with the contribution of the false prophets and prophetesses in Judah at the time of Ezekiel. These false prophets/prophetesses were corrupt, greedy and wicked as shown in their devilish activities. Rather than shepherding the people and serving as God's spokesmen/women; they simply worsened the situation by giving false prophecies and wrong information to the people.

The questions which this paper seeks to address

include: What was the motive of these prophets for giving false prophecies? Were these prophets aware that their actions and messages were dangerous to the people, especially as they were in the foreign land? What impression were they giving to the unbelieving Babylonians? Do we have cases of false prophecies in our nation today? Is it possible for the Church to control the activities of false prophets? These and other relevant questions are examined in this paper.

PROPHET EZEKIEL

Ezekiel, whose name means "God strengthens" or "God will strengthen" was born in Judah around 623/622 BC and he ministered for at least twenty-two years⁵. Ezekiel lived during the reigns of Kings Josiah (640-609 BC), Jehoahaz 9609 BC), Jehoiakim (609-597 BC); Jehoiachin (597 BC); and Zedekiah (597 – 587 BC)⁶. Ezekiel was the son of Buzi, a priest (Ezekiel 1:2-3). However, there is no evidence that he performed any priestly functions in Jerusalem before his deportation to Babylon.

Historically, Ezekiel lived through the greatest crisis in Israel's history, the final destruction of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem; the loss of independence in the promised land, exile of all the leading citizens to Babylon; and the tearing down of the temple and removal of the House of David from kingship (2 Kings 25; Jer. 39-41, 52; Lam. 1-5; II Chro. 36)⁷. Ezekiel and his family were among the 8000 exiles taken to Babylon with King Jehoiachin (1:2; 33:21) in the eight year of Nebuchadnezzar (II Kings 24:14-16). He lived with a group of exiles in Tel Aviv located beside the Kebar River (Ezekiel 3:15).

Ezekiel was a prophet of influence while in captivity. He was married and had his own house (Ezekiel 8:1; 24:18) where the elders of Israel came to consult with him. Unfortunately, his wife died during his ministry but he was forbidden to mourn (Ezekiel 24:16-18). The book of Ezekiel is full of the personal experiences of the prophet. For example, he shut himself up in his home, bound himself and was smitten dumb (Ezekiel 3:24-26); he was charged to lie on his right side and the left side for 430 days (4:4-8); he ate bread prepared in an unclean manner (4:27)⁸.

Ezekiel was one of the captivity prophets. He ministered to the Jews taken captive to Babylon⁹. Ezekiel followed his older contemporary, Jeremiah, in consistently opposing the plans of Zedekiah and his advisers to rebel against Babylon (12:1-15; 17:1-22; 21:18-32)¹⁰. Besides, there are several similarities between the message of Jeremiah and that of Ezekiel of which John B. Taylor notes:

Both of them seemed to be taking a lone stand for the truth, one in Jerusalem and the other in Babylon; they both insisted that the future of Israel lay with the exiles and not with those left behind in Jerusalem; they both rejected the fatalism of those who quoted the proverb about the fathers eating sour grape and the children's teeth being set on edge; they both inveighed against the shepherds of Israel who failed to care for the flock; they both emphasized the principle of individual retribution and the need for individual repentance; they both looked forward to a lengthy exile, followed by a

restoration under godly leadership; they both spoke in terms of a new covenant which would be inwardly and personally appropriated; and they both spoke against the false prophets who prophesied peace when there was no peace¹¹.

Ezekiel was appointed a watchman for the house of Israel (Ezekiel 3:16-21; cf. 33:1-20)¹². Therefore, he was responsible for sounding the warning of impending judgment to Israel. He was to warn the wicked (Ezekiel 3:18-19) to turn away from their evil ways in order to save their lives. Also, he was to warn the righteous (Ezek. 3:20-21) so that they (the righteous) would not turn from their righteousness and do evil.

The message of Ezekiel is centered on the holiness of God, His transcendence and sovereignty¹³. Perhaps his priestly background explains his so much emphasis on the greatness and holiness of God, the temple in Jerusalem as well as the actions of prophets and priests attached to the temple in Jerusalem¹⁴. It has been noted that Prophet Ezekiel never spoke of certain concepts such as the love of Yahweh, the loving kindness of God, etc as found in other prophets like Hosea¹⁵. However, the prophet had a very deep knowledge of God. He particularly had a deep knowledge of the glory of God. The prophet, having received a vision of the glory of God before his commission, continued to refer to God's glory throughout the book (1:28; 3:12, 23; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4; 18-19; 11:22-23; 39:11, 21; 43:2-5, 44)¹⁶. The phrase *abi YHWH* I am Yahweh is repeated several times in the book¹⁷. It is a phrase that shows the self-revelation of God. Describing Ezekiel, W. Zimmerli notes:

Ezekiel, this prophet of sensitivity, of dramatic personal involvement who is seized by the sudden intrusion of the word of Yahweh, who paints his pictures with the glaring colour of extreme phantasy but nevertheless stands in a passion filled dialogue with his peers, who speak out of a rich priestly heritage and takes up many themes which have reached him through the earlier traditions of Israel and her prophets, this prophet Ezekiel with all of his characteristics recedes into the background, when one asks about the goal of his proclamation¹⁸.

EZEKIEL AND THE FALSE PROPHETS

False prophets are referred to by different names in the Old Testament. Moses made allusion to them when he said that "a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death" (Deut. 18:20). They are called fools in Hosea 9:7. They lead people astray (Micah 3:5) and tell fortunes for money (Micah 3:11). They are given to too much wine (Isaiah 28:7). They are arrogant and treacherous (Zephaniah 3:4). They practice deceit (Jer. 6:13). They are godless even as they profane the temple (Jer. 23:11). Commenting on false prophets, Willem A. Vangemeren notes:

Prophet were false when they misled people (Deut. 13:2; 8:20; Jer. 2:8; 23:27), when their morals were loose (Jer. 23:24), or when they practiced magic and divination (Isa. 8:19;

Jer. 14:14). The false prophets belonged to the socially and religiously acceptable institution of 'professional' prophets who responded to the needs of their time¹⁹.

Ezekiel 13 is one of the five messages given by the prophet on the certainty of the judgment of God that would come upon the people. In other words, the chapter is directed against Israel's false prophets and prophetesses who were leading the people and the nation astray. The divine origin of the message of Ezekiel is established in 13:1 with the phrase "The word of the LORD came to me". This is unlike false prophets who prophesied out of their own imagination and followed their own spirit (Ezekiel 13:2-3, 17). The Hebrew word *milabam* is from *Leb* which is a masculine noun for hear, inner man, mind and will²⁰ (cf. Psalms 84:3; 22:15; Jer. 4:19, etc). In this context, Ezekiel 13:2, 17 make specific reference to the mind, that is, doing things out of one's mind (cf. Num. 16:28; 24:13; I Kgs. 12:33; Neh. 6:8). This means that the prophecies of false prophets were based on their own wishes. They are very selective in their messages as they prefer only messages that would comfort the people²¹.

Also, Prophet Ezekiel declared that the vision of these prophets are false and their divination a lie (13:6-7). The word *machazi* is a masculine noun which means 'vision' (cf. Gen. 15:1; Num. 24:4, 16)²². The Hebrew word for divinations is *kesem* and it is a masculine noun. Divination is the "practice of attempting to foretell the future, reveal the unknown, or find out the wish of a divinity or spirit"²³. Divination was used in various nations in Ancient Near East. In Israel it was used by Balaam in Numbers 23:23. In Nigeria, especially among the Yoruba tribe, J. Omisade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu note:

Diviners are consulted when something is lost, when a barren woman desires children, when there is an inexplicable disease, when one has a strange dream, during crises of life, when a child is born, at betrothal to find appropriate husband, at death to find the cause of death, and during an undertaking²⁴.

In this context, divination is used by false prophets who were involved in deceiving people (Ezekiel 13:6, 23; 21:34; 22:38)²⁵. Incidentally divination had already been prohibited in Israel (cf. Deut. 18:10; II Kgs. 17:17).

Furthermore, the false prophets were accused of declaring the word of LORD when he had not said a word (Ezek. 13:6). In other words, they claimed to represent God when in the actual sense God did not recognize them. They were prophesying peace when actually there was no peace. Speaking on the character of the message of false prophets, Leon J. Wood notes:

False prophets spoke messages that catered to the delights and whims of people. This was seen in the four hundred that gave the message to Ahab regarding the battle at Ramoth-gilead. They told him what he wanted to hear²⁶.

Unfortunately, there were also false prophetesses who were called "the daughters of your people who prophesy out of their own imagination" (Ezek. 13:17 cf. 13:2)²⁷. These prophetesses were like mediums or sorcerers. They sewed magic charms all around their wrists and made veils of various lengths for their heads.

The Hebrew word *keseth* (magic charms) occurs only here (Ezek. 13:18, 20) in the Old Testament²⁸. The purpose for the magic charms and mysterious veil was to ensnare the people, especially in times of uncertainty and turmoil. They would 'tell the future' or provide a 'good luck spell' for a few handful of barely and scraps of bread either as payment for the divination or as means employed for divination. By this act, they had killed those who should not have died and had spared those who should not live. Obviously, the false prophets "lived and worked for a human ideal, dream, vision, or institution. They promoted programmes and techniques, sought to eternalize the present and to institutionalize the spirit in space and time"²⁹.

Ezekiel had no sympathy for the false prophets as he spoke forcefully against them by declaring God's judgment upon them (Ezek. 13:8-9). He specifically mentioned three aspects of their judgments. First, they would not belong to the council of God's people (Ezek. 13:9). In other words, "they would lose their place of honour which they have long enjoyed among the citizens of Israel"³⁰. The Hebrew word *sod* is a masculine noun which in this context connotes assembly or company (cf. Psa. 89:8; 111:1)³¹. Secondly, they would not be listed in Israel's record. The Hebrew word is a masculine noun and it means record, register or enrolment³². This punishment would deprive them of rights of citizenship (cf. Ezra. 2:62; Neh. 7:64). They would be excommunicated from the fellowship of Israel. Thirdly, they would experience the wrath of God (v. 13). The word *gesem* is a masculine noun and it means 'rain', 'shower'³³. But in this context it means that the rain of destruction would come upon them. It is the rain whose "effect of the down pour is to wash away the whitewash

and have the flimsy wall naked"³⁴. Obviously they would never again enter the land of Israel. They would die as captives in foreign land. Finally, God's anger would be vented against them and He would neutralize their power (Ezek. 13:20-21). God would tear their magic charms and He would set the people free. Also, God would tear off their veils and thereby save the people from their hands. And ultimately they would know that Yahweh is the LORD Almighty. The phrase "you will know that I am the LORD" in Ezekiel 13:9, 14, 21, 23 is a key concept in the narrative. It is to establish the power of Yahweh over the false prophets.

THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

Having examined the presence of corruption in Judah at the time of Ezekiel as demonstrated in the activities of false prophets who were corrupt, greedy, and wicked; it is appropriate at this time to examine what is going on in the contemporary Nigerian society. Nigeria is a nation that is being confronted with so many political, religious and social problems. One of the problems which the present administration is trying to address is corruption which has eaten so deep into the system³⁵. Unfortunately, corruption is also found in the Church even, among Church leaders. Two things have worsened the situation in Nigeria and these are poverty and unemployment.

This issue of poverty has become a major concern for African political leaders. President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria has admitted that "abject poverty constitutes a major threat to the survival of democracy in Africa"³⁶. He stressed further that "unless the poverty question is tackled, democracy cannot flourish"³⁷. In fact, speaking of poverty in Nigeria, it has been reported

statistically by Boye Ilori, of the National Planning Commission that "67.7 percent of Nigerians are living below poverty line. Over 80 million Nigerians, based on the 120 million population estimate, survive on less than \$1 per day"³⁸.

On the issue of unemployment, it is obvious that there are many cases of well-educated and hard working young men and women who have graduated from Universities and other tertiary institutions for years and yet have no job and the possibility of getting one is nil. It seems obvious that some people go into the pastoral/prophetic ministry not because they are genuinely called and commissioned by God, but as a means of livelihood. Consequently, in an attempt to make it in life, such people get involved in false prophecies thereby exploiting the people. It is this matter that has led to proliferation of churches which has reached an alarming rate in recent years. The country has been regarded as having "the highest number of churches per capital in the world"³⁹. Churches spring up at an unprecedented rate in every available space, shop, and uncompleted building particularly in our major cities⁴⁰.

The point is that poverty and unemployment have produced several false prophets in contemporary Nigeria that have affinities with the false prophets at the time of Ezekiel. It was discovered in an empirical research conducted on the use of imprecatory Psalms in Nigeria that false prophets use imprecatory Psalms as threats to their clients, primarily for selfish, material and financial gains⁴¹. In other words, the level of poverty and unemployment in our nation have given birth to several false prophets who have resorted to the practice of divination. Such prophets see delusive visions for their clients and they impress it upon them that the only

way out of their problems is to have special prayer sessions during which imprecatory Psalms/prayers are extensively said against the imagined enemies of the clients. And of course, ridiculous demands are made from the clients during such special prayer sessions. There were the cases of four such false prophecies. One, there was the case of two prophets and a prophetess who had been identified by the police as fraudsters. They were accused of "deceiving their victims that the latter's money had evil aura and needed to be made clean with special prayers"⁴². Two, the case of two pastors of the Redeemed Christian Church of God who were accused of stealing about N50 million⁴³. Three, the case of one Taiwo Onabanjo who claimed to be a pastor. He found himself in police custody over an alleged robbery of which he claimed that the devil used him⁴⁴. Finally, there is the case of one fake Pastor Gbolagade who mimicked the voice of God to dispossess Ojo Adeola of his house, a car and other valuables. He even sent assassins after Ojo and when he (Gbolagade) was caught he said 'it's all brainwork' with the aim of making money⁴⁵.

Also, it should be mentioned here that some of the contemporary Nigerian prophets fail to hear distinctly from the Lord before making controversial prophetic statements. An example is the case of Pastor Tunde Bakare, a vibrant man of God whom God has used tremendously in the nation. However, sometime in 1998, he prophesied that the then military Head of State, General Sanni Abacha would become the president. He also prophesied that Chief Olusegun Obasanjo would not become the president of this nation. Today, the picture is very clear as to these two controversial prophecies. On the one hand, General Sani

Abacha died shortly after the prophecy was made. On the other hand, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo has successfully completed the first term of four years and he has less than a year to complete the second term.

But then, in spite of corruption in the nation and the rampant activities of the false prophets/pastors, credit should be given to true prophets and men of God like Ezekiel, who are still faithful in their duty posts in Nigeria. Usually, these men of God speak out the mind of God on issues that affect the nation. For example, many of them spoke on the controversial tenure elongation that the third term will bring doom to Nigeria⁴⁶.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the presence of false prophets is dangerous to the nation. This is because they are out to mislead the innocent, as they declare what God has not declared. Their primary focus is material and financial gains as they use every opportunity to exploit the people.

It is recommended that Christians should take time to carefully examine the nature of their problems in the light of the word of God. And having examined themselves, they should go to God who is all-knowing and powerful. They should avoid patronizing false prophets who will not only exploit them but add to their problems.

Every prophet in Nigeria must take time to hear clearly from the Lord before making prophetic pronouncements. False prophets, however, must know that the type of judgment that came upon the false prophets in Judah during the time of Ezekiel awaits them if they fail to repent cf. Jer. 14:13-15; 29:31-32.

On the part of the Government, effort should be made to come up with concrete plans and schemes that will make life comfortable for the people. In other words, false prophecy will be drastically reduced in Nigeria the moment more jobs are created. People will have enough to live on without necessarily being involved in wickedness and corruption.

END NOTES

1. The validity test for any of the prophets is recorded in Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:21-22.
2. John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter-varsity Press, 1969), pp. 40-4; and Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Apollos, 1995), pp. 375-6.
3. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, pp. 42-44.
4. *Ibid*, p. 44.
5. Dillard & Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 313.
6. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, pp. 29-39.
7. Lawrence Boadt, "Ezekiel Book of" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Edited by David Noel Freedman, 6 Volumes (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:713.
8. Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 11.
9. The contemporaries of Ezekiel include: Jeremiah, who ministered in Judah till the siege of Jehoiachin; Daniel, who served at the Court of Nebuchadnezzar; and Zechariah.

10. Boadt, "Ezekiel, Book of" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:714.
11. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 35.
12. The Hebrew word *Sapeh* (watchman) is used several times of prophets in Israel (cf. Isa. 56:10; Jer. 6:17; Hos. 9:8). Watchmen were stationed on city walls, hilltops or specially designed watchtowers. A watchman was to be on the alert for approaching enemies and warn the people of the city of any impending danger cf. Charles H. Dyer, "Ezekiel" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty: Old Testament*. Edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton Illinois: Victory Books, 1985), p. 1233.
13. Dillard & Longman III, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 325.
14. Dyer, "Ezekiel" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 1225.
15. For detailed, see W. Zimmerli, "The Special form and Traditio-Historical Character of Ezekiel's Prophecy" *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 15 (1965): 525-6.
16. Dyer, "Ezekiel" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 1226.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Zimmerli, "The Special Form and Traditio-Historical character of Ezekiel's Prophecy", p. 527.
19. Willem A. Vangemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 58.

20. F. Brown; S.R. Driver & G.A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), pp. 524-5.
21. Vangemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, p. 63.
22. *BDB*, p. 303.
23. J. Omosade Awolalu & P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonje Press, 1979), p. 147.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid*, p. 890.
26. Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 109-110.
27. It should be noted that there are true prophetesses who ministered in both Old and New Testament times-Miriam (Exod. 15:20); Deborah (Judges 4:4-5); Huldah (II Kgs. 22:14); and the four unmarried daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8-9).
28. Dyer, "Ezekiel" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 1252.
29. Vangemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, p. 64. For detailed study on the differences between true and false prophets, see pp. 61-66 of the same book.
30. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 122.
31. *BDB*, P. 691.
32. *Ibid*, p. 508.
33. *Ibid*, p. 177.
34. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 123.

35. For the activities of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, see *The News*, Volume 20, Number 25 923 June, 2003), pp. 16-25, 45.
36. Olusegun Obasanjo, "Poverty, threat to Democracy" *Sunday Tribune*, 7 March, 2004, p. 5.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Quoted from the Punch Editorial titled "Rising Youth Unemployment" *The Punch* (Tuesday June 10th, 2003), p. 16.
39. Ronke Ogidi, "Worries Over Failure of Religion as Moral Anchor" *The Guardian* (28, March, 1997), p. 11. cf. E. Ade Odumuyiwa, "A Religious but Criminal Society; any Remedy"? 19th Inaugural Lecture Delivered on 27th February, 2001 at Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, pp. 7-8.
40. J.F. Jemiriye, "Proliferation of Churches in Nigeria: Economic or Christians Emancipation"? *African Journal of Biblical Studies*, Volume 12, Nos. 1 & 2 (April and October, 1998), pp. 47-48.
41. C.O. Ogunkunle, "Imprecatory Psalms: Their forms and Uses in Ancient Israel and some Selected Churches in Nigeria" A Thesis in the Department of Religious Studies submitted to the Faculty of Arts in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, 2000, p. 294.
42. Charles Nwach, "Fake Prophet and Prophetess fall into trouble" *Saturday Sun* (15 May, 2004), p. 22.

43. Richard Elesho, "Stealing from God" *The News* Volume 20, No. 26 (30 June, 2003), pp. 24-28.
44. See, Ademola Adegbamigbe, Bamidele Johnson, Ernest Omoarelojie and Idowu Ogunleye "The Devil Used me" *The News*, Volume 22, No. 9 (8 March, 2004), pp. 21-25.
45. For details, See "Smart Crook" in *Sunday Punch* (June 18, 2006), pp. 7, 45, 49.
46. For full information of what some of them like Cardinal Anthony Olubunmi Okogie, Rev. Dr. Wilson Badejo, et al said, See *Sunday Sun* (March, 19, 2006), pp. 30-31.