African Research Review

An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 5 (3), Serial No. 20, May, 2011

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print) ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

Biblical Theories of the History of Prophetism in Old Testament: An Ethical Monotheistic Approach

(Pp. 290-306)

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Abstract

This paper presents biblical theories of the history of prophetism in Israel as regards its ethical-monotheism. As apostasy reared its head, both in the kings and among the nation-Israel, the relationship between the kings and prophets was strained. Prophets and kings stood over against each other. The keynote of prophecy having become the message of overthrow, the kings, who naturally believed in the consideration of what existed, could not fail to regard the prophets with suspicion and antagonism. The prophets were from their standpoint lacking in patriotism, in fact traitors. The contrast between true and false prophets begins to play a role. Ethical-monotheism is an ethical conception of Jehovah giving rise to monotheism. The proper examination of these problems engages the aim of this paper. The method of approach is historical with the review of relevant literature or literary analyses.

Introduction

According to Ndiokwere (1995), from a phenomenological point of view, no immediate attempt has been made to define the term 'prophet', or to distinguish, for example, the ecstatic from the prophet, the prophet-healer from the traditional diviner, the seer from the man of God, or from similar roles frequently lumped together under the term 'prophet'. The tendency has always been to speak or think of the prophets of Israel whose work and utterances are familiar to us from the scriptures. But the modern study of psychology and of the history of religions has shown that prophecy is not a phenomenon limited to Israel alone. The semantic evolution of the term 'prophet' has been recognized as a more complex problem, as has the origin of prophecy itself.

It has been shown that most world religions (past and present) have exhibited the prophetic phenomenon, either continually or at some stage of their development, and so prophets are found in many provinces of the world of religion, in ancient as well as in modern times. Modern prophets, or what Lindblom (1973) describes as 'homines religiosi' (prophet types), and in the genuine sense of the word are real prophets of God. To Lindblom, these figures as prophets to whom religious experiences as such were the essence of their religious life. Personal communication with God, prayer, devotion, and moral submission to the divine will are said to be the main traits of their religious attitude.

As we come to study the role of prophets in biblical tradition, we need to consider, not so much the etymology of the word 'prophet', as the elasticity with which the term is applied to different personalities, so as to establish a basis for our own use of it. As Napier (1967) has pointed out, the Hebrew word 'nabi' has been applied to a remarkable range of characters appearing from Genesis (20:7) to Malachi (4:5), and to surprisingly disparate personalities from Aaron to Elijah; from the 'true' to the 'false' prophets, from the relatively primitive to the relatively sophisticated, from the highly visionary to the concretely ethical, from the seemingly objective perspective to the intensely participating attitude – only to suggest the breadth and range of the application of the term in the Old Testament. Abraham is called a prophet (Gen. 20:7), 'God-sent' envoy and the intercessor before God. The expression 'Avi', my father has not only the patriarchal significance, but a technical term which designates at the same time a prophet (Nether, 1956).

During the centuries which followed the installation of Israel in Canaan, political power was in the hands of the prophets, and the Judges were, to an extent, nothing but these prophets. Men of the spirit, enthusiasts, patriotic war-mongers, bands or troops of ecstatics, military leaders (nagid) and heroes, saviour-kings, Nazarites, the figure known as 'man of God' (ish ha-Elohim), seers and diviners-all have been lumped together by various authors as prophets or prophet-types. The translation 'prophet', according to the Septuagint, is said to be just a matter of expediency (Ndiokwere, 1995). It was exceedingly difficult to decide whether nabi was 'habitus', or description of a function, or a sign of vocation. The saying: "Is Saul also among the prophets' confirms this. Elsewhere (cf. 1 Sam. 9:9) 'prophet' and 'seer' are explicitly the same; the two terms are supposed to go back to different epochs: 'for he who is now called a prophet was formerly called a "seer" '.

Prophetic, in its etymological derivation denotes that the Hebrew word for prophet is 'nabhi'. Various proposals have been made by exegetes as regards the root of the word prophet. To Vos (1975), connection is sought with a root-group in which the first two radicals are nun and Beth. The meaning fixed upon is 'to spring', 'to gush forth', or passively 'to be sputtered, bubbled or gush against'. The nabhi therefore might be 'the one gush upon by the spirit' (so keil). Second, recourse is had to the Arabic. In it naba'a means 'to announce'. A difficulty arising in connection with 'to announce' is that nabhi' is restricted to the announcer for the Deity, whilst the verb, in order to give us help, would have to signify 'to announce' in general. The suspicion arises that perhaps the verb is derived from nabhi' in its technical religious sense, which latter then might very well have had another etymology. Third, derivation from the Assyrian has been advocated. Nabu here signified 'to call', 'to proclaim', and 'to announce'. The ideas of 'gushing', 'springing' are likewise represented in the root: manbau is 'a fountain' while nibhu, 'a sprout'. The concurrence of the Hebrew, Arabic and Assyrian in expressing this idea in the same root to which nabhi' belongs is certainly remarkable.

The term 'prophet' is not always used in the stiff', strict technical sense we are accustomed to combine with it. As 'vision' came in course of time to stand for revelation in general, so 'prophet' could be equivalent to 'instrument of revelation' without particular regard to technical sense, distinguishing a prophet from other organs of revelation (Vos, 1975). Moses is called a prophet, and yet is set over against the prophets as to his

communication with God (Num. 12: 6ff). In Genesis 20:7, Abraham is called a prophet meaning one who has special acquaintance with God, and can intercede for others. Peter, in Acts 3: 21, 24, uses in succession the under sense and the specialized application: 'holy prophets which have been since the world began', and 'all the prophets from Samuel and them that followed after'. This recognizes that there was an incision in the history of revelation in the time of Samuel, which prophecy in a new form began from that date.

With this enquiry into the meaning of nabhi we may combine a brief discussion of its Greek equivalent, prophetess, from which our word prophet has come. We associate with this mostly the idea of 'foreteller' or 'forthteller'. The Greek term, however, has religious associations no less than the Hebrew one. Prophetess is the one who speaks for the oracle. The Hebrew nabhi' and the Greek prophetess were practically synonyms.

According to Udoette (2007), prophecy in Paul is a charism. Suffice it to say that for Paul charisms constitute God's call, addressed to each and every Christian in view of the church, coupled with the ability to perform such services. To Sullivan (1982), charisms are the principles of individuation or differentiation of every Christian and so determine who plays what role in the Christian community, the body of Christ (*soma tou* christou). For Paul, "A Christian community without the charisms operative in its members would be unthinkable; it would no longer be like a living body, and hence no longer a body of Christ". It is within the context of his theological reflection on the charisms (1Cor. 14: 12-14) that Paul discusses prophecy and its functions. Unlike tongues which are utterances of mysteries in the spirit (mysteria en pneumatic) meant for the unbelievers, Paul contends that *ho de propheteuon anthropos lalei* (he who prophesies to men) especially believers. Those who prophesy, speak to human beings for their moral up building, encouragement and consolation.

In general terms, the prophet is the man who speaks the intention of God, interpreting God's message to his people, and applying it to particular situations (Nmah, 2009). Prophecy has a rich variety. The Old Testament introduces us to a great variety of prophets who seem to have prophesied in many different ways.

The ethical connotes an adjective of morals or moral questions. Nmah (2004) defines ethics as critical study of morality. It includes systematic theories of the nature of the moral life of a man. That is to say that the norms of right

and wrong by which his conduct may be guided and the good toward which the practical moral choices which men make. Ethics, indeed, is a system of moral principles, and rules of conduct.

Biblical theories of the history of prophetism

We can take our point of departure for the history of prophetism in time of Moses. Not only were there prophets at that time among Israel, but they represented, with the exception of Moses, whose case was unique, the prevailing form of revelation. Moses, in Numbers 11:29 expressed the desire that the entire Lord's people might be prophets. This shows that from the first there was a religious as much as a functional value found in the appearance and exercise of the office. This appraisal runs through the entire history of prophecy from beginning to end. The divine promise in Joel 2: 28-32 extends it into eschatological age. Not only is Israel honoured by having prophets, the greater honour is that the people are intended to become prophets.

At the first stage of the new epoch in the history of prophetism, which dates from Samuel, the difference from what had existed before lay in two points. {i} The office obtained a more public theocratic background for its activity in the newly-established kingdom. {ii} The number of prophets shows a large increase, especially if we count in the groups of collective prophets associated with such men as Samuel.

Prophetism, as connected to the kingdom did not on that account lose any of its independence. The events in the reigns of Saul and David in turn, upheld and restrained by the prophetic leaders of the time, are sufficient proof of it. A mere religious appendix of the kingdom prophecy never was. As apostasy reared its head, both in the kings and among the nation, the relationship was altered. Prophets and kings stood over against each other. The keynote of prophecy having become the message of overthrow, the kings, who naturally believed in the conservation of what existed, could not fail to regard the prophets with suspicion and antagonism. The prophets were from their standpoint lacking in patriotism, in fact traitors.

This change of base on both sides is followed by the invasion of apostasy into the ranks of the prophets themselves. The contrast between true and false prophets begins to play a role. False prophecy encroached to such an extent upon the true, as to bring the whole office into discredit. Zechariah (13: 2-6) predicts that in the better order of affairs to come, parents will disavow a son laying claim to prophetic calling, nay, that the quasi-prophets themselves

shall be ashamed of the calling. Prophesying and unclean spirit are put on a line. This is quit a different reason for the suppression of prophesies from that forecast in Jer. 31:34, and the opposite of the favourable forecast of Joel, which hearkens back to the Mosaic era.

It has been attempted to derive the corruption of prophesy in some way from the collective form which the latter developed. This is unjust so far as the earlier stage of the history of this movement is concerned. It coincides with the religious and patriotic revival that occurred in the age of Samuel, and can scarcely be discredited without discrediting in principle the whole movement of which it formed apart. The same observation can be made in regard to its intensified activity in the age of Elijah and Elisha. It is not easy, however, to define the exact relation between individual prophetic and group prophetism. We meet with the group-prophets first in 1 Samuel 10:5. The word here used is chethel, 'band', 'company', just like Lehaqah in 1 Samuel 19:20. "Sons of the prophets" might be descriptive of the relation of submission and attachment in which these bands lived with great individual leaders.

According to Vos (1975), the term 'preachers' is apt to observe the very point in which perhaps a difference between individual prophets and band-prophets can be discovered. The group-prophets do not seem to have been employed in the transmission of truth as the others were. The individual prophets, therefore, were the 'preachers'. That the collective bodies were recipients of supernaturally-communicated truth is plain, in nevertheless. They 'prophesied', and this can scarcely mean anything else than that they had been touched by the spirit in a supernatural manner.

The stranger bodily manifestations that took place among them likewise bear witness to that fact. These extraordinary phenomena must be attributed to the spirit as much as were the analogous peculiar phenomena in the early New Testament Church. The spirit has not his exclusive function in moralizing and spiritualizing. He can work also in the sphere of the semi-intelligible. Music played a part both in the production and the expression of the enthusiasm characteristic of these circles, and music lies on the border-land of that reign of that feeling where mysterious forces play upon the soul, of which even he who experiences them cannot give a clear account to himself.

It has been asserted that Amos disavows every connection between himself and 'the sons of the prophets' (7:14). This cannot be a correct exegesis, for the same disavowal would also include the prophets in general. Amos speaks

of the sending of prophets to Israel as one of the bounties bestowed upon the people by Jehovah (2:11). Amos and Micah however criticized the prophets of their own days as a result of their spiritual and moral deterioration (Micah 3:11, Jer. 6:13). When serious corruption of this nature appears, we are obviously on the eve of the approach of 'false prophecy' in general. The court and temple prophets at Bethel cannot have deserved the name of true prophets in the real sense of it.

Again, the crisis through which Israel passed in the time of Samuel, and of Elijah-Elisha, was but a form of expression of a religious crisis. The issue between Philistines and Israel, and that between Canaanites and Israel was at bottom a religious issue. We must look upon the assemblies of prophets as centres of religious life. The modern critical reconstruction of the history of Israel's religion has laid hold upon prophetism at two vital points. The first concerns the origin of nabhi'ism among Israel. The second relates to the role the prophets are believed to have played from the eighth century BC onwards as creators of ethical monotheism (Vos, 1975).

Ethical monotheistic approach to the history of prophetism

In this context we shall consider the theory of the same critical school as to the role played by the prophetic movement at a point in history. The prophet, from the age of Amos and Hosea onwards, are credited with the discovery and establishment of the great truth of ethical monotheism, in which the distinctive and permanent value of Old Testament religion is held to reside (Vos, 1975). Ethical monotheism is an ethical conception of Jehovah giving rise to monotheism. The ethical element must have come in between the days of Elijah and Elisha on one hand, and the age of Amos and Hosea on the other. Before the time of Elijah and Elisha, Jehovah was only the national true God of Israel. He was neither a particularly ethical being, nor the only true God. Some of his features were even ethically repellent.

The prophets such as Elijah and Elisha stood up for Jehovah, simply because they were greater patriots and more confirmed nationalists than the rest. Elijah's main trait is his insistence upon the exclusive right of Jehovah to the national service of Israel. Neither he nor his lesser successor protested against the calves set up at Dan and Bethel. The prophets represent Jehovah as the avenger or gross injustice. But this is by no means to be confounded with the prophetic view of a century later, which made the entire relation of Israel to Jehovah rest on an ethical basis, and believed that it served a moral

purpose. It did not differ in principle from the way in which a heathen deity might have been invoked in a similar situation elsewhere.

Most critics agree that this monotheistic inference is clearly drawn from Jeremiah's time onward. Some difference of opinion exists as to the period between Amos and Jeremiah (Vos, 1975). It ought to be further noticed that, according to the critics, the ethicism that thus came to be ascribed to Jehovah, was extreme ethicism, hyper ethicism, as it were. It was concentrated, not in the benevolent, gracious aspects of the ethical consciousness, but in the strictly retributive aspect of the same. The whole view of God's moral nature has a certain unamiable one – sidedness about it. The ethics exclude the love and grace of God. This is the reason for the divisive criticism practiced by certain writers of this school upon the text of the prophetic books.

Ethics tends of itself to spiritualizing, and carried to an extreme, resulted in the rejection of all religious usages among Israel that were not spiritual, at least not on the surface. All ritual observances, the sacrificial cult, the feasts, all images made of the Deity, were represented by the prophets, not merely as ineffective, but as reprehensible and exciting the wrath of Jehovah. An attempt was made to turn the cult which could not be entirely abolished, to the best possible use by making it a vehicle of ethical and spiritual ideas. The several law-codes of the Pentateuch, with their strange mixture of the moral and the ritual, are the product of this compromise.

Side by side with the ritual of Israel, its social sin falls under the prophetic condemnation. Owing to the present-day sociological trend of religion, this side of the prophetic message has attracted considerable attention. The grave economic problems of modern society arise largely from commercial and industrial causes. The people of Israel were not a commercial or industrial community. Such a problem as that of the relation of capital to labour did not exist for them. A striking illustration of this is found in the rule that, while no interest may be taken from Israelite by Israelite, this is not forbidden in dealing with foreigners. What is allowed on economic grounds is forbidden on theocratic grounds (Ex. 22: 25; Lev. 25: 36; Deut. 23:20; Ezek. 18:8).

The concern with the will of Yahweh is central in the work of the great prophets (Black, 1981). They were not primarily either foreteller or moral teachers, though they did in fact both predict future events and impart moral teaching. In their ethical teaching they were neither revolutionary reformers nor die-hard conservatives. They protested against alien influence and

recalled their contemporaries to pure worship of Yahweh. They reasserted the moral claims of Yahweh in a society whose structure had undergone and was undergoing drastic change (Black, 1981). They did so, not by advocating a return to earlier conditions, but by applying anew the ancient standards to their own age. The moral standards of their religion were derived not from a particular pattern of social life, but from Yahweh's historic revelation of himself to his people. The plea for social righteousness, for instance, is a particularly prominent in Amos who denounces unsparingly the flagrant injustices in the Northern kingdom. On the other hand, the national background of Hosea's ministry is the political instability and the moral and religious corruption of the closing years of the Northern kingdom (Black, 1981, cf. Hosea 2: 14f). Isaiah, likewise, lashes unsparingly the superficiality and immorality of contemporary religious practice (Isaiah 1: 10ff, 28: 7f). He exposed the rapacity and cynicism by which the national life was distorted (Isaiah 5: 1-23).

The chief end of this monotheistic ethics is for a man to understand and obey the law (Guthrie, 1980). In an age when the law was considered to be the sum of the revelation of God, this view was inevitable. Nevertheless, on their whole there is an advance in ethical conceptions in this prophetic literature as compared with some phrases of the Old Testament. Israel was very conscious of the uniqueness of her relationship to God (Psalm. 14: 19-20). True religion was, to her, precisely the knowledge of Yahweh, and presupposed Yahweh's self-disclosure in covenant. Lacking this, the Gentile world had fallen into idolatry. The Old Testament verdict upon Old Testament revelation was that it was not a complete whole, but preparatory for something greater. The prophets looked forward to a day when God would reveal himself by mightier works than ever yet: He would raise up the Messiah, gather his scattered people and establish his kingdom among them. Heaven and earth would be made new (Isaiah. 65: 17-25); Israelite religion would be transformed (Jeremiah. 31: 31-34); and all nations would see and acknowledge the glory of God in Israel as never before (Isaiah. 60: 1-14; Ezek. 36: 23).

Relationships between prophetic-ethical monotheism in Old Testament and New Testament Revelation in the probation of Jesus

Every Christian is potentially a prophet. The pouring out of the spirit on all flesh carries with it this result, 'and they shall prophesy' (Acts 2:18). Paul called upon the Corinthian Christians to 'desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but

rather that you may prophesy' (1Cor. 14:1). We see this actually happening in the case of the Ephesians in Acts 19:6, in the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9), and in the men and women of the Corinthian church (1Cor. 11: 4-5). Prophecy is mentioned next after apostles in the lists of ministries (1Cor. 12: 28-29; Eph. 4:11); they are associated with teachers in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1), the two senior grades of ministry under the apostles.

The function of the prophets as indicated in Acts and Epistles was the customary double prophetic ministry of proclamation and prediction (Douglas, 1980). Agabus, one of the few prophets named for us, is noted for prediction (Acts 11:28, 21: 10-11), making use of this power of foresight to issue spiritual guidance to the church. The whole book of Revelation is the most outstanding example in the Bible of foretelling. In their capacity as preachers to the church, their work is described as exhortation (Acts 15:32), edification, and consolation (1Cor. 14:3). The reaction of the non-Christian to the ministry of the prophets (1Cor. 14: 24-25) shows that they were preachers of the whole message of sin and salvation, wrath and grace.

Various penal sanctions arose from the presence of sin. The unity of the biblical ethic takes full account of the exigencies created by sin and guilt (Douglas, 1980). The content of ethical monotheistic is the sum-total of the revelatory data set forth in the scripture bearing upon human behaviour. But though there is this manifold diversity, it is equally clear that the Bible provides us with a summary of what is normative for thought, life, and behaviour. The biblical witness, as it bears on the complexity of life and on the wide range of divine obligation, organizes itself around a central core of ethical principles.

The Ten Commandments were not given with any consideration for human ability or inability to keep them; they are the revelation of God's demands made of men and women who had declared that if God would make his law known, they would keep it (Chambers, 1984). Keeley (1988) opined that Christian ethical teaching begins with Jesus and his teaching. But as soon as we begin to read the New Testament we are taken a step further back. We notice that Jesus is in constant dialogue with his contemporaries about the Old Testament law. These Old Testament commandments are set within a covenant and this temple worship was the focus of Israel's faith and of morality that flowed from it. There is, of course, a more universal dimension in the stories of the creation of the world and in the picture of human life given to us in such books as the Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. But Old

Testament morality is still rooted in a particular nation and its history of faith.

Jesus fulfilled the hopes of Israel and made the full knowledge of God a present reality. He announced that the kingdom of God was at hand and called people to repent. With authority he called people to follow him and be his disciples. With that calling he invited people to be like him, as he is the fulfillment of the law and prophets; just as he took up his cross and followed his calling from God, so the disciple was to take up his cross and follow Jesus (Keeley, 1988).

Jesus sometimes expressed how people were to live by verbal teaching in parables such as the story of the Good Samaritan, in extreme statements such as 'if your eye offends you pluck it out', in poetic statements such as 'blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God'. But sometimes it came across in his dealings with individual people, as when he threw money-changers out of the temple, or forgave an adulterous woman. In terms of the law and gospel, Jesus said that he had come not to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5: 17-20). He was not going to deny the Old Testament by what he did and said. But this does not mean that nothing had changed from the Old Testament with his coming. Rather it means that there was a clear fulfillment based on a clear foundation. And a fulfillment implies a development, and a difference.

The early Christians did not at first fully understand this transition from heritage to fulfillment. They held to their continuity with Israel's heritage, but they were aware that things had changed. What the Old Testament had foreshadowed was now fulfilled in Jesus in his coming, death and resurrection. God and his will had received a new dimension.

In the letter to the Hebrews the old covenant is contrasted with the new covenant and Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of, and as superior to, what had gone before. In John's Gospel we learn that the law came through Moses but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. And Paul tells us that all people are to find peace with God on the same basis, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And equally there was a new understanding of the behaviour which God called for. The idea of living for God now extended beyond the life of one nation. The believer, Jew or Gentile, was to understand and obey God's will in his everyday life wherever God placed him. He was no longer a member of a

holy, covenanted nation with an identifiable territory and a holy city, as Israel had been.

This does not make the Old Testament law entirely a thing of the past. New Testament morality was worked out very much in the light of what had gone before in the Old Testament. According to Keeley (1980), 'The prophets had continually looked to interpret the Law of Moses as was appropriate for their own times' (p. 283). Jesus continued this prophetic tradition. Much of what we find in the New Testament is a continuation of the ethical development already under way in the Old. Yet Jesus' mission brought a decisive change to the place of the law in a believer's life. He did more than take over the Old Testament and restate it. He developed the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament in the light of his own teaching and example. The change from the holy nation of Israel to the universal faith of Christians had a dramatic influence on the shape and understanding of Christian ethics in the New Testament.

Jesus went beyond a morality of commandments. The Sermon on the Mount, particularly the Beatitudes, is a portrait of the ethical character of the kingdom of God. Similarly Paul's lists of virtues and vices suggest what is typical in the kingdom of God. There is a sense of ethical vision; a way of setting before people God's ideal of what life should be. In terms of Christian tradition, two thousand years of teaching has inevitably had an effect on the way we think of morality. Christian life has to do with God, and so faith, hope and love have had an important part to play. When these three characteristics are held together, they link the religious and ethical aspects of the Christian life together in close relationship. Sometimes the tradition has been expressed in terms of virtues; intellectual and, practical virtues, 'cardinal virtues, of a more generally moral kind and theological virtues, shaped more specifically by Christian religion. Particularly in the medieval church, the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude were seen as given body in everyday life to the essentially Christian virtues of faith, hope and love.

Some have approached ethical ideas by describing a perfect situation; a vision of the character of the kingdom of God to which Christians should aspire, or a utopia. The utopian way of dealing with ethics, particularly in the political area, has had a long history, stretching from Plato to modern literature. Outstanding book on utopia is the one written by sixteenth century English Catholic, Sir Thomas More (Keeley, 1988). In his book, More

described utopia as an ideal situation with certain obvious points of contact with the realities of the writer's own time.

In these different ways the Bible and the Christian moral tradition combine to give the Christian a standpoint and a direction as he makes moral decisions. His comprehensive understanding of the will of God and his particular life situation-these are two factors which together, in a constantly changing balance, make it possible for the Christian to choose rightly. In making moral decisions, the Christian can use the long history of moral teaching from Christian theologians and also from other moral philosophers. These are some important general points to be aware of: (i) what he regards as moral right ought to be capable of being applied universally; (ii) we are ourselves responsible for our actions and decisions.

Second Isaiah expands and deepens ethical-monotheistic power and purpose that sustained Israel's history (Anderson, 1981). He developed this prophetic teaching-found classically in the Yahweh, Amos, Isaiah, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and the Priestly Writing-with the result that it becomes relevant not just for Israel but all the nations. Fundamentally, his critique of the idols is that they are powerless in history, and therefore they are nothing. Second Isaiah, then, advocates a historical ethical monotheism – that is, he perceived that the whole course of history is under the control of Yahweh, who alone is creator and lord.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, according to Hinson (1994), every human society develops its own pattern of accepted forms of behavior, in order to restrict causes of conflict and to enable people to live together in peace. Such a pattern of accepted behavior is called 'morality', or a code of ethics. By regular use it becomes part of the customs of the people who use it, though many other sorts of activity may also be called customs. The prophets were continually challenging Israelites to live according to patterns of morality which they had received from the Lord. Often the prophets had to deal with situations which arose because many of the Israelites did not understand the special importance of morality in their religion. Continually they were tempted to follow the pattern of other religions, and to suppose that what the Lord chiefly required from his people was worship and sacrifice. They found it difficult to that even though they took part in the sacrifices and feast days; the Lord was not necessarily satisfied with their service. The prophets had to repeat over and over that obedience is better than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22; Isa.

1:12-17; Prov. 21:3, and so on). They did not deny, the importance of worship, but made it quite clear that worship and morality belong together in the service of the Lord.

The law, the prophets, and the writings all contain guidance about how the people ought to behave as members of the Israelite community. A great part of the message of the prophets was warning about the sins which were dividing the people and hindering God's purposes for them. The writers of the Wisdom literature such as Proverbs preserved an understanding of life which was drawn from practical experience, and which shown the best ways to live in God's world, and among his people.

Throughout the Old Testament ethics, that is, the accepted customs are not merely ways of behavior which ease the problems that arise in human society, and help people to avoid conflict. As we have seen, righteousness is that which is in harmony with the will and purpose of God. All the law-giving, preaching, and teaching recorded in the Old Testament is intended to help people understand what it is that God wants them to do, and how they may best serve him. We shall see that this can be summed up in the phrase 'the image of God' (Gen. 1:26).

In all periods Israelite law forbade the perversion of justice. When the eighth century prophets so vigorously denounced the bribery that went on in courts, and the miscarriage of justice that went on around them, and called for righteousness to flow through the life of the nation as a never-failing stream (Amos 5:24), they were calling men to obedience to what they ought to have known to be the will of God (Rowley, 1979). Similarly righteousness in commercial transactions was seen to be the corollary of this justice which should flow through the entire nation, and not merely be a quality of judges.

The prophet is one who speaks for another (Ex. 7:1f; Deut. 18:18f.). His office presupposes people's ignorance and blindness with respect to God's will and purpose, which the prophet as spokesman of the Almighty seeks to dispel (Milne, 1993). Prophethood was classically expressed in the person of Moses and later Old Testament figures like Isaiah, Amos, Hosea and Jeremiah. The Old Testament messianic anticipation includes the prophetic role, The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me, You must listen to him' (Deut. 18:15). The early church saw this fulfilled in Jesus (Acts 3:22f; 7:37).

It was as prophet that Jesus was first acclaimed by his contemporaries (Mt. 21:46; Mk. 8:28; Luke. 7:16; John. 9:17). He himself accepted the title (Mk. 6:4; Luke 13:33), though with reservation (Mt. 11:9-11), and in the traditional sense it clearly not adequate to Jesus' claims for himself (Mk. 9:1-8; Jn. 10:30; 14:6). He stands within the long line of prophetic heroes who bore the word of God, and yet he towers over them for he also is the word he bears (Jn. 1:1-14). This fundamental link between the work of Christ and his person is explicit in John 1:14, 'The word became flesh'. In Jesus, the prophetic word of God finds its ultimate expression as a truth not only of his teaching but of his very being. The later New Testament amplifies this dimension; Jesus is the incarnate wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30), the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:3)

Christ's prophetic function therefore consists in his bringing to ignorant, sin – darkened humanity the very truth of God. In revealing God himself to us (Jn. 14:9) he is the supreme teacher whose word bears authority and to whom we must submit in all things (Mt. 7:24-29; Mk. 1:22f; Jn. 13:13f). He both proclaims and incarnates God's demand on us, as well as the divine grace by which alone we can enter the kingdom of the God of truth (Mk. 1:14; Jn. 1:17,10:9).

In some of the mainline churches and new Christian sects and movements, there is, however, no doubt that the prophetic office is taken seriously in the canon of the scriptures. Unfortunately, the situation is not always so, as some ordained priests sometimes abuse the prophetic office by either using the pulpit, not to preach the good news, but to make relevant and irrelevant announcements, or organize bazaar, launchings, and other functions that have no spirituality to the people. In some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, the abuse of the prophetic office is even more alarming and glaring. What seems to be stock in trade in most of these Christian denominations is that prophecy and the prophetic office have been turn into business. Since the so-called prophets constitute themselves into a group of Christian soothsayers, the situation is such that instead of moral up building, consoling or comforting the people, they end up feeding them constantly with disastrous predictions that frighten them out of their wits and make them tend to see God, no longer as a loving father, but as one whose duty is to chastise them with calamities.

In Nigeria today, it is common knowledge that while many families have been divided, others have been completely ruined on account of disastrous prophetic predictions that accused and counter-accused members of the same

family and set them against one another. Endless accusations of involvement in witchcraft and sundry cultic practices have become so common. In some cases, a good number of minors have been accused of membership and active involvement in witchcraft and sundry activities. It is true that in some circumstances some minors have actually confesses openly that they were being initiated into some secret societies by the senior members of those diabolical confraternities although no empirical evidence is established to the case as such.

Consequently, it is important to examine critically how the prophetic charism or office is exercised in contemporary Christianity in Nigeria. It would not be an overstatement to submit that the understanding and practice of prophecy in contemporary Christian churches in Nigeria is very often a far cry from what was obtainable in the Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and other true prophets' era coupled with that of Pauline churches, especially Corinth. Christians should endeavour to reflect on the biblical teachings on the prophetism for true spirituality and moral edification.

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