

TRUE AND FALSE PROPHECY IN ‘ALL CHRISTIAN PRACTICAL PRAYING BAND (ACPPB)’, UFUMA, IN THE LIGHT OF JEREMIAH 27-28

Luke E. Ugwueye and Ikenna L. Umeanolue

Abstract

Jeremiah proclaims a message of God’s judgment against the rulers and the people of Judah because of their violation of the religious and the legal traditions of the nation but Hananiah opposed him preaching a message of peace and salvation and predicted the nation’s deliverance from the hands of their enemies. Both claim to have God’s authority. Jeremiah 27-28 provides a window into the problem of discerning a true prophet from a false one. Christians are also being challenged with such opposing prophecies by prophets and visioners in All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB), Awka who all claim that their prophecies come from God. This study adopts exegetico-hermeneutical method of interpretation in the application of the narrative message of Jeremiah 27-28 to the fact of truity and falsity in prophecy in ACPPB. It is discovered that prophecy is a call, and not all comers’ affair. Prophecy lacks empirical proof and is sometimes manipulative and susceptible to barratry. The study further discovered that true Prophets claim to prophesy by the Spirit of God while false Prophets prophesy from their own mind but also claim to do so by the spirit of God. True prophets are consistent in their prophecy while false prophets change their words to fit the situation of the moment. Just like Prophet Hananiah, there are prophets who could be genuinely called but have refused to stay within their call because of loss of focus and desire for material gains The prevalent worldview of our people concerning easy solution to life’s problems that leads to abuse of prophetic consultations needs to be changed.

Keywords: True, False, Prophecy, Christian, Practical, Praying, Band

Introduction

From time immemorial, the human person is being confronted with many evils ranging from social, religious, economic, and political to psychological problems. These problems are sources of worry to the human being and as such there is need to ask questions about the happenings in one’s life. Therefore, human beings seek answers to these perplexities of existence. To get answers or solutions, religious people need charismatic persons to interpret the divine mind. Hence, contemporary Christians have made recourse to prophets in order to have their problems and needs solved and met respectively, just like the Israelites of Jeremiah’s time. Prophecy is a common practice in Christian prayer houses in contemporary Nigerian society. All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB) popularly known as *Ekpere* Ufuma, is one of the prayer houses that prominently exhibits this charismatic feature of prophecy.

Within the development of the prophetic movement in Israel during the period of the monarchy, there arose two types of prophets. The first type was a group of independent prophets who claimed to speak on behalf of Yahweh and whose primary function was to challenge the awful policies of the king. These prophets also warned the people to return to the old traditions of the covenant. The second type was a group of prophets who were paid by the temple or the court and who proclaimed the kind of message their patrons desired to hear. This group of prophets came to be known as false prophets, not because of their desire to mislead the people, but rather,

because they misinterpreted Yahweh's intentions at times when the nation was facing great dangers. According to Vangemeren (1990), in times of moral darkness the false prophets, predicting smooth things for the nation, independent of repentance, consecration and the pursuit of spiritual ideas, were honoured above the true prophets who emphasized the moral greatness of Yahweh and the necessity of righteousness for the nation.

Two prophets who represent these styles of prophetic ministries are Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jeremiah 27-28) who are the chief actors in our narrative passage. Jeremiah spoke truly in the name of Yahweh, Hananiah spoke falsely in the name of Yahweh, and the central question is how to understand this phenomenon of false prophecy.

The confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah took place in the temple (Jer. 28:1). Faced with two contradictory views of God's work, which one should the people accept as the legitimate interpretation of God's will? Which prophet was applying prophetic tradition properly to determine what God was doing in the current situation? The contemporary Judeo-Christians are also being confronted with such opposing prophecies by Christian prophets and ministers who claim that their prophecies came from God.

This paper, therefore, surveys the question of truism and falsity in prophecy with particular reference to the prophecies of Jeremiah and Hananiah in Jeremiah chapters 27-28 and its implications for truthfulness and falsity of prophecy in ACPBB. The study adopts exegetico-hermeneutical methods of biblical interpretation which facilitate the application of the narrative message of Jeremiah 27-28 to the ACPBB. Personal observations with oral information obtained from interview with selected prophets, and Christians in *Ekpere* Ufuma constituted the source material.

Etymologically, the English word prophecy comes from the Greek verb *prophemi* which means 'to speak for'. Thus prophecy is God's message delivered by the prophet who speaks on behalf of God. According to Price (1984), "Prophecy is an inspired communication from God" (p. 396). Literally, prophecy means speaking for, or on behalf of God (Matthews, 1918; Mowvley, 1979; Obielosi, 2012). The prophetic word lives a life of its own once it has emanated from the prophet, and the prophet is very much identified with the word that he has uttered. In other words, the prophetic word is greater than the prophet, which the prophet, himself would have been the first to acknowledge.

For Ugwueye (2002), prophecy is not specifically or even principally the forecasting of the future but rather the mediation and interpretation of the divine mind and will (p. 3). Operationally, the term prophecy is defined as the word of God proclaimed by a prophet commissioned by God to speak for him publicly to the people. The Hebrew word נָבִיא denotes one who communicates divine revelation. The Hebrew Bible applies this word both to the so-called false prophets of Israel or even to the prophets of other religions like Baalism as well as for the genuine prophets of Yahweh.

From the beginning, Old Testament prophets grew into quite distinctive persons. Several examples of this kind of religious persons have been collected together by Lindblom (1973). He enumerates a number of characteristics which enable one to describe a person as prophetic and

then uses this as a kind of check-list against which certain individuals and groups of people may be examined: They must be wholly devoted to the god whom they worship; they are inspired and under divine constraints showing signs of ecstasy and abnormal behavior; they receive revelations from their god and announce them publicly; they have a special call from the deity to fulfill his purpose unconditionally. This would be a fair description of Israelite prophets.

The Old Testament shows how false prophets told kings exactly what they wanted to hear, to garner favour for their own personal gain. There is no hint of their complete disappearance until the end of the fourth century (Zech. 13:2). Under Ahab, they declared to the king that he should make war on Ramoth-Gilead, with the certainty of capturing the town; in fact he was defeated and killed (3 Kings 22). In the time of Jeremiah, Hananiah addressed the people and priests in Jerusalem and foretold the overthrow of Nebuchadnezzar, because that was what everyone was hoping to hear (Jer. 28)

An Exegetico-Hermeneutical Analysis of Jeremiah 27-28

Jeremiah 27 and 28 record the controversies Jeremiah had with false prophets in Jerusalem before the Babylonian captivity. The events depicted in these chapters took place in the period between the first and second deportations of Judeans to Babylon. According to Dyer and Merrill (2001), the events recorded may have happened sometime after a failed coup attempt against Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon in December of 595 and January of 594 B.C. Overholt (1967) is of the view that the dominant theme of these chapters find expression in the following structure: general message to those who remain in Jerusalem concerning service to Nebuchadnezzar and the length of the exile (Jer. 27) and a specific example of prophetic opposition to this message at home (Jer. 28).

Jeremiah 27 has to do with Jeremiah's warning against making a coalition to resist king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. This chapter of Jeremiah contains three sections: Jeremiah's prophecies to the foreign messengers (vv. 1-11), his appeal to King Zedekiah (vv. 12-15), and his appeal to the priests and people of Jerusalem (vv. 16-22), that God has laid on them the yoke of the king of Babylon, and that they ought to humble themselves under his almighty hand (Mandel, 2006; Keil & Delitzsch, 2006). Each of the sections contains, principally, a two-part exhortation: Do not believe the prophetic lie (שָׁקֵר, but do serve the king of Babylon. According to Vine (1996), the word שָׁקֵר occurs 113 times in the Old Testament. The first occurrence is in Exodus 5:9. In about thirty-five passages, שָׁקֵר describes the nature of "deceptive speech": to speak (Is. 59:3), to teach (Is. 9:15), to prophesy (Jer. 14: 14), to lie (Mc 2:11). It may also indicate a "deceptive character" as expressed in one's acts: to deal treacherously (2 Sam. 18:13) and to deal falsely (Hos. 7:1). In Jeremiah 27 and 28, שָׁקֵר is used as a prophetic lie.

In Jeremiah 27:1-11, the yoke Jeremiah is to make and lay on his neck is a plain emblem of the Babylonian yoke the nations are to bear. The words מִוֶּסְרֵי וּמִטְּוֵי (bonds and yokes) denote together one yoke. מִטְּוֵי are the two wooden beams or poles of the yoke, which were fastened together by means of the מִוֶּסְרֵי bonds, ropes, so that the yoke might be laid on the beast's neck (cf. Lev. 26:13). That Jeremiah really put such a yoke on his neck and wore it is seen from 28:10, 12, where a false prophet breaks it for him. He is to send the yoke to the kings of Edom, Moab, etc., by means of envoys of those kings, who have come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah. Though this might have sufficed to accomplish the aim of the prophecy, it is difficult to reconcile it with the wording of the text; hence שָׁקֵר לְתָם arbitrarily changed into שָׁקֵר לְתָם. The plural "bonds and yokes" may indeed mean a single yoke, but it may also mean many; and the verbs שָׁקֵר לְתָם and שָׁקֵר לְתָם both with plural suffixes, indicate clearly that he was to make not merely one yoke for himself, but yokes for himself and the kings. In Jeremiah 28:10 and 12, where 'one yoke' is spoken of, the singular מִוֶּסֶר is used; while "yokes of wood has thou broken" in v. 13 does not prove that this plural has the same force as the singular.

Jeremiah charged the people not to hearken to their prophets, soothsayers, and sorcerers that deliver false prophecies. The enumeration of the multifarious means and methods for forecasting the future is designed to show the multitude of delusive schemes for supplying the lack of true and real divine inspiration. כַּשְׁפִּים is equivalent to מְכַשְׁפִּים the same which in Deuteronomy 18:10 is used along with מְעִיֵּן. The explanation of the last mentioned word is disputed. Some take it from עָנָן meaning cloud – cloud-maker or storm-maker; others from עֵין meaning eye – fascinator, the idea being that of bewitching with the evil eye (cf. Lev. 19:26). The use of the word along with שַׁחַד וּמְכַשְׁפִּים (cf. Deut. 18:10) favours the latter rendering, whereas no passage in which the word is used in the Old Testament supports the idea of it meaning storm-raiser. The false prophets delude the people, inciting them to rise in rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, contrary to God's will, and thus simply bringing about their expulsion from their land, i.e., removal into banishment. מְכַשְׁפִּים shows, as frequently as possible, that the inevitable consequence of these false prophets' proceedings is designed by them. Zedekiah and the ambassadors that had come to him might have learnt from Nebuchadnezzar's course of action after the capture of Jerusalem under Jehoiachin, as compared with that in Jehoiakim's time, had they not been utterly infatuated by the lying spirit of the false prophets, whose prophecies accommodated themselves to the wishes of the natural heart.

The imperative תִּיָּחַד intimates the consequence of the preceding command. Verse 13 gives the application of the threat in v. 8 to King Zedekiah and his people; and v. 14ff gives the warning corresponding to vv. 9 and 10 against the sayings of the false prophets (cf. Jer. 14:14; 23:16, 21). In chapter 27:14-15 Jeremiah told Zedekiah not to listen to the false prophets who were advocating resistance because Yahweh had not sent them. Listening to their advice would result in exile and death for the king and the false prophets. For Feinberg (1986), "To underestimate the power of a lie in times of national distress is sheer folly" (p. 545).

Jer. 27:17 advises the priests and people not to listen to these false prophets. They should submit to Nebuchadnezzar and live rather than resisting and see Jerusalem destroyed. According to Jeremiah 27:18, if the false prophets were true, they should ask Yahweh to keep the remaining furnishings and accessories still in Jerusalem from being taken captive to Babylon (cf. 2 Kings 25:13-17; Dan. 1:1-2). The granting of their petition would validate them as authentic prophets. Jeremiah 27 concludes with verse 19-22. Here, the Lord's word concerning these treasures of the temple, palace, and city was that Nebuchadnezzar would take them to Babylon where they would remain until the Lord restored His people to their land (cf. Ezra 1:7-11).

Jeremiah 28 has to do with Jeremiah's conflict with the false prophet, Hananiah. Keil and Delitzsch (2006) divide Jeremiah 28 into three sections: Jeremiah's conflict with the false Prophet Hananiah (vv. 1-4), Jeremiah's reply to Prophet Hananiah (vv. 5-11), and Yahweh's testimony against Hananiah (vv. 12-17). In the first section, the false prophet Hananiah endeavours to stamp on his prediction the impress of a true, God-inspired prophecy, by copying the title of God, so often used by Jeremiah, "Yahweh of hosts, the God of Israel", and by giving the utmost definiteness to his promise: "within two years" (in contrast to Jeremiah's seventy years). "Two years" are made as definite as possible by the addition of יָמִים: two years in days, i.e., in two full years (cf. Gen. 41:1; II Sam. 13:23).

In Jeremiah 28:2-3, Hananiah prophesied that Yahweh had broken Babylon's authority over Judah. Within two years the Lord would return to the temple the vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had already taken to Babylon. חַנְּנִיָּה (Hananiah), whose name means "Yahweh has been gracious," announced a message that Yahweh would be gracious. Jeremiah predicted that the captivity would last 70 years (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10), but Hananiah predicted it would last only two years. The Lord would also return Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) and the people who went with him to Babylon as captives, Hananiah predicted, because Yahweh would break Babylon's yoke (Jer. 28:4). This flatly contradicted Jeremiah's prophecy that Jeconiah would die in Babylon (Jer. 22:24-27; cf. 52:31-34).

It cannot be charged, for example, that the prophet Hananiah speaks without obvious authority, for he comes forward in the name of Yahweh (Jer. 28:2, 11). Hananiah is no mere impostor, and it is clear that his "falsity" is not immediately obvious to Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 28:8 Jeremiah presents a characterization of the prophetic vocation as his justification in the conflict with Hananiah: "The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms". Here, there is neither a series of prophets nor a prophetic office, but simply the mention of the prophecies of the prophets who have preceded Jeremiah and Hananiah from ancient times. Especially noteworthy is the generous "you and me" (פְּיָלֶם וְנִדְ) a formulation that unquestionably includes Hananiah in the group of prophets - Hananiah is not a false prophet in the ontological sense, but merely a prophet who in this particular case has delivered himself of words not of the Lord and thus has spoken falsely (Sharp, 2000).

In Jeremiah 28:5-11, Jeremiah first admits that the fulfillment of this prediction would be desirable (v. 6), but then reminds his opponent that all the prophets of the Lord up till this time have prophesied of war and calamity (vv. 7 and 8). So that if a prophet, in opposition to these witnesses of God, predicts nothing but peace and safety, then nothing short of the fulfillment of his prediction can make good his claim to be a true prophet (v. 9). Jeremiah started answering with the word אָמֵן (Amen). The scope of this assent is without delay defined in יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה יְקָם May Yahweh so do). But in order that the hearers may understand his assent, Jeremiah proceeds to show that hitherto only threatening predictions have carried with them the presumption of their being true prophecies, inasmuch as it is these alone that have been in harmony with the predictions of all previous prophets. וְנִינְבֵא in v. 8 is explained by the fact that "the prophets" with the accompanying relative clause is made to precede absolute-wise. In the same absolute manner the clause "the prophet... peace" is disposed so that after the verb וְנִדְ the word וְנִבֵא is repeated. The truth expressed in v. 9 is based on the Mosaic Law concerning prophecy (Deut. 18:21f.), where the fulfillment of the prophecy is given as the test of true, God-inspired prophecy.

Hananiah is not attacked because of the form in which he received his revelation, and no mention is made of any personal immorality. Even though Jeremiah himself mentions the fulfillment of prophecy as a check on the validity of Hananiah's message (Jer. 28:9), it is evident that the contest is not resolved in that way. Jeremiah apparently did not wait for two years to elapse before returning to confront his opponent, nor does he even mention the matter of non-fulfillment (cf. Jer. 28:12-16). To all outward appearances, Hananiah was also a true prophet of Yahweh. If he is to be identified as a "false" prophet, this must be done from the point of view of the message he brought to the people. Hananiah asserts that the fortunes of the city are about to be restored (Jer. 28:2-4, 10ff.). In doing so he stood firmly within the tradition of the prophet Isaiah, who was convinced that Zion would never fall.

Had Hananiah been sent by the Lord, he might have been satisfied with Jeremiah's opinion, and might have contently awaited the issue. But instead of this, he seeks by means of violence to secure credence for his prophecies (Jer. 28:10f.). He takes the yoke from off the neck of the prophet, and breaks it in pieces, as he repeats before the people his former prediction: "Thus says Yahweh: Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all nations within two years". Thereupon Jeremiah went his way without answering a word, calmly entrusting to the Lord the vindication of the truth of His own word. Apparently not long after Jeremiah had departed, he received from the Lord the commission to go to Hananiah and talk to him (Jer. 28:12). When Prophet Jeremiah says וְנִבֵא עֲצֵב עֲצֵב עֲצֵב (you have broken wooden yokes), one is not to understand him as speaking of the breaking of the wooden yoke Jeremiah had been wearing; he gives the deeper meaning of that occurrence. By breaking Jeremiah's wooden Yoke, Hananiah has only signified that the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar lays on the nations will not be so easily broken as a wooden one, but is of iron, i.e., not to be broken. The plural מוֹטְיָם (yokes) is to be explained by the emblematical import of the words, and is not here to be identified, as it sometimes may be, with the singular (vv. 10 and 14) which shows in what sense Hananiah put an iron yoke in the place of the wooden one.

Jeremiah responded to Hananiah sincerely but ironically. So be it, he said. Jeremiah wished that Hananiah's prophecy would come true because he loved his people and his land and did not want them to experience the horrors of invasion and a long exile. Yet Jeremiah urged the people to listen to what he was about to say to them (Jer. 28:7). Time would tell, he said, whether Hananiah's prophecies of peace or Jeremiah's prophecies of war were truly from Yahweh (Jer. 28:8-9). One of the tests (not in all cases) of a true prophet in Israel was the fulfillment of his predictions (cf. 23:16-40; Deut. 18:21-22). Jeremiah's meaning was that the usual message of the earlier prophets was one of doom, and that when he spoke of judgment he was more in the line of the predecessors than Hananiah, who spoke only of peace and prosperity.

In Jeremiah 28:10-11, Hananiah proceeded to deliver a symbolic act of his own by vandalizing Jeremiah's sign. He dramatically smashed the yoke that Jeremiah had been wearing on his neck (cf. Jer. 27:2). He claimed that similarly within two years Yahweh would break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar off the neck of all the nations that he was oppressing. In Jeremiah 28:12-13, shortly after these events, the Lord told Jeremiah to return to Hananiah with a message. He told the false prophet that by breaking the wooden yoke off Jeremiah's neck he had only made Nebuchadnezzar's oppression more certain. Failure to repent had resulted in more certain judgment. Jeremiah told Hananiah that Yahweh of Hosts, Israel's God, said that all the nations would serve Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 28:14). The Babylonian king would even control the beasts; his supremacy would be total. Nothing the people could do would divert this judgment (cf. Acts 20:26-27). His yoke over them was as unbreakable as iron (cf. Jer. 15:12).

In Jeremiah 28:15-16, Hananiah is said by Jeremiah not to be 'sent' (שָׁלַח) by Yahweh, and to be making the people trust in a 'lie' (שֶׁקֶר). "Yahweh did not send you, and you are causing this people to trust in a lie" (Jer. 28:15). The first element of this charge might be paraphrased, "Yahweh did not send you in this situation with this particular message". Because of this fact the breaking of the yoke bars was pointless. Furthermore, the Lord had revealed that He would take Hananiah's life within a year because he had encouraged the people to rebel against the Lord's word.

The penalty that false prophets were to suffer under the Mosaic Covenant was death (Deut. 18:20). The words פְּסוּקֵי הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֲלֵי־הוֹנָה (you have spoken rebellion against Yahweh) recall Deuteronomy 13:6. They involve an application to Hananiah's case of the command there given to put such a prophet to death, and show how it can with justice be said that the Lord will cast him from off the face of the earth. The verb שָׁלַח לְתֵיבָה chosen for the sake of the play on לֹא־שָׁלַח לְתֵיבָה. God has not sent him as prophet to his people, but will send him away from off the earth, i.e., cause him to die. In v. 17 it is recorded that this saying was soon fulfilled. Hananiah died in the seventh month of that year, i.e., two months after his controversy with Jeremiah (cf. v. 1).

Sure enough, as stated in Jeremiah 28:17, about two months later Hananiah died. The prophet who predicted deliverance in two years died in two months. God graciously gave him two months to repent before He put him to death. His death was another object lesson to the people on the importance of obeying God's word. Jeremiah survives to see the fulfillment of the prophecies given to him by the Lord.

Prophecy in All Christian Practical Praying Band (*Ekpere Ufuma*)

ACPPB popularly called Ekpere Ufuma was founded on May 24, 1957 by the Late Pa Eleazar Nwokolo together with the cooperation and support of his wife Late Madam Sophia Nwokolo. Before the founding of the Praying Band, Pa Eleazar Nwankwo was a devoted school and Church teacher who had so much interest in prayers. He was a member of Anglican Church. He taught as classroom teacher in Central School Ogbunka (1924), Holy Trinity School Ufuma (1925), St Peter's School Amawbia (1926) and St Peter's Anglican Church and School Ogbete

Enugu (1928-1931) where he worked both as a teacher and Church Catechist. From there he was posted to C.M.S. Church Ovoko in Igboeze South Local Government Area of Enugu state as a Church teacher (1936-1937) where he met his wife Madam Sophia Nwokolo. In 1942 he and his wife were brought nearer home to St Luke's Anglican Church Awah in Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State where he retired two years after. After his retirement, he finally returned to his home town Ufuma in Anambra State.

The Late Pa Eleazar Nwokolo's special calling manifested when his wife Madam Sophia Nwokolo developed a strange illness which he tried in vain to find the cure through both spiritual and medical treatments (Aka and Okeke, 2006). He took her to many prayer houses all to no avail. One of the prayer houses they visited was Umueji, a village in Ufuma. The owner of the prayer house was one Lawrence Okeke. It was Lawrence Okeke who revealed that Madam Nwokolo's sickness was as a result of God's calling for her husband to establish a ministry through which God would use him. Late Pa Eleazar Nwokolo went home with his wife and began to organize morning and evening prayers in the corridors of their bungalow. This was the extension of their usual family prayers. Members of Nwokolo family's immediate Umunebo community were allowed to attend. As the attendees increased, prayers were said in front of the house. No sooner had Pa Eleazar Nwokolo started the Praying Band than his wife's illness disappeared. By 1958, people from outside Ufuma who heard about the worship and miracles being performed there began to attend. Over the years, branches began to spread in the nooks and crannies of Eastern Nigeria continuously. According to ACPBB (2010), to be a member of ACPBB, one must be a member of a Church and must have a personal Bible. This is to say that the Praying Band is an interdenominational Christian ministry.

ACPPB has a lot of special gifts of the Holy Spirit but the gift of prophecy is the most salient. Prophecy in ACPBB is believed to be possible through the gift of the Holy Spirit. According to I. Ugwu (personal communication, April 14, 2014), any member of the Praying Band can prophesy provided the person receives the gift of prophecy. He also confirms that the current General Leader of the Praying Band, Samuel Nwokolo, is not a prophet. Members who possess the gift of prophecy occupy special positions in the ministry as prophets and visionaries. They are the eyes of the Praying Band. The position is a spiritual office; it is believed that it is the Holy Spirit who calls people into it. The prophets receive prophecy at any given time, especially in the mood of prayers.

All messages are confirmed through prayers because different spirits can give prophetic messages alike which lead to true and false prophecy among the prophets or visionaries. Every visionary or prophet proclaims the name of Jesus before he/she gives any divine message. According to Aka and Okeke (2006), "Papa's first son Samuel Nwokolo was the first to see vision during prayers but could not understand what he was seeing. Later Madam Sophia Nwokolo also started seeing the same thing which she later confirmed was the same vision" (p. 43). Madam Nwokolo's prophecies were what made her popular and people began to see her as the founder and owner of the ministry.

I. Ogala (personal communication, April 18, 2013) is of the view that there is a process of checking true and false prophecy in ACPBB. According to him, any member who claims to be a prophet or visioner is normally sent to the headquarters of the Praying Band at Ufuma on a

probation period where the person would be subjected to fasting and praying in order to test the authenticity of the gift he/she has received. After the period of probation, if the person is found worthy, the person is sent back to his/her branch as a recognized member of the band of prophets. If it is discovered that the gift is not real, the person is further subjected to more difficult prayer life as a process of purging him. Most at times, people who fail this test tend to leave the Praying Band on their own because of their inability to live up to the expectations of the spiritual assessors of the band.

Prophetic work in the ACCPB makes it a prayer house with a difference. Apart from Madam Nwokolo and her son Samuel, other members also started seeing visions. At present, the Band is over 50 years and is still waxing strong. According to ACCPBN (2010), the visionaries are the spiritual torch-bearers of the Praying Band and have the spiritual gifts of vision and prophecy in accordance with the Scriptures. At prayer sessions every one of them openly communicates divine messages imparted to him/her by God and the Holy Spirit. According to Aka and Okeke (2006), the Band has the following outstanding rules for prophetic works: There must be at least three songs of praises before any prophecy; prophets must prophesy in the name of Jesus as a guide against any false prophecy; prophets must kneel down while prophesying; prophets must hold their Bible while prophesying; younger prophets must have respect for the senior ones; and prophets must hear the sermon of the day's prayer service before prophesying.

ACCPB and Jeremiah 27-28

Discerning a true prophet from a false one is as difficult in ACCPB as it is in other churches and praying houses. Here, there is the question of who is a true prophet that delivers prophetic message of God and who is a false prophet that gives self proclaimed prophecy, since all the prophets claim divine authority for their mission just like Jeremiah and Hananiah. In spite of certain contradictions, there are obviously true prophecies in the ACCPB.

The criterion, 'by their fruits you shall know them', which has since constituted the standard for measuring true prophets has run into difficulty as it becomes difficult to determine what the fruits are. It has therefore been doubted whether this formula could stand as a universal criterion for distinguishing true prophets from false.

True prophets are very much fearless in their proclamations. Jeremiah possesses this quality. Even when Hananiah used violence on him, he did not fear. K. Unegbu (personal communication, December 26, 2013) testified to this similarity to ACCPB true prophets when he said that fearlessness was a mark of a true prophet in their ministry. Some known true prophets had had problems on account of their prophetic utterances but till today they remain fearless.

Hananiah cited God falsely as his source of power. Some prophecies in ACCPB when verified through prayers show not to be from God. According to I. Okwuosa (personal communication, February 3, 2014 and E. Ezech personal communication, March 8, 2014), some of the prophets in ACCPB are sometimes suspected to have acquired their prophetic gift from traditional herbalists and diviners. Many of them who were questioned concerning this allegation instead of clearing themselves left the ministry showing that they were false.

Jeremiah was not supported by the people in the temple. In ACPBB true prophets are generally disliked and not trusted for they speak the truth and what God reveals to them, not the people's desire. Their preaching is not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but the demonstration of the spirit and power of God. They are socially unacceptable to the crowd because their prophecies most times do not conform to the peoples' expectations. False prophets are liked and accepted socially by the people who eat, drink and regularly exchange visits with them.

Hananiah intentionally wanted to please his sponsors who give him bread and butter. False prophecies are mostly given by false prophets who come in sheep's clothing. There are some influential members of ACPBB who one way or the other render help to some prophets or visionaries in the ministry. This kind of prophets can have prophetic gift like Hananiah but can distort it and use it to please their benefactor. They are deceivers who tell the people what they want to hear, prophesying prosperity, health and victory without hearing from God. These false prophets prophesy for monetary value and their motives are not spiritual. Their primary interest is their enthusiasm to prophesy and this is done through the singing of songs of praises and clapping of hands which often stimulate them to ecstasy by which they can prophesy falsely.

Consistency is seen in Jeremiah's prophetic style. He cited others before him who have been consistent in prophesying what he himself has prophesied. This could only be achieved through following the covenantal Mosaic standard of prophecy. Even when what is prophesied about is catastrophic like the passage under review, its recurrence in prophecy cannot be avoided for the essence of prophecy is to stimulate repentance. Many prophets in ACPBB who do not follow the processes and procedures laid down for prophesying are false.

Jeremiah cautioned the people against listening to the whole host of dishonest design by the false prophets who bewitch them. True prophets in ACPBB are distinguished by their constant warnings against prophetic bewitchment by the false prophets who preach peace when there is war.

Hananiah has been regarded as a representative of the false prophets but all the external characteristics of a true prophet is recognized in Hananiah - he believes in the election of Israel, quotes Yahweh as his authority, and makes use of symbolic actions as Jeremiah does. All these never obfuscated Jeremiah's assessment of him as a false prophet. True prophets in ACPBB always recognize false ones. Even though they were unable to explain how the false ones are recognized by them, they maintain that being false with all its attendant camouflage cannot be hidden from the spiritual eye.

Fulfillment of what is predicted in this passage seems to be an acceptable distinguishing mark of a true prophet. This must always be checked against the Mosaic tradition as Jeremiah said. A prophet might claim that he spoke in the name of Yahweh, and what he spoke might come to pass, but if he did not acknowledge the authority of Moses and subscribe to the doctrines of the Exodus he is a false prophet (Deut 13: 1- 6). ACPBB does not place much premium on fulfillment as the only sign of prophetic truism; prophesying according to tradition is imperative.

Implications of Jeremiah 27-28 for ACPBB and Christians

Jeremiah 27-28 has implications for Christians of ACPPB and the contemporary Christians at large. Many contemporary Christians have been deceived by false prophecies which they thought were genuine just like the Israelites of Jeremiah's time (Opeyemi, 2009). Jeremiah 27-28 alerts and educates us that there are false prophets both inside and outside every religious sanctuary.

Many people believe that a prophet is someone who predicts a specific event that comes to pass. Prediction is only an infinitesimal aspect of prophecy and even a false prophet's prediction may come to fulfillment as a test to God's faithful followers. In reality, a true prophet is someone who is calling people who have gone astray to return and enter into a right relationship with God. To properly listen to a true prophet of God is to respond to their message before it is too late to do anything about it. The prophecies of Jeremiah and Hananiah in Jeremiah 27-28 therefore imply that the role of a true prophet is to call God's backslidden people into a right spiritual relationship with him. The true working of a false prophet is to persuade God's backslidden people that there is no need to repent or reconcile with God. False prophets often confuse the issue by turning the true message of God around to mean its exact opposite just to please their hearers.

The passage strongly highlights the implication of 'prophetic lie' to God's work. The essence of telling a lie is basically to distort the truth. According to Ugwueye (2004) to use speech in a manner contrary to that for which it was not intended for is certainly intrinsically evil. A lie told in our ordinary life is usually capable of causing discomfort and catastrophe of different proportions. A lie told with the claim that God is the one speaking had in the past caused the death of many people, led communities and nations into war, made people to be fanatical and caused many to live in fools paradise for years. As the passage under review pointed out a prophetic lie deceives and may not be immediately obvious to the listeners that have being told a lie.

When a lie is told, especially a prophetic one, the liars go to any length to defend and protect the lie in order to make it what it is not. Hananiah had to break the wooden yoke on Jeremiah's neck just to sustain the lie he had told. The essence of true prophecy is to call for repentance. False prophecy promotes and postpones the evil day. Problems are deepened by prophetic lies because they make people not to repent thereby making God's judgment more certain.

Those who are behind prophetic lies are the false prophets. Whether they are in ACPPB or elsewhere in Christendom they must be aware of the implication of what they are doing. The type of judgment that came upon the false prophets in Judah during the time of Jeremiah awaits them if they fail to repent (Jer. 13:13-15; 29:31-32). Failure to repent has in the past given rise to additional harsh verdict.

Calmness and absolute trust in God at all times as exhibited by Jeremiah throughout the encounter with Hananiah are of far reaching implication for true prophets and Christians in ACPPB and elsewhere. A true prophet by virtue of the prophetic work can meet with opposition, hatred, insult, challenges and even violence; what is needed on their part is Jeremiah's consistent calmness and unwavering trust in the one and only author of genuine prophecy.

Conclusion

The prophetic phenomenon in Jeremiah 27-28 and in ACPPB is complex and complicated for the people's understanding of the prophets. People are so inclined to prophecy that they visit ACPPB and many prayer houses where they are given the message of what will happen in near future. But the growth of false prophecy against true prophetic word has destroyed some people's belief in the prophetic word of God. False prophets and their prophecy, instead of reducing are growing. They even challenge the true prophets openly as Hananiah did to Jeremiah. Like Jeremiah the true prophets in ACPPB show a deep sense of morality towards God and his prophetic messages. They do not want the divine message contaminated with self proclaimed messages of prophets that partake in false prophecy. Such men are expelled from the church.

Lastly, It should be remarked here that distinguishing the true prophet from the false is not easy. One is to be careful in patronizing them and guard against making themselves easy prey for deception. The prevalent worldview of our people concerning easy solution to life's problems that lead to abuse of prophetic consultation needs to be changed. The world has always been with problems and there are steps to solving them. Jeremiah is our archetypal true prophet and he truly prophesies that physically and spiritually one must go through what one is designed to unless there is repentance. This is why he is the true prophet. Hananiah remains the symbol of prophetic lie and being true to type he falsely prophesies that one's wish to escape what is meant for him in flesh and spirit without repentance is possible. This is why he is the false prophet. In differentiating between the true and the false prophets in ACPPB and everywhere in Christendom this tip-off will serve as *lux in tenebris* for all.

References

- A.C.P.P.B.N. (1995). All Christian Practical Praying Band Nigeria: Constitution and rules & regulations. Retrieved February 17, 2014 from acppb-larcom/acppb-pdfs/acppb-Constitution-Nigeria.pdf.
- Aka, D. and Okeke, C. J. (2006). All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB) International: History and doctrine. Retrieved February 17, 2014 from acppb.gositestudio.com/thedoctrineDD.pdf.
- Dyer, C. H. and Merrill, E. H. (1999). *The Old Testament Explorer*. Nashville: Word.
- Feinberg, C. L. (1986). Jeremiah. In F. E. Gaebelin and R. P. Polcyn (Eds.). *Isaiah-Ezekiel: The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (vol. 6). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Hornby, A. S. (2010). *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary: International students' edition*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Keil, C. F. (2006). Jeremiah and Lamentations. In C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (Eds.). *Commentary on the Old Testament* (vol. 8). Massachusetts: Hendrickson.
- Lindblom, J. (1973). *Prophecy in ancient Israel*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Mandel, D. (2007). *The ultimate who is who in the Bible*. Alachua, Florida: Bridge-Logos.
- Matthews, I. G. (1918). How to interpret Old Testament prophecy. *The Biblical World*. 52.3. 326-334. Retrieved September 28, 2013 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3136016>.
- Mckenzie, J. L. (1974). *A theology of the Old Testament*. New York: Doubleday.
- Menezes, R. (2002). *Voices from beyond: Theology of the prophetic books*. Banda: St. Pauls.
- Mowvely, H. (1979). *Guide to Old Testament prophecy*. London: Lutterworth.
- Ndiokwere, N. I. (1995). *Prophecy and revolution: The role of prophets in the Independent African Churches and in biblical Tradition*. London: SPCK.

- Obielosi, D. (2012). John 11:49-52: An involuntary prophecy with part fulfillment (An exegetico-hermeneutical appraisal). *Journal of Religion and Human Relations*. 1. 4. 128-148.
- Ohler, A. (1985). *Studying the Old Testament: From tradition to canon*. Edinburgh: T & T. Clark.
- Opeyemi, S. (2009). False prophets and pastors in Nigeria. Retrieved November 15, 2013 from <http://www.google.com.ng>.
- Overholt, T. W. (1967). Jeremiah 27-29: The question of false prophecy. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 35. 3. 241-249. Retrieved September 25, 2013 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1461631>.
- Price, P. A. (2006). *The prophet's dictionary: The ultimate guide to supernatural wisdom*. New Kensington: Whitaker House.
- Robbinson, T. H. (1925). *Prophecy and the prophets in ancient Israel*. Birmingham: Birmingham.
- Skinner, J. (1999). *Prophecy and religion*. West Broadway: Wipf and Stock.
- Scott, G. G. (1960). Introduction to Hebrew prophecy. In J. R. Dummelow (Ed.). *Commentary on the holy Bible* (pp. xli-xliv). New York: Macmillan.
- Ugwueye, L. E. (2002). *Prophets and prophecy in the Old Testament*. Nsukka: Prize.
- Ugwueye, L. E. (2004). The 10th July Abduction Incident in Anambra state: Its Ethical implication for Democtatic Governance in Nigeria. In J.E. Madu et al (ed) in *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. v.(101-123)
- Vine, W. E. (1996). *Vine's complete expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Vangemeren, W. A. (1990). Prophets, the freedom of God, and hermeneutics. *Westminster Theological Journal*. 52. 1. 79-99. Retrieved September 24, 2013 from http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk /article_god_vangemeren.html.
- Vowter, L. (1995). Introduction to prophetic literature. In R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer and R. E. Murphey (Eds.). *The new Jerome biblical commentary* (pp. 186-200). Great Britain: St Pauls.
- Ugwueye, L. E. (2002). *Prophets and prophecy in the Old Testament*. Nsukka: Prize.