

# A Re-examination of the Origin and Cycle of Prophetic Movement in Israel

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**Abstract:** The upsurge of interest in the prophetic ministry in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is one that cannot be ignored. Its ever increasing significance presents an imperative for the critical Bible reader to evaluate modern claims to the prophetic ministry/gift in the light of the scriptures. Thus, questions regarding the origin, essence, characteristics and form of the prophetic ministry in the Bible abound, as scholars seek to give clarification, interpretation and/or credence to what is practiced today. The questions that comes to the fore, however, are (1) is prophecy to be understood as a novel means through which Yahweh communicated with His people in the Judeo-Christian tradition, or as an adoption of a religious medium of communication that was already prevalent in the Ancient Near East? (2) Can it be said that the model of prophecy that is prevalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century conforms to that of the Judeo-Christian tradition? This essay adopts the historical and phenomenological methods of research, and the research findings agree with modern study of psychology and history of religions which has shown that prophecy is not a phenomenon limited to Israel alone, thus, the origins of prophetism can be traced together with the origin of the Israelite nation; and that prophecy was a phenomenon that shed light on the history and philosophy of Israel as a nation, seeking to align Yahweh's people with His sovereign will at all times, not a one-sided venture seeking to please the people by saying what they wished to hear as is practiced by many acclaimed prophets today. The conclusion drawn is that, more than any other time in history, the prophetic ministry of the Church needs to be revived, revamped, and redirected in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in the post-Covid-19 Nigeria in which corruption, nepotism, and bad leadership are being heightened by the day. Only then would the renewed interest in the prophetic ministry be justified and salubrious to the nation, as long as it conforms to the rubrics and ethics of the prophetic ministry as revealed in the holy writ.

**Key Words:** Prophet, Israel, Greek Era, Religion, Old Testament, Hebrew

## I. INTRODUCTION

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 "new paradigm" in prophetic studies considers prophecy as a phenomenon that is, as an occurrence or type of cross-cultural behaviour observed in various societies across temporal and geographic bounds (Kelly, 2020:24). 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 (Nmah & Nwadiakor, 2011: 290; cf. also Ndiokwere, 1995). Before the nation of Israel came into being and while prophecy was at its peak, the nations and states of the Ancient Near East had their own oracular speakers whom we may also consider as prophets. As in Israel, they took various forms and titles and presented different sorts of messages. Though there are bound to be some significant differences in emphasis, the analogies are sufficiently clear that we might speak of prophecy as a part of the ancient world and not simply a part of Israelite's history. However, it is to be noted that the very category of "ancient Near Eastern prophecy" did not emerge before the last decades of the twentieth century, and it is still sometimes ignored by Assyriologists (Nissinen, 2017:8).

The Old Testament itself supports the idea that prophecy was not germane with the Israelites when it refers to prophets of Baal in I Kings 17. According to Herbert B. Huffmon (1992; cf. also Huffmon, 1968; 1970; 1976a; 1976b), references to prophets (male and female) occur throughout Syria-Palestine in such places as Emar on the middle Euphrates River, Phoenicia, Aram and Ammon as well as in Anatolia and especially in Mesopotamia in the second millennium texts discovered at Mari and in the first millennium Neo Assyrian texts. Moreover, a few long-known documents of prophecy in West Semitic milieus, like the Egyptian Report of Wenamon and the Zakkur Inscription, as well as the Balaam Inscription from Deir 'Alla, which became public knowledge in the 1970s, were there to testify that the biblical band of the "prophets of Baal" was not quite without historical foundation. In addition, there are several ritual and administrative texts from the Old Babylonian period in which prophets are mentioned. Finally, the presence of persons with prophetic titles is amply documented in sources from the twenty-first to the second centuries BCE from different parts of the ancient Near East (Nissinen, 2019a:3-4).

However, Hebrew prophecy remains unique and incomparable in its spiritual quality and permanent significance for religion (Leclerc, 2007). In the words of Scott (1969:1) 'the prophets' *par excellence* are the prophets of Israel, and their words are the standard of prophecy. For instance, the claims of oracular speakers in the Mari texts may be confirmed by technical or divinatory processes, a move forbidden in the Old Testament.

Prophecy is a common phenomenon in the history of religions. Both from profane and Biblical history, the activities of prophets determine the lives, religious practices

and God-man relationship. But each land has its own prophets in a way peculiar to its own religion. The names by which they are called sometimes reflect this. For instance, the Hebrew calls them *'nevi'im* in the context of being the bearer of Divine word (*Dabar Yahweh*). Whatever the names and context, prophets have the common function of establishing a link between man and the deity. In Judaism, prophecy is a type *'sui generis'*.

In almost all religions, the art of deciphering the mind of the object of worship be it known as the sacred, numinous, divinity, deity or ultimate reality, is at the centre of religious expression. In Hebrew religion, prophecy illuminates the theological concepts of Yahwism and sheds more light to their primitive religious experience and expression (Blenkinsopp, 1996). Hence Heaton (1961) views that the life of the people was throughout guided by the prophets who fertilized the religious life of the nation with new thought or nourished the seed of truth and higher aspiration already planted in the hearts of the people. It is a trite saying that the history and development of the people were started by prophets and they also monitored the people's growth even up to the exilic period.

At various parts of Israel's historical experience, Yahweh did not leave them without a genuine prophet (Albright, 1961). The lists of the prophets of Israel cannot be exhausted. Some of them were Moses, Deborah, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, Gad, Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, Ezekiel, Daniel just to mention a few (Rowley, 1950; 1956). Particularly, prophecy among the ancient Hebrews occupies a prime place in her religious traditions. Prophets were seen not just as the interpreters of the mind of Yahweh, but they were also seen as reformers, mystics and preachers of their age and time. The prophetic traditions and literature occupy largely a substantial part of the Hebrew Scriptures. The major Hebrew Scriptural subdivisions except the 'Writings' are largely suffused with materials from the prophetic traditions. The Pentateuch pictures the personality of Moses as the father of prophecy in Israel. Other prophetic figures pictured were Miriam, the prophetic guilds and probably Balaam. In the Deuteronomistic History, Deborah, Samuel, Gad and Elijah were portrayed as seers; later a greater part of the Hebrew Scriptures contains the supposed message of the classical and 'literary' prophets (Von Rad, 1968; Heaton, 1961).

From the vintage importance and dominance of prophetic traditions in the Old Testament Scriptures, one submits that prophecy is an important feature in which the Ancient Hebrew perceives her God. Therefore, the aim of this study is to re-trace and re-examine the origin of prophetic movement in Israel and its relevance for 21<sup>st</sup> century prophetic ministry, through stating the meaning and phenomenon of prophecy in Israel, prophetic phenomenon in the ancient near East, pre-history of prophecy in Israel and the Hebrew prophets and their world.

#### *Meaning and Typology of Prophecy in Israel*

Prophecy originates from the Greek *'Prophetes'* and the French *'Prophetie'* meaning one who communicates divine messages. The Hebrew word *nabi*, (*navi*?) normally translated in Greek *'prophetes'* and in English 'prophet' is connected with the Assyrian *'nabu'*, meaning 'to call'. It is uncertain whether the word is used in an active or passive sense: namely, as one who is called by God, or one who calls, utters, proclaims the word for God. Both together describe well the role of the prophet; he is called to speak the word of God, and he speaks the word of God not by virtue of his native genius or acquired skills nor even because of his own piety, but simply by virtue of God's call. Additionally, the word 'prophecy' is a derivative of the French *'prophetie'*. This is from the Latin *'prophetia'* or *'prophetes'* (KirkPatrick, Wiktionary: The Free Dictionary).

The English word prophet is derived from Greek *'prophetes'*, meaning, 'one who speaks before others'. The Greek word almost always denotes one who communicates divine revelation (McKenzie, 1956: 694). Accordingly, therefore, it was in this sense that *'prophetes'*, (lit. 'One who speaks for another' or interpreter') was used to designate those who interpret the divine mind as made known in various ways to themselves or to others (Brown, 1990: 224). Therefore, a prophet is not someone who announces the future but someone who speaks in the name of God, someone who has been made privy to God's plan. His principal concern is with the current situation: the events, the vicissitudes and challenges to the religious life of his immediate contemporaries. He can only speak of the future in relation to and flowing from events contemporary to him and his audience. Indeed, a prophet speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation. The charism of prophecy is a universal as well as a unique phenomenon. Thus, there is hardly any nation on earth which in some form or the other does not know revelations of its gods. In almost every age and every land, inspired people emerge who are believed to be endowed with a spiritual strength (and) have access to occult source of knowledge. Moreover, as Nmah, & Nwadiolor (2011: 290) have argued, it is a world-wide occurrence since prophecy of the Hebrew type has not been limited to Israel; it is indeed a phenomenon of almost world-wide occurrence (cf. also Ndiokwere, 1995). Prophets had existed not only among the Egyptian, Hebrew and Greek, but in all civilisations which have existed. Everywhere we find diviners and prophets carrying on the function of the primitive medicine-man.

Nissinen (2004) and McKane (1979) observe that prophetism in Israel is generally recognised by scholars to have its source from other ancient Near East sources; and that in the letters of Mari, there appears a priest called the *'muhhu'* who delivers oracles of the god *Hadad* to the King Zimri-lim, and that there were ecstatic and oracular phenomena in the cult found in the records of Ugarit. Despite its world-wide occurrence, Nissinen (2004) and McKane (1979), note that the resemblance between these phenomena and Israelites prophecy is merely in the form. The ethical and religious content of Israelite

prophecy has no parallel whatever in the ancient world. On this ground alone, the biblical prophecy has been proved a type '*sui generis*'. This uniqueness of Israelite prophecy is contestable among scholars but we are not concerned with their arguments here.

The relationship between Moses and Aaron is described in terms of prophecy thus, "See, I make you as God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet" (Exodus 7:1). This is further described in Exodus 4:15ff: "You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth... He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be a mouth for you and you shall be to him as God". This is the way that Israel understood the role of the prophet in relationship to God. It is for this reason that the accounts of their calling figure so prominently in the prophetic writings; it is their authorization to speak in the name of God.

Prophets in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, technically speaking, existed during the reign of Ahab who was the husband of Jezebel, daughter of one of the priests of the pagan goddess, Astarte. During this time the prophets of Baal and Astarte enjoyed official status (1Kgs. 18). Loyal followers of Yahweh were persecuted and some were brutally executed. This period became too dangerous for Yahwism. The "old time religion" was gradually weakened and mixed with elements from Baalism: the *masseboth*, which was a phallic symbol used in the worship of the male deity, and the *asheroth*, a wooden pillar, often a tree, used in the worship of the god's consort. By these rites religious syncretism and indifferentism were initiated into Yahwism. Worshippers of Yahweh were even unaware that their worship was tied up with the worship of the gods and goddesses of the storm, wine, seasons and fertility. All these led the people to heresy and idolatry.

It was at this point that Yahweh raised up individuals who were to be his spokesmen. These people, whom we now call prophets, were arch defenders of pure Yahwism and fearless announcers of his word. It should, however, be mentioned that there were prophets as early as the time of Samuel, about 1040 BC. The only difference is that this period was as it were the Golden Age of Prophetism. This situation was to prevail from the eighth to the fifth century BC. The Hebrew prophet is thus identified in various appellations:-

- i. The prophet is the man of God. This was a usual title for prophets depicting the moral and ethical nature of prophecy in Israel. Moses, Samuel, Elijah and Elisha were designated in such ways.
- ii. The prophets are servants of Yahweh. Its implication is that Hebrew prophets are enlisted at the 'public service' of Yahweh himself as a mediator.
- iii. The prophets are also messengers of God. He is a delegate and speaks with the authority of he who sent him.
- iv. Also, the Hebrew prophets are interpreters of the mind of God.

- v. The Hebrew prophet is also a seer. Samuel often had this designation (1 Sam 9:19). *Ro'eh* (seer) and *choze* (seer) are also used to highlight the responsibilities of prophets in Israel, as we find in 1 Chron. 29:29
- vi. Prophets are watchmen. As Davidson puts it, "the prophet looked out; he watched for God's revelation". Habakkuk and Ezekiel essentially display these qualities in their respective prophecies".

Obviously in all Israel's history, the prophet often times combined the works of a seer, a spokesman, a priest (in rare cases), a statesman, a judge, a ruler, a diviner, a visioner, dreamer and a forth-teller. In a much broader sense, a prophet is one who believes that he has been sent by God with a message to tell. He was seen as a mouthpiece of God. It is important to note that the Hebrew writers did not employ the terms in such a manner to make a clear distinction between "men of God", "seers", and "prophets" as contemporary scholarship does (Okoronkwo, 2020:4).

From all these functional designation, it is found that prophetic institution is an all-important religious office in Israel. Various typologies therefore have been used to classify Hebrew prophets. These typologies include Major and Minor Prophets, literary and non-literary prophets, vulgar and classical prophets, exilic, post-exilic and cultic institutional prophets, missionary prophets etc. All these classifications were made based on the basis of inspiration, behaviour, office, periodization and function of the prophets. At present, new typologies are being evolved in prophetic studies.

#### *Prophetic Phenomenon in the Ancient Near East*

It is apt to state here that prophecy as a phenomenon is not unique to Israel alone (Nissinen, 2019b). Recent archeological studies on the Ancient Near Eastern Texts (ANET) reveal flourishing prophetic institutions in most ancient nations of which the Eastern Israel was a tiny political part. Prophecy and its like phenomenon existed in ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt and Canaanite aborigines. Historical records on the Ancient Mediterranean culture mention a common pattern of divination by seers and diviners who through their esoteric arts prod into the minds of the gods. Ancient Egypt depended solely on the mind of the gods for different circumstances; hence charismatic prophecy was apparently common in that society. Among the Egyptians, history and its accompanying events follow a pattern which could be observed and the laws of which could be discerned. In different intervals, either of prosperity and hardship, predictions and divinations are sought so as to maintain the ontological balance between the humans and the divine. Prophetic sayings were found in Egyptian Mantis texts, the papyrus text, and the protests of the eloquent peasants.

Various scholars sought to pin the possible origin of Israelite prophecy to the Canaanite aborigines. This view is highly improbable. The Hebrew Scriptures itself situates the origin of prophetic institution to Israel. The Hebrews were abased with



the Canaanite form of prophecy. Other documents mention the prophetic tradition in different ancient nations in the Middle East. The Hittite King, Mursilis II (c 1334 – 1306 BCE) mentions the presence of the prophets. The Mari text found in the 18th Century sheds more light on the rich prophetic institution found in North West Mesopotamia. In Mari, the words *'muhhum'* and *'apilum'* meaning 'an ecstatic' and the one who responds were used to denote prophecy. The *muhhum* were cultic prophets while the *apilum* were members of the ecstatic prophetic guilds. The Moabite stone which was believed to have been inscribed by king Masha of Moab in the 9th Century contains prophetic statements. The stone reads "Chemosh said to me, go take Nebo from Israel; Chemosh said to me, Go down fight against Hausmen" (De Vaux, 1965; 'ANET 320-21). This text parallels the following Old Testament passages: 1 Sam 23: 2, 1 Sam 22: 5, 1 Sam 23:6-12. Also among the 11th Century BCE Phoenicians, prophetic experiences and utterances were recorded of Wen-Amon, an Egyptian emissary at the port of Babylon. In Babylon temples priests were said to have delivered a message '*tetu*' to their respective clients (cf Vawter, 1961: 186). The '*tetu*' is similar to the Hebrew '*Torah*' which is used to represent prophetic instructions (Isaiah 1:10; cf. Vawter, 1990: 186). Much earlier information alludes that Zoroaster, a 7th – 6th century BCE founder of Zoroastrianism was an ecstatic priest singer who used special technologies to induce a trance state; no wonder prophetic and apocalyptic literatures were found in Zoroastrian literature. In a nut shell, it is succinct to state the discernable features of Ancient Near Eastern prophetic traditions as follows:

- i. There were little or no distinctions between the office of the prophets and that of priest unlike in later Israel.
- ii. Prophets were most ecstatic and frenzied in nature. This ecstatic stage was induced through the use of music, dancing, drumming, bodily movement, and self-laceration, and in some places even drinking.
- iii. Prophecies in Ancient Near east comprised largely of divination more than forth telling. These ancient prophets ascertained the will of the god, through astrology, auspices, haruspices, chiromancy, hydromancy and various other forms.
- iv. Like their Hebrew counterparts their clients, audience and royalties communed through oracles, dreams, visions and other forms of mediumship. All these affirm that prophetic institutions were found in almost all ancient religions.
- v. Earlier biblical records mention Balaam the son of Boer who lived at Pethor, which is near the river in the land of Ammon (Numbers 22 4-6). The reference to this pagan prophet affirms that prophecy and divination were essential features of Canaanite and surrounding religions.

- vi. Archeological findings discovered in recent times shed more light on the emergence of an advanced prophetic institution outside Israel. Among these prophetic texts were the mantis texts, and the papyrus of North Western Mesopotamia, the Moabite stone carved by King Mesha during the 9th century BC and the 11th century recorded prophetic utterances which were of Phoenician origins. Essentially, these prophetic texts buttress the fact that the Ancient Near Eastern world, just like the Hebrews, had a suffused religious world view; men relied on gods to ascertain situations of uncertainty, wars, and history. It is however highly probable that the prophetic phenomena of surrounding nations may have heavily influenced Israel's prophetic movements.

#### *Pre-History of Prophecy in Israel*

Albright (1961) and Campbell (2008) trace the prehistory of prophecy in Israel to the priestly diviners and the seers, ecstatic prophets, cultic prophets, Nazirites and Rechabites, prophetic makers of history and emerging ethical prophets. In Hebrew religion, prophecy entails ascertaining the mind of Yahweh. Albright (1961) and Campbell (2008) make bold to assert that the history of Israel is history of prophecy. It is indeed only in the age of prophets, who have left writings behind them that we get details such as to enable us to make a picture of ourselves of the real condition of the people's mind and their practical tendencies. In orthodox Hebrew reckonings, Moses was the first of the prophets (Jensen, 1970). The Old Testament pictures him as a prophet who was primarily a law giver. Later prophetic evidences lend credence to the Mosaic age as the genesis of prophetic tradition in Israel. Numbers 1: 24 – 30 captures the presence of ecstatic prophetic guilds (Campbell, 2008). Aaron and Miriam, Moses siblings were also said to be prophets (Ex 15:20). The Story of Balaam, a pagan seer was inserted in Numbers 22- 24. Unfortunately for the king of Moab, Balaam blessed Israel instead of cursing her; Deborah, a female Israelite judge was also called a '*nebia*'. In later Deuteronomistic tradition, an evident development of a prophetic guild was noticeable. It is obvious that these men prophesied in groups, hence their designation 'Sons of the prophets', a terminology which was lately interpreted as members of the 'prophetic guilds' or 'professional prophets' or 'prophetic disciples' (Forbes, 1997). These guilds were mainly connected with the cult and the sanctuaries (1Kg 14: 17, 2 kg 22: 14-1, Amos 7: 10 ff) or served as '*Court prophets*' (2 Sam 7: 1 ff). Their prophetic expressions were often-times ecstatic and frenzied in outlook (2 kg 9 – 11). Examples of these prophets were Samuel, Gad, Nathan and Elijah (Ellis, 1967; Albright, 1961). It is believed that their prophecies were a transition from vulgar prophetism to literary prophetism. Elijah and Elisha were associated with the sons of prophets (Ellis, 1963). Elisha mostly exhibited ecstatic expressive outlook in his prophecies. Later 8th, 7th and 16th centuries saw the development of classical prophets. Their list includes Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah of Jerusalem (Herbermann, 1913).

Summarizing the pre-history of Israelite prophetic traditions, it is succinct to state that it evolved through little stages before its enormous advancement. The priestly diviners and seers made use of divination elements such as dreams, trances, *urim* and *tummim* (which was to cast lots), also the ephod worn by the priests were instruments of divinations. The ecstatic prophets often went in bands and elicit their prophetic utterances through an induced trance state. The cultic prophets were located at the shrines and sanctuaries in Israel; some of them such as Samuel were both exercising priestly and prophetic functions. The Nazirites and Rechabites were the Puritan Yahwists (Scott, 2009), they remained as a protest group against the religion and culture of Canaan and essentially preserving its nomadic traditions. Ethical prophecy was said to have emerged as at the time of Samuel (1Sam 15:22). Nathan was also credited to have rebuked David against adultery and homicide. These categories of prophets insist on ethical purity as a *sine-qua-non* to true religion instead of superficial cultic observances.

#### *The Hebrew Prophets and their World*

We had earlier stated that the history of Israel is the history of prophecy. This goes a long way to connect the inseparability of prophetic history from the actual national history of Israel. Therefore, the world of the Hebrew prophets spanned through the course of Hebrew history, probably faded away and later was replaced during the Hellenistic period by wisdom and apocalyptic literature. It will be proper to assert that the world of the Hebrew prophets was complex and dynamic in nature. It spanned through various periods in Israel's socio-economic and structural development namely the pastoral society made up of the nomadic and semi-nomadic character of society, which Israel were settled in the Promised Land and began to grow crops; the urban commercial society and the era of Israel in international scene of history (cf Scott, 2009). It was believed that prophetic tradition came to its apogee in the 8th Century BCE and later fizzled away probably in the late 6th century.

During these historical periods, Israel was battling with various peculiar problems. At its nomadic and semi-nomadic era, Israel was largely clan-oriented. As it transited to agricultural stage, she was faced with the problems of the even distribution of wealth among her citizens and the challenge of religious syncretism as a result of religious influence of their neighbouring nations. As Israel progressed within the international scene of the Ancient Mediterranean world, she became concerned with the problems of imperial domination and colonization of various overlords. Israel, according to records, was successively colonized by various emerging super-powers in the Ancient Near East. She was under the Egyptian political control, became a vassal state under the Philistines and later regained her autonomy as at the time of David and his son Solomon. During the 8th and 7th Centuries, Israel became a force to reckon with in Mediterranean politics, later came under Assyrian control, then under the Chaldeans, Egypt, and Babylon of which she

was reduced to a buffer nation. During these periods, different socio-economic and religious challenges faced the nation. Hence, the prophets were there as her religious and moral police mediating these internal pressures until they later phased out in the post-exilic era under the Greeks and the Romans.

#### *Prophetic Types in Israel*

There are basically four prophetic types in Israel. These are as follows:

##### *i) Ecstatic Prophecy*

Biblical tradition traces the origins of Israelite prophecy to Moses, and at least in the sense that this means prophecy began in Israel. However, the scene described in Num. 11:24-30 which Amos referred to in 2:11 when ascribing the beginning of the *nebiim* (prophets) to the Mosaic age was ecstatic in nature. Later, the term has become much broader in its signification where it is applied to any kind of inspired person such as Deborah and Miriam. The major function of these ecstatic prophets according to Vawter (1990:187) seems to have been to stimulate patriotic and religious fervor. Usually these men prophesy in groups whose communal experiences are described in such passages as 1 Sam. 10:6-8, 10-13. As a result, they are often given the generic name 'sons of the prophets' (*bene hannebim*), which has been variously interpreted as members of prophetic guilds, professional prophets and prophetic disciples (1 Kgs. 20:35; 2Kgs. 2). All these interpretations may be justified. The ecstatic experience that served as the climate for prophecy was often induced by mutual contagion through dance and music. These prophets too are often seen to have served as disciples or apprentices under some noted prophet; however, they could also live apart as private individuals (2 Kgs. 4:1).

The ecstatic experience transformed the prophet and made him 'another man' (1 Sam. 10:6). Certainly this condition was the medium of genuine religious experience in which true contact was achieved with God. Ecstatic prophecy continued to some degree throughout the entire period of Israelite prophecy. For instance, Samuel is represented on one occasion as leading a band in ecstatic prophecy (1Sam. 19:20). Also, Elijah and Elisha are habitually associated with the sons of prophets as masters and leaders.

##### *ii) The Diviners and Seers*

The ancient relation of the 'Seer' (Heb. *roeh* or *hozeh*) to prophecy is uncertain. However, the presence of these people contrasts prophecy as the sole legitimate manner of learning the divine will. The significant distinction is that the diviners and seers according to Scott (1994:41) are regarded as ways of satisfying human inquisitiveness by invading and attempting to coerce the world of spirits, whereas a prophet is 'like unto Moses' in that he speaks when bidden not by man but by Yahweh. Obviously, such a situation belongs to a period when prophecy has attained its full stature and the fact that it was necessary to indicate that the old superstitions still

persisted. The story of Saul's stealthy visit to the witch at Endor (1 Sam. 28:6-25) shows that such practices were only driven underground when they came under the official ban. The three official methods employed by Saul without success were dreams, *urim* and *thumim*. These prophets were of a much more primitive type than Amos and Isaiah 300 years later.

The Hebrew word for priest (*kohen*) has its Arabic counterpart (*kahin*) to mean diviner. At the formative stage of Israelite religion and worship, there were no clear cut distinction between the functions of the prophets and those of the priests. Samuel, the first character in the post-conquest story of Israel to be called a prophet, had ministered as Eli's assistant in the temple at Shiloh (1 Sam. 3) while Elijah the prophet built an altar at Mount Carmel in the course of his contest with the prophets of *baal* and offered sacrifice (a priestly function) (1 Kgs. 18). The eventual distinction between the priestly and prophetic office may have come as the temple cultures became more elaborate and the work of its ministers became specialized.

### iii) *The Cultic Prophets*

Majority of scholars hold that the original home of prophecy was the cult and that both in form and substance the preaching prophets were greatly affected by the life and worship of Israel's great sanctuaries (Udoekpo, 2017). Nyoyoko (2003; 2006) opines that there can be little doubt that prophets belonged to the permanent staff of the Jerusalem temple. Repeated references are found in their prophesying in the Jerusalem temple and at other shrines (1 Sam. 3:20; 1 Kgs. 14:2; Jer. 7:2; Amos 7:104). Priests and prophets are associated as temple personnel and often are denounced together by the canonical prophets for abuse of their sacred offices (Isa. 28:7; Jer. 23:11; Mic. 3:11; Zech. 7:2).

The question arises as to the relationship between the classical prophets and the cultic prophets. The classical prophets denigrate the cultic prophets as insufficient in it apart from moral obedience to Yahweh (Isa. 1:10, Jer. 7:1). However, evidence shows that both worshiped together and took turns to prophesy. The difference is in what each one says. Amos's dispute with the priest-in-charge at Bethel, Isaiah's vision when posted so close to the temple during worship, and Jeremiah's controversy with the priests and prophets are indications that the three, priests, cultic prophets and classical prophets, often did participate in conduct of worship. What set them apart was what they said when their turn came to speak. The priest of Bethel was outraged, not by Amos' presence, but by his daring to speak Yahweh's word against Israel, her sanctuaries and her king. Jeremiah's opponents were outraged when he presumed to predict for the Jerusalem temple the fate that had long ago befallen Eli's and Samuel's temple at Shiloh. Evidence of cultic participation in the temple services are also seen in Psalms. Let me opine here that there are passages in the Psalms which have the form of prophetic oracle (cf. Deut. 6:5; Is. 2).

### iv) *Nazirites and Rechabites*

Though these are not regarded as prophets, the puritan Yahwism for which they stood gave them a special affinity with the main prophetic tradition. The Nazirites were individuals who had taken vows of a special sort; the Rechabites might be called "a Bazirite family" for they were a clan which preserved nomadic customs on religious grounds as a strict family tradition.

The word Nazirite means one set apart or consecrated. They did not cut their hair, nor drink wine or liquor. The Nazirite avoided contact with a corpse, or whatever else might make him ritually unclean. The part that was taken by these devotees as forerunners of the prophets in the great struggle to preserve the distinctive tenets and values of Yahwism as well as avoid the dangers and seductions of Canaanite life is fairly clear. Both Samson the typical lay hero of the struggle against the Philistines, and Samuel, the prophetic and priestly leader in the same struggle were Nazirites. Amos links the Nazirite with the older prophets, "I raised up some of your sons as prophets, and some of your men as Nazirites... but you made the Nazirite drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, prophesy not" (Amos 2:11).

### *Nature and Characteristics of Israel's Prophetic Movement*

General prophetic phenomenon in Israel had a unique characteristic. Basically, all Hebrew prophets appealed to a kind of call experiences that propelled them to prophesy. Moreover, there was a direct messaging from Yahweh hence the phrases "the word of the Lord came to me" or "thus says the Lord," were mostly used. The prophets did not speak on their own accord; they were sent by Yahweh to declare the '*dabhar*' to the people. Some of these prophets owed their inspiration either to nature or their surrounding social and physical environments. Their messages were specific and often international and national in outlook. Found in most prophetic traditions are the continuous call of the people back to the covenant and their theocratic ideals. They were constant reminders to the people of their social and cultic lapses. They were not merely exceptional and convinced men of religion drawing deep conclusion from faith. It is obvious that prophecy was of no human deriving, that the prophet was what he was and spoke the way he did as a result of extra-ordinary acts of God's free choice and determination (cf Vawter, 1961:27). Moreover, Micah 3 makes it clear that true prophets do not speak what people want to hear, but what they understand Yahweh wants them to communicate (Wessels, 2021:5). Most prophets made use of religious imageries, symbolism and vague religious languages, oracles; vision narratives and some kind of ecstatic attitudes were also noticeable among certain prophets, especially those belonging to the 'prophetic guild'. Judgment, retribution and hope featured prominently in Israel's prophetic movement. The people were denounced for their follies, commended for their devotion and directed towards restoring the relationship between them and Yahweh. All these were prophetic features in the Old Testament prophetic traditions.



Nonetheless, in the Bible, not even prophets (as in the Hebrew **נְבִיאִים**) are always to be trusted, which leads to the issue of how the people are supposed to know if a prophet and his message are legitimate or not (Arena, 2020:4). This was because there were self-made prophets who usually capitalized on prevailing situations to mislead unsuspecting people. As Isaac and Adeyeye note, three major tests were used in discerning between the true and the false prophets. The first was theological, where a prophet was deemed false if he failed to acknowledge Moses' authority and subscribe to the doctrine of the Exodus. The second test was practical. It emphasized, according to Deuteronomy 18:20ff that any prediction that failed to be fulfilled was not from the Lord. The third test, the moral one, was applied both to the life of the prophet and to the tendency of the message he preached (Isaac & Adeyeye, 2020:159-160).

#### *Stages and Succession of Prophetism in Israel*

Prophetic movement took different forms and shapes all through the Old Testament period. According to Scott (1969: 63), the five stages of prophetic succession include, the era of Moses, actors on the stage of history Elijah and Elisha narratives, golden age of prophecy and post classical and anonymous writing prophecy. For us to study in details this section, the era of Moses, prophecy in the time of Deborah, prophecy in the time of Samuel and Saul, prophecy at the time of the monarchy, prophecy during the exilic era and prophecy after the exilic period will be looked into.

Scott (2009) lists five stages of prophetic succession in Israel which include the traditional and partly legendary literature relating to the founder Moses, the actors in the national drama, the biographical and legendary materials of Elijah and Elisha narrative, and the golden age of and post-classical written prophecy. This classification according to Scott (2009) is not an ordinary classification based on the story of prophecy but based on literature of which we could trace the Israelite development of prophecy even though these literatures roughly correspond to successive epoch of prophetic history. Four evidences affirm the tradition of the founder Moses which includes the distinctive character of the worship of Yahweh, the character of the covenant, the formulation of social and ethical codes based on successive national berith (covenant), and the words of the prophets which lend credence to Moses' role in Exodus. However, contemporary Old Testament research has identified six major prophetic stages of the Ancient Hebrew prophecies.

#### *(i). Prophecy during the Era of Moses*

Moses was reputed to be a law giver, a statesman and a religious reformer. He was an acclaimed father of Israelite prophecy. In fact, his mode of communication with Yhwh is explicitly distinguished from that of later prophets (Broida, 2019:24). This justifies the hypothetical postures taken by Vawter (1961:188) that prophecy originated in Israel herself not among the Canaanite fertility cult. Thus Moses was called a 'nabi' in the Pentateuch; also Aaron and Miriam were

depicted as such (cf Ex. 15:20). It seems that a group of ecstatic prophetic guild evolved from the time of Moses which is connected to the cult (cf Numbers 124 - 30). Hosea 12 -13 attest to the generally accepted prophet-hood of Moses who was the initiator of the 'berith' (covenant) which was the nation's normative code.

#### *(ii). Prophecy in the Time of Deborah*

Deborah was a notable 'nabi' who prophesied during the period of the Judges, although the Judges were generally military leaders and fighters more than preachers of righteousness (Apuivom, Annger & Iortyer, 2020:21). The book of Judges characteristically serves to fulfil the following function that was set out in the schema, "the children of Israel did what was evil in the sight of God and served Balaam. They provoked God to anger and he sold them to their enemies; and when the children of Israel cried unto God, he raised up a Saviour to the children of Israel who saved them and the land had rest for so many years" (cf Noth, 1960). Deborah stands out as one of such judges who served Israel.

#### *(iii). Prophecy at the Time of Samuel and Saul*

The period of Samuel and Saul (Ellis, 1967) is the period marking the transition from the Judges to the Monarchy. Samuel is said to be a leader of the ecstatic prophets. It seems that he was also a Nazirite by birth. He received his call in a dramatic way at Shiloh as 'altar boy'. Ecstatic prophets usually prophesied in groups (1 Sam 10:6 -8, 10 -13). They were usually called *bene hannevim* (sons of the prophets). They lived in groups and could as well live as individuals. Saul encountered Samuel in search of his father's lost ass; he was later associated with the band of Prophetic guild (1 Sam 10:5 -6, 12). As at the time of Samuel and Saul, prophets lived in communities. The village of Naioth in Ramah is said to be a community or settlement of prophets. Also Ramah, Mount Ephraim, Bethel, Gibeon, Jericho, Jordan and Gilboa, were examples of such prophetic communities (cf 2Kgs 2:3, 1Sam 10:3 10, 2 Kgs. 2; 3). The multiplication of prophets at Samuel's time points to the rising fervour of religious devotion in contrast to the period of the priest Eli when "the word of the Lord was rare in those days and there were no frequent visions" (1 Sam 3:1).

#### *(iv). Prophecy during the Period of Monarchy*

The period saw great prophetic statures such as Elijah and Elisha. Elijah is one of the most arresting personalities in the Old Testament, second only to Moses (Scott, 2009:71). The narrative introduces him as a Tishbite (1Kgs 17: 1). He stands tall as a portrait of religious reformer as at the time Israel was given to religious apostasy. Elisha his servant became his successor. Most of Elisha's stories consist of miraculous and legendary elements. He was said to be the head of the ecstatic prophetic guild. Earlier, Elijah and Elisha were "court" prophets such as Gad, Nathan and the sons of Haman (cf 2 Sam 4:11 Chron. 25:5). These prophets were counselors of

various kings. The list of court prophets includes Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micaiah.

*(v). Prophecy during the Exilic Period*

The northern kingdom which is also called the kingdom of Israel with headquarters at Samaria went into exile around 720-722 BC, while the southern kingdom which is otherwise called the kingdom of Judah with headquarters in Jerusalem went into exile in 586 BC. Most prophets were said to have prophesied during this period. Jeremiah's accounts showed that he continued his prophecy even when Israel went into exile. Deutero-Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel were exilic prophets. These prophetic messages consist of lament and dirge over the fate of Jerusalem, despair of the unfavourable condition the people brought on themselves, and an affirmation of hope for future liberation of Israel. These prophets also saw genuine repentance as the only way Israel could return to the Promised Land.

*(vi). Prophecy during the Post Exilic Period*

Trito-Isaiah falls within this period. Other prophets were Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi. These post exilic prophets foresaw hope for the returnees in as much as they obeyed the Torah through maintaining cultic and ritualistic observances. Their prophecies were polemical to the overbearing Chaldean and Persian influence on the 'remnant'. They insisted on religious revivalism, cultic reformation and ethical observances. All these were the cycle of Prophetism in Ancient Israel.

*Prophecy and Apocalyptic Movement*

Apocalyptic movement was a reactionary movement which was said to have taken over from the declining prophetic movement. Apocalypse means to unveil or reveal what is hidden. It originated around 200 BCE as at the time of the Maccabean revolt when Israel was faced with possible Hellenization. It seems that the apocalyptic tradition existed quite earlier and was combined with prophetic writings. The Book of Daniel contains much apocalyptic materials. Hence, apocalyptic witnesses were coded messages written under hostile and unfavourable condition, encouraging God's people in the face of their persecution and employed rich imagery, symbolism and encoded messages. The apocalyptic literature cohered to prophetism in its message of the eventual triumph of good over evil. It is probable that Daniel belonged to the apocalyptic movement.

*Prophetism and Social Order in Israel*

The prophets who were Israel's religious specialists were very much concerned with the nation's social structures and organization. This was because the people's social structure such as their way of life, pattern of thought, political authority, economic interest and social institutions could not be isolated from their religious worldview (Ko, 2013). The Hebrew world was deeply religious; no dichotomy ever existed between the sacred and the profane. The Ancient

Hebrew man was notoriously religious; he lived and even died religiously. Against this backdrop, the prophets were deeply concerned with the prevailing social order. Hence, the prophets played the following roles,

- i. They acted as social reformers, organizers and law givers. A typical example was Moses.
- ii. The prophets were moral vanguards of the people, insisting on ethical monotheism.
- iii. Most of the prophets were counselors and members of the kings' council hence forging the institution of the monarchy on the path of Yahweh's dictates.
- iv. Most of the prophets described the alarming injustice occasioned by prosperity and
- v. d boom hence making themselves 'senior advocates' of the masses and the oppressed.
- vi. Prophets sometimes doubled as priests, thereby resolving the conflicts within the social structures.
- vii. The prophets mainly were international analysts and national purveyors of their times. These they did from the point of view of Yahwism.
- viii. They were also religious policy makers, maintaining Israel's monotheistic ideals, the exodus covenant, and the cult.
- ix. The prophet served as the conscience of the people and was oftentimes an active participant in their politics and succession.
- x. The prophet mediated between Israel's institution, the family, the tribe, and religion.
- xi. Essentially, prophetism was geared towards maintaining the theocratic union of God with his people. They were the bearers of the theocracy, and commissioned to carry it out to its final intention.

## II. CONCLUSION

From the study, it is clear that the fact that the nation of Israel was born with the prophetic ministry which it borrowed from the traditions of the Ancient Near East, cannot be over-emphasized. It has been noted, however, that the prophetic ministry of Israel permeated their entire nationhood and was unique in character, motif, and motive. We therefore submit here that prophecy, to a very large extent, constituted an inseparable part of Israel's history and was responsible for its nature within successive eras. Prophetic movement took a complex and dynamic cycle throughout Israel's development and institutionalization. It started with Moses as its founder, later prophetic guilds were formed which comprised of ecstatic and frenzied religious mediums; then prophecy assumed its stable stage as at the period of the early 8th Century BCE until its decline during the Greek era. All these point to the fact that prophetism was an invaluable religious phenomenon among the Ancient Hebrews. Finally, the New Testament Church, rightly described by Paul the apostle as "The Israel of God", has a prophetic role to play wherever she is represented. In Nigeria, there is need for the Christian faith to emphasize a balanced view of the prophetic ministry. Whereas the tendency in some quarters has been to view the



prophetic ministry with skepticism, the time has come for the Church to rid prophecy of the narrow box of the prosperity gospel into which it has been subjected for too long, extending its frontiers to the pristine scriptural pedestal, from where it can address corruption, nepotism, and the many other vices that plague Nigeria.

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