

THE MENACE OF FALSE PROPHETS IN PLATEAU STATE: ITS IMPACT ON THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The Prophets in the Bible from the Old Testament were the oracles of God. They spoke the will and the mind of God. They were highly respected by the masses because the prophets carried the presence of God. The evidence to know a Prophet is real is by his prophecy coming to pass. In the New Testament, the word prophet can be used to refer to a leader or minister of God who operates in any office of the five-fold ministry or a clergy. The issue is that many false prophets have deceived the true believers, and they have polluted the church of Christ. It is disheartening that the office of the prophet or clergy in our contemporary days has been abused. People begin ministry not because they are called by God but because of their personal and selfish gain. This has brought a lot of harm and misfortune to the church and society. What are the characteristics of false prophets, and what are the factors that have led to their increase? This paper uses an analytical and historical approach to discuss the menace of false prophets in Plateau State, considering its impact on the contemporary Church and society. It was observed that this menace harms the individuals, the family, which comprises the Church and Society. All government agencies, religious leaders, community stakeholders, and informed citizens should put their hands together to stop this menace and bring about sanctity in our churches and societies in Plateau State.

KEYWORDS: False Prophet, Clergy, Church, Society, and Plateau State.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed a notable proliferation of individual-centred churches. While this trend offers potential advantages with legitimate leaders, it also presents challenges due to its unregulated nature, allowing self-proclaimed prophets to emerge. As Obiefuna observes, this surge is rooted in historical factors: the Protestant Reformation's introduction of diverse denominations, colonial missionary activities that spurred Independent Churches due to cultural insensitivity, and competition among missionary groups creating a 'confusing cluster of Churches.' Additionally, exposure to Western literature, the Protestant tradition, and the need to address African spiritual

concerns contributed to the rise of these individual-driven religious movements (Obiefuna, Nwadiolor, and Umeanolue 19-44).

This paper critically analyses the menace of false prophets in Plateau State, examining its impacts on the church and society. Like many Nigerian states, it exhibits a diverse religious landscape. The population includes a significant Muslim presence, predominantly of Hausa and Fulani ethnicity, who are often referred to as 'settlers.' The Christian population, largely considered 'indigenes,' is dominated by evangelical denominations, notably the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) and the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA). Other established Christian denominations, such as the EYN, Anglican, and Catholic churches, also have a strong presence. However, the recent surge of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements has led to a rapid proliferation of new churches and ministries across the state.

The proliferation of self-proclaimed prophets in Plateau State, driven by the rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements and exploiting the region's diverse religious landscape, poses a significant threat to individuals, families, and societal stability through religious manipulation and exploitation, necessitating a comprehensive approach that includes increased religious literacy, strengthened legitimate religious institutions, and effective regulatory oversight. This paper gives an overview of the concept of prophets in the Bible, the nature and manifestation of false prophets, contributing factors to the rise of false prophets, and their impact on individuals and family (church), and society. The paper suggests and recommends education and awareness campaigns, strengthening legitimate religious institutions, and taking appropriate legal and regulatory measures to curb the menace of false prophets in Plateau State.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT OF PROPHETS IN THE BIBLE

To understand prophets and prophecy today, it is essential to examine their biblical origins, beginning with the Old Testament. In this context, prophets were revered and honoured. Willem Vangemeren observes that prophets provided insight into God's grand plan, offering a vision of hope for His people. They spoke within specific historical moments, empowered by the Holy Spirit to convey God's word. Functioning as witnesses for future generations, they delivered messages of transformation to those complacent with their current circumstances. The prophets presented a stark contrast between God's kingdom and human kingdoms, between divine revelation and human religion (18-19).

Belcher defines a prophet as someone who speaks the words that God gives him to speak (21). The traditional understanding of a prophet portrays them as a divinely appointed messenger, an oracle tasked with conveying God's message, not their own.

This message, ideally, serves the edification and well-being of the people. While divine reward may accompany their service, a true prophet's vocation transcends personal gain or selfish ambition. In the Old Testament, prophets were understood to 'foretell,' predicting future events, or 'forthtell,' speaking God's word into the present situation, often calling for repentance or offering guidance. Essentially, a prophet is a chosen vessel, entrusted with the sacred duty of articulating God's will (Adams <https://www.biblestudytools.com>).

Willem further notes that in Israel, the revelation of Yahweh was a unique gift, demanding a response of absolute loyalty to God who had spoken. This contrasted sharply with the surrounding nations, where religious practices involved seeking "divine" guidance through professional diviners, magicians, enchanters, and dream interpreters (20). Abraham is the first individual explicitly designated as a prophet (Genesis 20:7). This designation is supported by several events in his life. In Genesis 12, he received a divine call promising blessings to his family and all nations. In Genesis 15, he received a word from God in a vision. However, a more definitive understanding of prophecy emerges approximately four hundred years later in the context of Moses, particularly within his warnings against soothsayers and diviners (Thompson n.d.).

Regarding Moses, Thompson states that he will be like a god to Pharaoh, and Aaron will be like a prophet. In Deuteronomy, Moses was the one identified as the Prophet. During the Israelite monarchy, the kings would turn away from God and worship idols. However, the true prophets of God always stand outside of this moral and theological corruption and proclaim the true word of God to all of the guilty parties—the kings, the priesthood, and all the false prophets. The two primary terms used to designate those individuals who spoke and transmitted the word of Yahweh are *nabi* (prophet) and, less frequently, "seer" or "man of God" (Hays & Longman 24-26). The Old Testament contains a network of interrelated predictions and anticipations of a Coming One, who would be both God and man, and who would be prophet, priest, and king par excellence (Smith xi).

This anticipation finds its fulfilment in the New Testament, where an elevated view of prophets and prophecy is characterized by its emphasis on that very realization. Jesus's acceptance and teaching of the divine authority of prophetic texts is clearly evident. The Gospels demonstrate this connection through scriptural references to the prophets (Matthew 1:22-23 referencing 5:2, Luke 24:44), and instances of prophetic fulfilment (Thompson n.d.). Peter states that, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Pro and *phetes* are the two Greek words for the Prophet in the New Testament. The formal preposition could either mean 'afore time, before time, and in the presence

of' while the latter means 'to say'. This means a Prophet delivers God's message before his people (Adejare and Nggada 395). Prophecy, a gift of the Holy Spirit, delivers God's word to His people. Believers, desiring to know God's will in all aspects of their lives, seek to receive prophetic revelation and avoid grieving or quenching the Spirit (Thompson no page). This New Testament understanding of prophecy carries profound implications for the contemporary church. Firstly, it highlights the continued relevance of prophetic ministry. While the canon of Scripture is closed, the Holy Spirit continues to gift the church with prophetic utterances for edification, exhortation, and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3).

Obielosi and Idonor show the difference between false and true prophets by stating that, unlike true prophets who fearlessly speak truth and prioritize God's message, these false prophets are driven by a desire for popularity, aggressively promoting their ministries and fabricated miracles to amass followers and wealth. This proliferation of prophetic figures and events raises critical questions about the nature of their influence and the potential impact on the region's socio-religious fabric. The aggressive self-promotion through public advertising, coupled with the promise of supernatural solutions to complex societal issues, creates an environment where vulnerable individuals may be easily swayed, potentially leading to exploitation and disillusionment. This phenomenon demands a closer examination of the underlying motivations, the methods employed, and the consequences for the people of Plateau State. This is a feature of the contemporary Plateau landscape, which is the ubiquitous presence of posters and billboards advertising self-proclaimed prophets. These individuals, often asserting extraordinary powers, make bold claims of healing for the land and offer purported political predictions. The religious sphere is further saturated with crusades, conferences, and various other 'spiritual' programs, each promising miraculous interventions and divine pronouncements.

THE NATURE AND MANIFESTATION OF FALSE PROPHETS

Olatoye professes that the operation of false prophets has existed for a long ago since the time of Israel (353). Given the prevalence of individuals claiming to speak for God, discerning authentic divine communication becomes crucial. In today's social media landscape, self-proclaimed prophets are increasingly common. Whether these claims reflect divine calling remains largely unverified. As Belcher observes, the prophet's function is to receive and articulate God's word. However, the integrity of such communication is not always assured. False prophecy can manifest in two primary forms: speaking in God's name without divine mandate and speaking on behalf of alternative deities (22). Obielosi and Idonor explain that biblical texts provide clear distinctions between true and false prophets. True prophets faithfully convey God's

words, are divinely called, deliver uncompromised messages consistent with scripture, and are guided by the Holy Spirit, serving to teach, reprove, and correct. Examples include Amos, Jeremiah, and Micaiah, who fearlessly spoke truth despite opposition, with Micaiah's fulfilled prophecy validating his authenticity.

Conversely, false prophets speak from their own minds, exemplified by Balaam's mercenary soothsaying, Zedekiah's flattering falsehoods, and Hananiah's contradictory pronouncements. These distinctions underscore the importance of discerning genuine divine messengers from those driven by personal agendas (no page). The prevalence of false prophets in contemporary Plateau State presents a multifaceted problem rooted in the exploitation of vulnerable individuals. These individuals, often adept at reading human emotions, capitalize on emotional and financial fragility, employing tactics like coercion, gaslighting, and guilt-tripping to extract resources. Obielosi and Idonor explain that these false prophets prioritize personal gain, prophesying peace and prosperity amidst suffering to attract followers, while avoiding condemnation of evil or calls for repentance. Furthermore, their prosperity teachings encourage the pursuit of wealth through dubious means, fostering a culture of greed and moral laxity (no page). The insistence on "sowing seeds" as a prerequisite for blessings exemplifies this financial exploitation, highlighting the manipulation inherent in their practices.

Furthermore, false prophets frequently employ fear and manipulation to control their followers. By predicting dire future events or referencing past misfortunes, they instil fear, offering themselves as the sole means of averting calamity in exchange for compliance or payment. This manipulation extends to the fabrication of miracles and prophecies, with social media rife with allegations of staged healings and paid actors feigning illnesses. This deceit erodes trust and undermines the credibility of genuine religious institutions. The distortion of religious doctrines serves as a critical tool in the arsenal of false prophets. They twist established theological principles to justify their actions and serve their personal gain, deviating significantly from orthodox interpretations. This manipulation of sacred texts not only misleads followers but also creates a climate of religious confusion and instability, further exacerbating the problem within the Plateau State religious landscape.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE RISE OF FALSE PROPHETS

There are factors that contribute to the rise of false prophets in Plateau State. A few of them are mentioned here.

Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities

Obiefuna et al state that beyond claims of divine calling, the proliferation of individual-centered churches is significantly driven by socio-economic factors. The

pursuit of material wealth and social status motivates unemployed individuals to establish churches as a means of economic survival, with church founding perceived as a rapid path to financial independence. Accusations of "Holy Deceit" highlight the commercialization of religion by some founders, exploiting a society increasingly preoccupied with material gain (19-44).

The rise of false prophets in Plateau State is significantly intertwined with prevailing socio-economic vulnerabilities. The precarious economic climate, characterized by uncertainty and hopelessness, fosters an environment where individuals are susceptible to the promises of quick fixes and divine intervention offered by these manipulative figures. Moreover, poverty and unemployment create a dual vulnerability, driving some to false prophecy as a means of survival while rendering others, suffering from unemployment and underemployment, easy targets for exploitation. The primary driver behind the proliferation of churches, as identified by the study, is the severe economic downturn and widespread unemployment in Nigeria. Jobless graduates, including those from Bible colleges, increasingly view establishing a church as a viable means of livelihood, often undertaking brief Bible college courses before launching ministries without a genuine sense of divine calling (Ogunbade 61-76).

Furthermore, the lack of access to quality education and reliable information exacerbates this vulnerability. Limited access to health and financial literacy resources leaves individuals ill-equipped to make informed decisions, making them susceptible to manipulation. This lack of knowledge, combined with the desperation for immediate solutions to complex problems, drives individuals to seek shortcuts through false prophets, rather than pursuing sustainable, long-term strategies. The desire for instant gratification creates a symbiotic relationship between false prophets and their followers. Obiefuna et al explain that prosperity preaching, emphasizing material wealth as divine favour, has gained popularity in Nigeria's materialistic society, potentially eclipsing traditional Christian doctrines of heaven and hell (Obiefuna et al 19-44). Individuals seeking quick solutions find willing providers in these manipulative figures, who, in turn, exploit their desperation for personal gain. This cycle perpetuates the problem, as both the exploiter and the exploited are driven by the desire for immediate results, rather than sustainable solutions.

Religious Illiteracy

Gambo states that theological education is very imperative for the development of the church and society (262). The susceptibility of followers to false prophets in Plateau State is significantly amplified by a pervasive lack of biblical knowledge. To begin, many believers lack a comprehensive understanding of scripture, viewing it as a mere weapon against perceived spiritual enemies rather than a rich source of theological

study. Consequently, churches that fail to establish robust educational structures leave their members vulnerable to every passing wind of doctrine. In contrast, the Apostle Paul's admonition to Timothy, 'study to show yourself approved,' highlights the importance of rigorous scriptural engagement as a defence against heresy.

Furthermore, the prevalence of blind faith contributes to this vulnerability. Individuals often believe that faith alone can solve their problems, neglecting the crucial role of reason and discernment. This imbalance, where logic and critical thinking are abandoned in the name of 'living by faith alone,' leads to gross misunderstandings and susceptibility to manipulation. Finally, the rapid proliferation of unregulated religious organizations exacerbates the problem. Untrained individuals establish ministries without proper theological grounding or accountability, contributing to a chaotic religious landscape. There is the issue of half-trained individuals in unregulated Bible schools. Ogunbade states that the increase in unregulated Bible schools creates a situation where graduates, potentially lacking a genuine divine calling, perceive their qualifications as a license to establish churches, contributing to the overall proliferation. This lack of oversight allows false prophets to thrive, exploiting the spiritual naivety of their followers and undermining the integrity of legitimate religious institutions (61-76). The Church has the responsibility to preach and fight against every social vice, such as hard drugs, etc. (James 159-62). In the same vein, the church should fight against the menace caused by the false prophet.

Cultural Beliefs and Practices

Obiefuna et al state that early Nigerian Christians, seeking to reconcile their faith with their cultural identity, founded African Christian denominations that embraced both Christianity and their African heritage, in response to the perceived alienation from European Christianity (Obiefuna et al 19-44). The vulnerability of the Plateau State's religious community to false prophets is significantly shaped by the enduring influence of traditional African beliefs and superstitions within the context of Christian practice. Notably, the tendency towards syncretism, the blending of indigenous religious practices with Christianity, remains strong. This is particularly evident in the acceptance of "seeding" as a form of modern-day sacrifice, which resonates deeply with cultural practices of appeasing deities through offerings. Additionally, the familiarity with diviners and fortune-tellers creates a receptive environment for self-proclaimed prophets, as individuals readily transfer their reliance on supernatural insights to the Christian sphere.

Furthermore, false prophets often exploit this cultural context by incorporating traditional African rites into their practices. Ritual cleansing, incantations, and the use of objects believed to possess spiritual power lend an air of authenticity to their prophecies, legitimizing their claims within a familiar cultural framework. This

blending of traditional and Christian elements further blurs the lines of discernment, making it difficult for individuals to distinguish between genuine spiritual guidance and manipulative practices. Beyond these specific examples, a range of traditional beliefs contributes to the vulnerability of the religious community. The fear of ancestral spirits, the reliance on amulets and charms, the emphasis on dreams and visions, the expectation of supernatural healing, and the deep-seated fear of witchcraft and evil spirits all create opportunities for false prophets to exploit and manipulate their followers. These cultural predispositions, when combined with a lack of biblical literacy and critical thinking, create a fertile ground for the proliferation of false prophets in Plateau State.

IMPACTS ON THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH AND SOCIETY

The church does not consist of the physical building, but the members of the church in the form of individuals and families. The author writes this section based on his experience in the church as clergy for many years.

Its Impact on Individuals and Families

The insidious influence of false prophets in Plateau State precipitates a series of dire consequences for individuals and families, beginning with financial ruin. Driven by fear and desperation, individuals often surrender substantial assets and income, believing it to be a form of "sowing" for future blessings. This practice, however, results in devastating financial hardship, depriving households of essential resources and contributing to both familial discord and societal instability. Moreover, the financial losses sustained are compounded by the emotional and psychological trauma inflicted through constant manipulation. Okanlawon writes that in Africa, the family unit is key and strongly connected to their social life (196).

Individuals experience heightened stress levels, often leading to mental breakdowns and long-term psychological distress. Furthermore, false prophets frequently disrupt family dynamics, fostering an allegiance to themselves that overrides familial bonds. This interference creates deep divisions, with spouses prioritizing the prophet's demands and families neglecting basic household needs in favour of financial contributions. Tragically, and perhaps most alarmingly, some prophets instruct their followers to abandon prescribed medical treatments, placing sole reliance on faith healing. This dangerous practice leads to the deterioration of health and, in some cases, preventable deaths. Consequently, the pervasive influence of false prophets in Plateau State not only results in financial ruin and emotional distress but also disrupts family structures and jeopardizes the physical well-being of vulnerable individuals.

The Impact on Society

The rise of false prophets in Plateau State has significantly disrupted the social fabric, beginning with the erosion of religious unity. These individuals instigate open disputes, marked by abusive language and intimidation, which often escalate into cyberbullying and further divisive actions. This fragmentation undermines the collective strength of legitimate religious institutions, leading to a pervasive climate of distrust. Furthermore, the actions of these false prophets have eroded public trust in legitimate religious leaders and institutions. Consequently, many individuals now indiscriminately distrust all religious figures, creating a challenging environment for those seeking to provide genuine spiritual guidance. This distrust, coupled with the chaos prevalent in the social sphere, particularly on social media, contributes to widespread social instability.

Conflicting doctrines and unchecked pronouncements leave individuals without clear guidance or accountability. Finally, the dissemination of misinformation by false prophets, especially during crises, poses a grave danger. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, they spread harmful conspiracy theories, discouraging adherence to public health guidelines and promoting reliance on faith healing. Amadi-Nche and Brown-Ikiri note that “The use of information and communication technology amidst Covid-19 also enabled Religious leaders in and around the world to hear their views and convictions and also the latent idea surrounding the deadly virus” (28). This irresponsible behaviour not only endangered the lives of their followers but also severely hindered broader public health efforts, demonstrating the profound and far-reaching consequences of their actions. However, discernment is paramount. The church must exercise careful judgment, testing all prophetic utterances against Scripture and the character of God (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). Secondly, the emphasis on divine origin, as articulated by Peter, safeguards against subjective interpretations. Prophetic ministry is not about personal opinions or insights, but about faithfully conveying God's revealed will. This calls for humility and submission to the Holy Spirit's guidance, ensuring that prophetic words align with the established truths of Scripture.

Thirdly, the church must cultivate an environment where prophetic gifts can flourish. This involves fostering a culture of prayer, where believers seek God's voice and learn to discern His promptings. It also requires creating safe spaces for prophetic expression, where individuals can share their insights without fear of condemnation. Furthermore, the fulfilment of prophecy in Jesus Christ underscores the centrality of Christ in all prophetic ministry. Any prophetic utterance that detracts from Jesus's Lordship or contradicts His teachings must be rejected. The church must prioritize Christ-centred prophecy, which builds up the body of Christ and advances His kingdom. Finally, the desire of believers to know God's will, as expressed in the text, should drive the church to actively seek and cultivate prophetic gifts. This requires a commitment to

biblical teaching on prophecy, a willingness to embrace the Spirit's diverse gifts, and a dedication to practicing discernment. In a world filled with competing voices, the church needs the clarity and direction that authentic prophetic ministry provides, always grounded in the authority of Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ.

RECOMMENDATION

The following are the solutions and recommendations given to curb this menace:

Education and Awareness Campaigns

Combating the menace of false prophets in Plateau State necessitates a concerted effort through education and awareness campaigns. To begin, campaigns should be launched to highlight the telltale signs of false prophets, focusing on practices that undermine human dignity, such as sexual assault, poisoning, fraud, and the dissemination of misinformation. Furthermore, promoting religious literacy and critical thinking is paramount. Individuals must be empowered to exercise their God-given intellect and understand that faith and reason are not mutually exclusive, contrary to the assertions of manipulative figures.

Moreover, disseminating information about the dangers posed by false prophets is crucial. Investigations into false and harmful practices should be conducted, and the findings should be publicly exposed. If these practices violate the law, prosecution should follow, serving as a deterrent to others. To effectively reach the population, media and community outreach programs should be utilized responsibly. Legitimate clerics must refrain from vehement and hateful attacks devoid of evidence, instead focusing on information and constructive dialogue. In essence, a multi-pronged approach involving public awareness, critical thinking education, and legal accountability is essential to mitigate the influence of false prophets and protect the vulnerable population of Plateau State.

Strengthening Legitimate Religious Institutions

Strengthening legitimate religious institutions is paramount in combating the influence of false prophets in Plateau State. To this end, promoting ethical leadership and accountability within these institutions is crucial. Seminaries and Bible schools, in particular, must incorporate or reinforce courses on leadership ethics and accountability. This proactive approach will equip future clerics with the necessary tools to maintain integrity and resist the temptation to exploit their positions for personal gain. Furthermore, these institutions must prioritize the provision of robust biblical education and counselling. Churches should develop comprehensive curricula for their members, extending beyond pastoral training to encompass the entire congregation. This emphasis

on theological literacy will empower individuals to discern between authentic teachings and manipulative doctrines.

Finally, fostering interfaith dialogue presents a vital avenue for addressing the issue. Some individuals who propagate false or heretical teachings may possess sincere intentions but lack proper theological training. Rather than resorting to adversarial attacks, legitimate religious institutions should engage in constructive dialogue, approaching these situations with love and a commitment to both human well-being and divine principles. By fortifying legitimate religious institutions through ethical leadership, sound education, and open dialogue, a stronger bulwark against the menace of false prophets can be erected.

Legal and Regulatory Measures

Addressing the menace of false prophets in Plateau State requires a robust governmental framework that develops and enforces regulations for religious organizations. While safeguarding religious freedom, responsible practice necessitates accountability and transparency. A unified Christian body could aid in distinguishing legitimate entities from unregistered ones, thereby empowering the government to target fraudulent activities. Establishing reporting and investigative mechanisms is also vital, enabling the identification of false prophets through their exploitative practices, misleading teachings, and harmful misinformation, particularly concerning health.

Strengthening law enforcement capacity is a consequential and critical step. Agencies must be equipped to investigate and prosecute false prophets who violate the law. This involves training to recognize and document financial fraud, investigate physical and psychological abuse, analyse harmful misinformation, collaborate with religious leaders and communities, develop effective prosecution protocols, and protect victims. Ultimately, a multi-pronged approach encompassing legal regulation, investigative mechanisms, and empowered law enforcement is crucial. This strategy will serve as a strong deterrent against the exploitation perpetrated by false prophets, safeguarding the vulnerable population of Plateau State and upholding the integrity of legitimate religious practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has critically examined the menace of false prophets in Plateau State: Its impact on the church and society. This paper discussed an overview of the concept of prophets in the Bible, the nature and manifestation of false prophets, contributing factors to the rise of false prophets, and their impact on individuals and families (churches) and society. The insidious rise of false prophets in Plateau State presents a complex and urgent challenge, deeply rooted in the region's unique socio-economic,

religious, and cultural landscape. These individuals, exploiting vulnerabilities and manipulating faith, inflict devastating harm on individuals, families, and the wider community, eroding trust, disrupting social cohesion, and hindering progress. To effectively combat this menace, a multi-pronged strategy is essential.

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