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False Prophecy and Prophetic Ethics: A Contextual Exegetical Analysis of Jeremiah 23:26-32 and Its Relevance to The Christ Apostolic Church, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Prophecy holds a vital role in biblical tradition, serving as a channel for conveying God's will, guidance, warnings, and instructions to His people. However, alongside genuine prophetic ministry, the Scriptures also highlight the existence of false claims where human ideas masquerade as divine revelations. In Jeremiah 23:26-32, this tension is addressed by calling out prophets whose messages originate from their hearts, rely on misleading dreams, misappropriate divine words, and assert divine authority without true commissioning. This study addresses these challenges and their significance for prophetic ministry within the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC). By employing a historical-grammatical and contextual exegetical approach, the study examined the historical and literary context, key Hebrew terms, rhetorical flow, and the theological and ethical implications of Jeremiah 23:26-32. The findings identified five key criteria for authentic prophecy: a divine source, fidelity to revelation, truthfulness, genuine commissioning, and communal benefit. The study concluded that false prophecy extends beyond making inaccurate predictions; it involves the deceptive presentation of human ideas as divine messages, which can lead to spiritual and communal damage. It recommended enhancing biblical and theological training, fostering scriptural and ecclesial discernment, ensuring ministerial accountability, promoting financial transparency, establishing ethical guidelines for sensitive prophetic issues, and increasing congregational education. The CAC should maintain its prophetic legacy by rooting prophetic ministry in Scripture, integrity, accountability, and service to God's people, rather than in personal authority, manipulation, or financial gain.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Prophecy plays a crucial role in the biblical tradition and continues to hold importance in contemporary Christianity. In the Old Testament, prophets were not just messengers; they were the ones who received and shared divine revelations. They addressed covenant disobedience, interpreted the events of their time, warned of impending judgment, offered hope, and urged the people to return to faithfulness. Prophetic ministry extended beyond predicting the future; it represented God and took responsibility for the spiritual, moral and social well-being of the community. Given that prophetic messages come with a claim to divine authority, it is essential to differentiate between true and false prophecy, which raises significant theological and ethical concerns. The problem of false prophecy is a recurring theme in the book of Jeremiah. During a time of political turmoil, religious corruption, and increasing pressure from Babylon, Jeremiah's warnings of judgment often clashed with other prophets who were preaching peace and security. Jeremiah 23:9-40 detailed the critique of corrupt prophetic leadership, while verses 26-32 specifically address misleading prophetic messages. These false prophets are accused of speaking from their deceitful hearts, sharing dreams, stealing divine words from one another, and falsely claiming, " Thus says the Lord," without any divine authorisation. The passage concludes by stating that God neither sent nor commanded these prophets, and their ministry ultimately brought no benefit to the people.

Beyond its historical context, Jeremiah 23:26-32 raises persistent questions concerning the authenticity of prophecy: the origin of prophetic messages, differences between divine inspiration and human invention, legitimate prophets, and the ethical responsibilities accompanying the assertion to speak for God. These questions are still very relevant, especially in places where prophecy is seen as a way to receive divine guidance.

This issue is particularly significant in the context of Pentecostal and prophetic Christianity in Africa, where prophetic ministers often play a crucial role in guiding believers who are looking for advice on various matters such as health, marriage, jobs, finances,

family challenges, spiritual battles, and future uncertainties. Omenyo (2011) posits that prophecy has become a key aspect of African Christianity, as many believers turn to prophets for divine insight during uncertain times. However, the power of prophetic ministry can also lead to manipulation and abuse. When prophetic statements are viewed as infallible commands from God, ministers might exert too much control over the choices of their congregants. When prophetic authority is tied to financial gain, it can lead to the commercialisation of spiritual gifts. Recent studies highlight issues like manipulation, competition, commercialisation, and the exploitation of religious vulnerabilities of the people (Omenyo, 2011; Ramantswana, 2019, 2021). Omenyo and Arthur (2013) further observe that neo-prophetic practices may twist biblical texts and revelations to validate modern prophetic claims. These trends highlight the need for solid biblical standards to assess prophetic messages.

The issue is especially crucial for the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), which has its roots in Nigeria's indigenous Christian and Aladura movements. This church has cultivated a spirituality that emphasises prayer, prophecy, divine healing, revival, and a deep reliance on the Holy Spirit. Central to its historical identity is the prophetic ministry of Joseph Ayo Babalola. Studies of CAC highlight how vital charismatic experiences have been in shaping its growth and development (Alokan, 1991; Folarin, 2013). Awojobi (2023) argues that predictive prophecy has played a key role in its expansion. Thus, prophecy is not just an afterthought for CAC; it's woven into the very fabric of its historical and spiritual heritage.

However, this prophetic heritage comes with a significant responsibility for accountability. The existence of a tradition of prophecy does not exempt contemporary practices from biblical evaluation. Rather, the authority attributed to prophecy makes ethical evaluation more necessary. Folarin (2018) illustrates the significant authority of Scripture in the theological framework of the CAC and Christian practices, offering a solid foundation for assessing prophetic claims based on biblical teachings rather than the charisma, reputation, or miraculous assertions of individual ministers.

The objective of this article, therefore, is to exegetically examine Jeremiah 23: 26- 32 and identify its benchmarks for distinguishing between authentic and deceptive prophetic authority. While authentic prophecy can bolster faith, uplift the church, and offer spiritual guidance, false prophecy can lead believers astray, skew theological understanding, and compromise the integrity of the church. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how Jeremiah 23:26-32 can serve as a biblical guide for assessing the authenticity of prophecies and help renew prophetic ethics within CAC.

The study argued that Jeremiah's critique remains relevant because the tendency to present human ideas as divine messages is not confined to ancient Judah; it poses an ethical risk wherever prophetic authority is at play. To explore this, the study adopted historical-grammatical and contextual exegetical methods, examined Jeremiah's historical background, the literary context of chapter 23, key Hebrew terms, the flow of verses 26-32, and the theological implications of the passage. These insights are then compared with existing studies of African prophetic Christianity and the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC). The study proceeded from a conceptual examination of prophecy and prophetic ethics to a thorough examination of the historical and literary context of Jeremiah 23:26-32, detailed exegetical analysis, ethical applications, reflections on CAC, a discussion of the findings, and some recommendations.

2. PROPHECY, FALSE PROPHECY AND PROPHETIC ETHICS

2.1 PROPHECY AND PROPHETIC AUTHORITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Prophecy in the Old Testament is fundamentally a God-human communication. Prophets are seen as the people through whom God communicates His plans, not just with Israel but with other nations. Their role includes proclaiming messages, giving warnings, offering encouragement, interpreting events, passing judgment, and instilling hope. While predicting the future is part of what they do, it is just one piece of the larger picture.

Being a prophet also comes with a strong sense of responsibility tied to the covenant. They often challenge kings, priests, and communities when their actions stray from God's expectations. Their authority is not meant for personal gain; instead, it is about preserving the bond between God and His people. Prophetic work has a moral dimension because prophets address real-life situations where human choices have significant religious implications.

The biblical tradition recognises that there can be conflicting prophetic voices. Deuteronomy 13:18 lay out important guidelines for assessing prophetic messages. For instance, Deuteronomy 13 warns against prophets whose signs or predictions lead Israel away from their covenant with God, while Deuteronomy 18 helps differentiate between a true prophet sent by God and one who speaks presumptuously in His name. Hibbard (2011) highlights how crucial these Deuteronomic teachings are for understanding Jeremiah's views on true versus false prophecy.

Consequently, prophetic authority in the Old Testament is not something that just springs from within. A prophet does not gain authority simply by calling themselves one or using prophetic language. True authority comes from God and must be accountable to Him. Therefore, the prophetic function is both a special privilege and a serious ethical duty.

2.2 THE NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF FALSE PROPHECY

Understanding the concept of false prophecy in Jeremiah requires careful definition. The Hebrew Bible does not have a straightforward term that directly translates to "false prophet" in English. Instead, Jeremiah talks about prophetic figures using terms related to falsehood, deception, and unauthorised speech, along with misleading actions. Hibbard (2011) notes that the Septuagint's term *pseudoprophētēs* has influenced the language we often see in later discussions of this topic. Jeremiah's main focus is on the essence and source of prophetic messages. When a prophet speaks from the "deceit of his heart," the message comes from a human source rather than a divine one. This makes false prophecy a matter of misrepresentation, where people mistake human words for divine ones.

Jeremiah 23:26-32 identifies several key traits of false prophecy. First, it springs from the prophet's own heart. Second, dreams can be manipulated to give the illusion of divine insight. Third, prophets might borrow words from others and pass them as messages from God. Fourth, they may arrogantly claim God's authority. Lastly, their actions lead people astray and offer no real benefit. The core problem is therefore not just about making wrong predictions. A person can make an incorrect statement without claiming to speak for God. False prophecy becomes particularly problematic when human words are presented as words of God. The ethical violation lies in taking divine authority for personal gain.

The significance of prophecy in African Christianity highlights the relevance of these biblical principles. Prophetic ministers often address deep existential concerns that individuals find hard to resolve independently. This can position the prophet as a vital source of pastoral care, but it can also lead to a sense of dependency among believers. Omenyo (2011) posits that the "man of God" phenomenon in African Christianity, where people frequently turn to prophets for divine insight. Omenyo and Arthur (2013) examined neo-prophetic interpretations of Scripture and explore how biblical language is used in contemporary prophetic practices. However, the rise of prophetic Christianity has generated concerns about commercialisation and spiritual exploitation. Ramantswana (2019) warns of situations where prophets might exploit the faith of vulnerable believers instead of genuinely praying for them. In a similar vein, Ramantswana (2021) examines the competition among prophets in today's commercial landscape. These trends underscore the need for prophetic ethics not to only consider the accuracy of specific claims but also the power dynamics and economic structures that shape prophetic ministry. Jeremiah 23:26-32 offers a valuable theological perspective by highlighting key aspects like the origin of revelation, the honesty in communication, the validity of authority, and the well-being of the community. It's not just about whether someone asserts they have a spiritual gift; it's really about how that gift is used with faithfulness and responsibility.

3. HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT OF JEREMIAH 23:26-32

Jeremiah 23:26-32 should be interpreted within the political, religious, and prophetic crisis that describes the final period of the monarchy of Judah. Jeremiah's ministry emerged during a time of decline of regional powers; with the rise of Babylon, Judah found themselves increasingly vulnerable. This backdrop led to a clash of interpretations regarding the crisis: Jeremiah insisted that Judah's predicament was the result of Yahweh's covenantal judgment, urging the people to repent, submit, and recognise divine intentions. In contrast, other prophets offered more comforting messages of peace and security (Jer 6:13-15; 23:16-17). Thus, the struggle was not just about differing predictions; it revolved around how to understand Judah's situation theologically and the ethical implications of those interpretations. Wessels (2009) argues that these opposing prophets were tied to Jerusalem's power dynamics and played a role in the moral and spiritual decline of Judah.

Literally, Jeremiah 23:26-32 forms a larger set of prophetic messages found in Jeremiah 23:9-40, which address corrupt prophetic leadership. This section follows a critique of Judah's rulers and fits into the broader indictment of leadership seen in Jeremiah 21:1-24:10. Wessels (2011) highlights Jeremiah 23:9-40 as focusing on the distinction between true and false prophecy, arguing that the failures of the prophets, along with those of the kings and priests, contributed significantly to Judah's crisis and eventual exile. The immediate context in verses 16-22 denounces prophets who speak from their desires instead of Yahweh's words, while verses 23-24 stress that Yahweh is not a localised deity to be controlled or hidden away. Wessels (2016) interprets these verses as a strong rebuttal against the idea that Yahweh's presence automatically ensures peace and security, a belief that could lead to complacency and a disregard for divine judgment.

In this context, verses 25-32 form a cohesive literary unit that gradually reveals the nature and fallout of deceptive prophecy. The first part, verses 25-28a, focuses on prophets who claim to have dreams, but whose messages are rooted in deceit. Then, verses 28b-29 draw a sharp contrast between human dreams and the genuine word of Yahweh, illustrating the latter's power through clear metaphors like fire and hammer. Finally, verses 30-32 deliver a stern judgment on those prophets who pilfer divine words, misuse prophetic formulas, and mislead the people. Wessels (2011) echoes this interpretation, identifying verses 25-28a as a critique of false dreams, verses 28b-29 as a presentation of Yahweh's true and powerful word, and verses 30-32 as a condemnation of the offending prophets.

This progression lays out a clear chain of prophetic failure: it starts with a corrupt message source, followed by the false appropriation of divine authority, and ultimately leads to the community being misled. Verse 26 showcases that the deception springs from the prophets' hearts; verse 27 illustrates how dreams are used in ways that make the people forget Yahweh; verse 28 differentiates between human dreams and Yahweh's word; verse 29 emphasises the penetrating power of true revelation; verses 30-31 highlight the theft and misuse of divine speech; and verse 32 wraps it up by stating that these false dreams lead the people astray. The repeated divine pronouncement against the prophets underscores the gravity of their wrongdoing. Therefore, the key issue is not just whether a prediction comes true, but whether the prophetic message truly comes from and accurately reflects Yahweh.

This passage is part of a larger prophetic conflict over what constitutes true divine authority. Jeremiah challenges prophets who, using authoritative language and divine speech formula, present their ideas as if they were revelations from God. This problem is both theological and ethical: they misrepresent where their messages come from and claim an authority that has not been given to them. Wessels (2011) asserts that prophets were meant to be conduits for Yahweh's communication with the covenant community; when that communication gets twisted, prophecy stops being helpful and instead becomes misleading. This raises an important standard for assessing prophetic ministry: just having confidence, using spiritual language, sharing dreams, or claiming divine authority does not automatically mean someone is genuinely commissioned by God.

The theological and canonical importance of this passage is further highlighted by its connection to Deuteronomy 13 and 18, where the legitimacy of a prophet is evaluated based on their faithfulness to the covenant and their authorised speech in Yahweh's name. Jeremiah explores these issues during a specific national crisis, making a clear distinction between authentic revelation and human fabrication. The imagery of grain versus straw in verse 28 illustrates the difference between Yahweh's true word and mere human speech, while the metaphors of fire and hammer in verse 29 highlight the strength and impact of real divine revelation. Thus, the passage goes beyond simply distinguishing between "true predictions" and "false predictions" to a deeper contrast between divine revelation and human invention.

The ongoing significance of prophecy in African Christianity highlights the relevance of these biblical principles. Prophetic ministers often address deep existential problems that individuals find hard to navigate. This positions the prophet as a vital source of pastoral care, but it can also lead to a sense of dependency among believers. Omenyo (2011) clarifies the "man of God" phenomenon in African Christianity, where people frequently turn to prophets for divine insight. Omenyo and Arthur (2013) investigate neo-prophetic interpretations of Scripture and explore how biblical language is used in contemporary prophetic practices. However, the rise of prophetic Christianity has raised concerns about commercialisation and spiritual exploitation. Ramantswana (2019) cautions against situations where prophets exploit the faith of vulnerable believers instead of genuinely praying for them. In a similar vein, Ramantswana (2021) examines the competition among prophets in the contemporary commercial landscape. These trends underscore the need for prophetic ethics to consider not only the accuracy of specific claims but also the power dynamics and economic structures that shape prophetic ministry.

4. EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF JEREMIAH 23:26-32

Jeremiah 23:26 (The Heart as the Source of Deceptive Prophecy)

This verse identifies לֵב (heart) of the prophets as the root of their misleading messages. In the Hebrew Bible, the heart extends beyond feelings; it includes thoughts, intentions, understanding, and will. So, when Jeremiah makes his accusation, he is not talking about wrong predictions-he is highlighting the internal motivations and deliberate nature behind the prophetic words. The prophets are sharing שֶׁקֶר (falsehood/deception*)* and תַּרְמִית לִבָּם (deceit of their heart), presenting their own deceptive inclinations as if they were divine insights (Carroll, 1986; Holladay, 1989; Lundbom, 2004; McKane, 1996). Wessels (Wessels, 2011) particularly emphasises that these prophets become the origin of their messages instead of being mere messengers of Yahweh.

Jeremiah 23:27 (Dreams and Covenant Forgetfulness)

Jeremiah is not rejecting dreams as a way for God to communicate; he is actually condemning their misuse. The real problem is that these so-called dreams lead the people to forget Yahweh's name, linking prophetic deceit to a lack of faithfulness to the covenant and the earlier turn to Baal. False prophecies mislead the loyalty of the community and twist Israel'גs perception of God (Thompson, 1980; Carroll, 1986; Lundbom, 2004; Brueggemann, 1998; Wessels, 2011).

Jeremiah 23:28 (Human Dreams and the Divine Word)

In verse 28, there is a clear contrast drawn between חֲלוֹם (dream) and דָּבָר (message). This distinction between straw and grain does not deny the existence of dreams; instead, it separates unreliable or self-made claims from the true word of Yahweh. The major problem for the prophets is about the source, authority, and faithfulness to divine revelation. Carroll (1986), Holladay (1989), McKane (1996), Lundbom (2004), and Brueggemann (1998) provide valuable insights for understanding this contrast within the broader conflict over prophetic authority.

Jeremiah 23:29 (The Fire and Hammer of the Divine Word)

The metaphors of אֵשׁ (fire), meaning 'fire', and פַּטִּישׁ (hammer), meaning 'hammer,' vividly portray the divine word as something incredibly powerful, penetrating, and effective. Unlike the hollow, Yahweh's word carries a transformative and confrontational strength. This imagery contributes to Jeremiah's distinction between human religious speech and genuine revelation (Thompson, 1980; Fretheim, 2002; Brueggemann, 1998; Lundbom, 2004).

Jeremiah 23:30-31 (Stolen Words and Fraudulent Prophetic Authority

When Jeremiah accuses the prophets of "stealing" Yahweh's words, he highlights the ethical issues surrounding false prophecy. Using the verb גָּנַב (to steal), he portrays prophetic speech as an illegitimate act of appropriation: words that weren't truly received from God are being passed around and falsely presented as divine messages. In verse 31, the critique sharpens as it reveals those who twist their own words while still trying to use the authoritative prophetic formula נְאֻם(says the Lord). This passage makes a clear distinction between simply mimicking the language of revelation and genuinely holding divine authority (Carroll, 1986; McKane, 1996; Diamond, 2003; Lundbom, 2004; Wessels, 2011). Wessels particularly points out the issue of self-proclaimed prophets whose claims to special revelation fail to prove their legitimacy.

Jeremiah 23:32 (False Dreams, Lack of Commission, and Communal Harm)

Verse 32 serves as the climax of this section. The false prophets narrate חַלְמוּת שָׁקֶר (deceptive dreams), leading the people astray. The key indicator of their illegitimacy is expressed in Yahweh's declaration: "I did not send them, nor did I command them." This divine commissioning is crucial for establishing prophetic legitimacy. The final statement that these prophets do not benefit the people offers an ethical and communal standard for assessing prophetic actions (Carroll, 1986; Holladay, 1989; McKane, 1996; Diamond, 2003; Lundbom, 2004; Wessels, 2011).

5. PROPHETIC ETHICS IN JEREMAIH 23: 26-32

Prophetic ethics hinges on a few key principles: fidelity to divine revelation, being honest in what is shared, maintaining moral integrity, exercising responsible authority, and showing genuine concern for God's people; these are discussed as follows:

Fidelity to Divine Revelation: Fidelity in prophetic ministry is the commitment to divine revelation. Jeremiah 23:25-32 presents the distinction between messages that emanate from the prophets' hearts and the true word of Yahweh. This passage calls out those who falsely claim to speak on God's behalf (Jer. 23:26, 30-32). Wessels (2011) posits that false prophecy is fundamentally misleading because these prophets twist their messages to make them seem as though they are from Yahweh. Prophetic ministry is valid only when it faithfully conveys divine revelation and truly serves God's people. Wessels (2009) also highlights the importance of truthfulness, loyalty to the covenant, and alignment with Yahweh's purposes as essential to distinguishing true prophecy from false. Therefore, prophetic utterances must always align with Scripture and cannot rightfully promote teachings that contradict the broader biblical narrative (Wessels, 2009, 2011).

Prophetic Integrity and Truthfulness: Prophetic ethics depends on truthfulness and integrity and a genuine connection between proclamation and conduct. Jeremiah strongly condemns prophets who "steal" divine words, twist their own messages, and falsely claim, "He says" (Jer. 23:30-31). The issue is not merely making wrong predictions; it's about the deceitful misuse of divine authority. Wessels (2011) argues that Jeremiah 23:25-32 gradually reveals false dreams, misleading speech, and illegitimate claims of divine calling, ultimately concluding that such prophecies do not serve the best interests of the people. Therefore, a prophet's credibility hinges on both the truthfulness of the message and the moral integrity of the messenger. Contemporary ministers should avoid presenting speculation as divine revelation and should openly acknowledge uncertainties in their interpretations. Additionally, ministerial ethics demand that leaders live out the values they preach; accountability literature emphasises that ethical behaviour and "walking the talk" are essential components of credible Christian leadership (Letswalo & Naidoo, 2024).

Self-Serving Prophecy and Manipulation: Jeremiah highlights the prophets' hearts, shedding light on the risks of self-serving prophecy. This is where personal desires, ambitions, or interests are disguised as divine messages (Jer. 23:26). Wessels (2009) notes that the prophets critiqued in Jeremiah 23 were often tied to existing power structures, using their claims to speak for Yahweh to wield influence. This serves as a significant warning for today: one must be cautious about prophetic authority becoming too personal or shielded from scrutiny. When prophetic ministers function as the main interpreters of God's will for their congregations, it can lead to a troubling dynamic of spiritual dependence and manipulation, especially in critical areas like marriage, finances, employment, health, or family matters. Therefore, true prophetic authority should guide believers back to God, Scripture, and thoughtful discernment, rather than fostering an environment of blind reliance on the prophet (Wessels, 2009, 2011).

Commercialisation and Abuse of Prophetic Authority: The commercialisation of prophetic ministry poses a significant challenge for the church. While it's perfectly fine to provide legitimate financial support for Christian work, things get tricky when spiritual services like prophetic consultations, healing, and deliverance start being treated as commodities. Ramantswana and Sebetseli (2021) point out that religious marketing, branding, competition, consumerism, and even fraudulent practices are all too common in the commercial landscape of some modern neoprophetic ministries. Kgatle (2022) also highlights how prophetic deliverance has

become commercialised, with paid consultations, spiritual products, and financial expectations tied to these services. These practices can easily take advantage of vulnerable believers, turning spiritual authority into just another economic resource. Jeremiah's warning about prophets who prioritise their own deceptive interests is still very relevant today, serving as a crucial ethical reminder for any prophetic ministry that puts financial gain ahead of the spiritual well-being of the community (Jer. 23:32).

Accountability and Discernment: Prophetic ministry isn't just about delivering messages; it also hinges on accountability, communal discernment, and institutional oversight. Jeremiah makes it clear that prophetic authority isn't above evaluation. Instead, the legitimacy of prophetic claims is assessed based on their source, truthfulness, loyalty to Yahweh, and the impact they have on the community (Jer. 23:28, 32). The New Testament echoes this sentiment, urging the community to evaluate prophetic speech (1 Cor. 14:29) and encouraging believers to test everything while holding on to what is good (1 Thess. 5:20-21). Recent research backs up this idea. Letswalo and Naidoo (2024) point out that ministerial accountability fosters trustworthy leadership and ethical practices. Their study of New Prophetic Pentecostal Churches raises concerns about prophetic leaders who function with minimal formal accountability structures. They stress the importance of personal, communal, and public aspects of ministerial accountability. The key elements of Prophetic accountability should include solid theological training, ecclesial supervision, honest financial practices, community evaluation, and a framework for regulating any misconduct. It is also important for congregants to have a good grasp of the Bible and the freedom to assess prophetic messages for themselves. Accountability is not about stifling prophecy; instead, it serves to protect prophetic ministry from deception, manipulation, exploitation, and abuse, all while ensuring it continues to play a positive role within the church. As Jeremiah indicated, true prophecy should faithfully convey Yahweh's message and genuinely benefit God's people, rather than lead them astray (Jer. 23:32; Wessels, 2011).

6. RELEVANCE OF JEREMIAH 23:26-32 TO THE CHRIST APOSTOLIC CHURCH

Prophetic Heritage and Theological Identity of CAC: The relevance of Jeremiah 23:26-32 to the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) is essentially to recognise the church's strong prophetic and Pentecostal roots. Prophecy has always played a significant role in the spiritual life of CAC, especially with its focus on prayer, healing, divine guidance, and charismatic ministry. Awojobi (2023) posits that predictive prophecy has been a key element in the church's historical growth. Therefore, Jeremiah 23 should not be viewed as a way to label CAC as a false-prophetic movement. Instead, this passage offers valuable ethical and theological guidelines for assessing prophetic ministry. Wessels (2009) indicates that Jeremiah 23 assesses different prophetic claims based on their connection to Yahweh, their moral consequences, and their impact on the community. Hence, it is important to uphold CAC's prophetic legacy while also implementing biblical and ethical discernment.

Scripture as the Norm for Prophetic Authority: A key implication of Jeremiah 23:26-32 for the CAC is how it highlights the connection between Scripture and prophetic revelation. Prophetic claims should not be seen as an alternative authority to Scripture. Folarin (2018) argues that the CAC holds a firm belief in the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture, viewing the Bible as essential for Christian faith and life. As a result, any prophetic declarations need to be evaluated against biblical standards. Personal advice or interpretations should not be treated as unquestionable divine commands. Jeremiah's warning against prophets who say, "He says," without a genuine divine mandate (Jer. 23:30-32) emphasises the need to differentiate between true divine revelation and mere human claims. Therefore, prophetic ministry within the CAC should enhance, not replace, the authority of Scripture.

Recovering the Ethical Dimension of Prophetic Ministry: Jeremiah 23 unequivocally opposes the reduction of prophecy to predicting the future. It assesses prophets not on their claims of supernatural insight but also on where that insight comes from, how truthful it is, and what impact it has on the community. Wessels (2011) observes that the false prophets in this chapter are criticised because their messages fail to truly help God's people. This serves as a crucial reminder for today's CAC prophetic ministry. Real prophecy should encourage repentance, faithfulness, spiritual growth, and obedience to God, rather than just feeding human curiosity about the future. Therefore, a prophetic vocation is not only about having spiritual gifts; it also comes with a significant moral responsibility.

Ethical Boundaries and Protection from Manipulation: Jeremiah's critique of prophets who speak from their own hearts (Jer. 23:26) lays a solid foundation for setting ethical boundaries around contemporary prophetic authority. It is important for prophetic ministers to clearly differentiate between divine revelation and personal opinions. They should steer clear of coercive directives and stay open to genuine evaluation from the church community. This becomes especially vital when prophetic messages touch on sensitive issues such as marriage, finances, jobs, health, and family decisions. Such declarations can lead to an unhealthy dependency if members start viewing the prophet as infallible. Therefore, prophetic ministry should promote prayer, biblical reflection, and responsible discernment, rather than trying to control the conscience of believers.

Resisting the Commercialisation of Prophetic Ministry: The commercialisation of prophetic authority is a concern. Recent studies in African Pentecostal scholarship have raised alarms about how prophetic and deliverance ministries are being commercialised. Kgatle (2022) highlights the commercialisation linked to prophetic consultations and deliverance practices, advocating for a ministry that offers spiritual services freely. In a similar vein, Ramantswana and Sebetseli (2021) delve into the realms of religious marketing, branding, consumerism, and the fraudulent activities that some neo-prophetic ministries engage in.

While these studies don't claim that such practices define the entire CAC, they do offer a broader African Pentecostal backdrop for ethical contemplation. For the CAC, Jeremiah 23:32 holds particular significance, as it emphasises that prophecy should be assessed based on its genuine benefit to God's people. Thus, it's crucial to differentiate between providing financial support for authentic ministry and treating prophecy, healing, or divine intervention as mere commodities.

Ministerial Formation and Accountability: Jeremiah 23 further emphasises the importance of ministerial training and accountability. Just because someone holds prophetic authority does not mean they should be exempt from theological evaluation, pastoral oversight, or ethical review. By focusing on areas like biblical interpretation, the theology of revelation, prophetic discernment, pastoral ethics, financial stewardship, and effective communication, ministers can better utilise their spiritual gifts while being held accountable. Letswalo and Naidoo (2024) highlight personal, communal, and public accountability as key aspects of ministerial responsibility. They also offer a valuable framework for examining accountability in contemporary prophetic churches. This means that CAC has the opportunity to enhance prophetic ministry by implementing proper ecclesial oversight, clear procedures, and effective ways to address any misconduct.

Cultivating Congregational Discernment: Prophetic accountability should not fall on the shoulders of ministers; it is equally important for congregants to develop theological skills for discernment. Jeremiah 23:28 clearly states the distinction between true divine messages and misleading claims. The New Testament also encourages believers to evaluate prophetic words (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:20–21). Therefore, members of the CAC should be motivated to assess whether prophetic messages align with Scripture, if the messenger shows moral integrity, whether the message fosters spiritual growth, and if it leads to an unhealthy reliance on the prophet. This kind of discernment does not undermine genuine spiritual authority; instead, it safeguards the church from mistaking prophetic authority for personal infallibility.

The relevance of Jeremiah 23:26-32 for CAC is mainly found in its ability to offer a solid biblical foundation for maintaining prophetic ministry while ensuring it adheres to theological and ethical standards. This passage emphasises the importance of being faithful to divine revelation, upholding truthfulness, maintaining moral integrity, exercising authority responsibly, caring for the well-being of God's people, and engaging in communal discernment. Application of these principles to CAC serves as a strong basis for enhancing its prophetic legacy without turning prophecy into mere predictions, personalities, or commercial ventures. Ultimately, prophetic ministry stays true to its biblical intent when it is rooted in Scripture, ethically sound, accountable, and genuinely serves the needs of God's people (Wessels, 2009, 2011; Folarin, 2018).

7.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

7.1 SYNTHESIS OF EXEGETICAL INSIGHTS

The exegesis showed that Jeremiah's main concern is the distortion of human speech, mistaken for divine revelation. The prophets mentioned in Jeremiah 23:26-32 were not only criticised for making wrong predictions but condemned for their messages springing from their hearts and being wrongly linked to dreams, misappropriating divine words, claiming divine authority, and ultimately leading the community astray. This passage outlines five interconnected criteria for what makes a prophecy genuine: source, fidelity, truthfulness, commissioning, and communal benefit. These criteria offer a richer framework than prediction alone. A prophecy should not be deemed authentic simply because an event later seems to match it. The theological source and ethical nature are crucial. Examining the Hebrew terms reinforces this idea. לֵב (heart) points to the inner source of misleading prophecy; שֶׁקֶר (falsehood) highlights its falsehood; חֲלוֹם (dream) reveals the misuse of dreams; דָּבָר (word) signifies the divine word; אֵשׁ (fire) and פַּטִּישׁ (hammer) illustrate its transformative power; גָּנַב (take decietfully) uncovers the theft of divine words; and שָׁלַח (to send) and צָוָה (commission) establish the idea of divine commissioning. The rhetorical flow of the passage thus uncovers a clear theology of prophetic responsibility. It starts with the source of prophetic speech and culminates in its impact on the people. Therefore, authentic prophecy must be both theologically sound and ethically grounded.

7.2 THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIOLOGICAL IMPLICATION

The findings highlight a key theological point: divine revelation takes precedence over personal religious experiences. While dreams, visions, and spiritual impressions can play a role in Christian spirituality, they do not automatically carry the same authority as Scripture or a confirmed divine message. This principle is particularly significant for CAC, given the church's theological tradition's strong emphasis on the authority of the Bible. Folarin (2018) offers compelling evidence of this commitment. Therefore, prophetic practices should operate within the church's scriptural and doctrinal framework, rather than in isolation. From an ecclesiological perspective, the study shows that prophetic authority must be accompanied by institutional and communal accountability. The historical importance of prophecy in CAC, as documented by Alokan (1991), Folarin (2013), and Awojobi (2023), underscores the need for such accountability. The aim is not to suppress the prophetic tradition but to ensure that charismatic authority does not become personal or coercive. A robust prophetic ecclesiology recognises the relevance of spiritual gifts while emphasising the need to test them. Prophetic authority should enhance the church's relationship with God, rather than foster reliance on individual ministers.

7.3 RELEVANCE OF CONTEMPORARY PENTECOSTAL PROPHETIC PRACTICES

The implications go beyond CAC; contemporary Pentecostal Christianity shows a strong interest in prophetic ministry, as believers are looking for divine guidance in the midst of their complicated personal and social lives. However, this same environment can also open the door to manipulation. Jeremiah 23:26-32 serves as a challenge to contemporary prophetic Christianity, calling attention to the need to differentiate between genuine spiritual experiences and true divine authority. It cautions against using prophetic language to mask personal ambitions, claims of divine authority without proper commissioning, and highlights ministries that do not benefit the people. This study suggests that authentic contemporary prophetic practice should be properly assessed through the following questions: Where does the message originate? Is it aligned with Scripture? Is it conveyed honestly? Does the minister hold legitimate and accountable authority? Does the ministry truly benefit God's people? These questions offer a practical ethical framework for Pentecostal churches. They also illustrate that biblical discernment is not about stifling the prophetic; instead, it is a way to protect genuine prophecy from being distorted.

8.0 CONCLUSION

This study adopted a contextual-exegetical approach to examine Jeremiah 23:26-2, exploring what it means for contemporary prophetic ministry, especially within the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC). It highlights that the main concern of Jeremiah is not prophecy itself, but the abuse of prophetic authority. This is particularly evident when personal ideas, misleading dreams, and bold claims are mistaken for divine messages. The passage establishes that false prophecy is characterised by identifying messages that come from the heart of the prophet, deceptive dreams, misappropriated words of God, unfounded claims of divine authority, lack of divine commissioning, and a failure to serve God's people. In contrast, authentic prophecy is marked by loyalty to divine revelation, honesty, divine commissioning, moral integrity, and a sense of responsibility toward the community (Wessels, 2011).

The study also showed that these criteria are still very much applicable to contemporary prophetic Christianity. The ongoing importance of prophecy raises valid concerns about manipulation, spiritual dependency, commercialisation, and the abuse of authority. For the CAC, which values its prophetic heritage as a key part of its identity, the right approach is not to dismiss prophecy but to ensure it is preserved responsibly and continually assessed against biblical and ethical standards. Jeremiah 23:26-32 offers a solid framework for this evaluation, encouraging a focus on the source, truthfulness, commissioning, and the communal impact of prophetic messages rather than extraordinary experiences, dreams, or bold declarations.

The passage substantiates that true prophetic authority cannot rely on claims of supernatural experiences or divine inspiration. It needs to be shown through a genuine commitment to God's word, honest communication, a legitimate calling from God, and a dedication to the well-being of His people. The imagery of God's word as fire and a hammer highlights its unique authority and transformative power. Additionally, the warning against those who misappropriate divine messages and falsely declare "the LORD says" underscores the gravity of prophetic deception (Jer. 23:28-32). For CAC, this means that while its prophetic heritage is important, its current practices must stay aligned with Scripture, sound doctrine, church oversight, ministerial integrity, and the discernment of the congregation. Prophetic ministers should focus on serving the church rather than trying to control it, and spiritual gifts should uplift rather than manipulate or take advantage of believers. Likewise, congregants should be empowered to evaluate prophetic claims against Scripture and consider their spiritual and ethical implications. This kind of accountability doesn't stifle prophecy; instead, it safeguards its credibility and ensures it serves its true purpose for the people of God.

Jeremiah 23:26-32 shifts the focus of prophecy from mere claims of supernatural experiences to deeper aspects such as revelation, truth, character, commissioning, accountability, and the benefit of the community. Therefore, the challenge for CAC is not whether it should embrace its prophetic role, but how it can maintain that prophetic identity in a way that stays true to the Bible and upholds ethical standards. A prophetic ministry that is rooted in Scripture, integrity, discernment, and accountability can honour the church's charismatic legacy while also enhancing its theological credibility and witness in the community. The passage ultimately calls prophetic ministry to its core mission: to faithfully share God's word and to serve His people, rather than taking advantage of them.

8.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study recommended that Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) should enhance the biblical and theological training for its prophetic ministers. This training should focus on key areas like biblical interpretation, revelation, discernment, ethics, pastoral care, and responsible communication. It's crucial that prophetic messages are always evaluated through the lens of Scripture and the church's teachings, ensuring that any claims align with established doctrine, Christian ethics, and the input of the congregation.

Additionally, the Church needs to bolster ministerial accountability by implementing recognised structures to address issues such as misconduct, false claims, and spiritual abuse. It's important to resist the commercialisation of prophecy and maintain financial transparency to protect vulnerable members of the congregation.

The CAC should also work to revive the ethical aspects of Babalola's prophetic legacy, placing a strong emphasis on prayer, repentance, holiness, evangelism, and reliance on God, alongside the more charismatic expressions of faith. Congregants should be

trained to discern prophetic messages critically rather than accepting them blindly. Clear ethical guidelines should be established for prophecies that touch on sensitive topics such as health, marriage, finances, career choices, and family matters. Lastly, ongoing scholarly engagement with the history, theology, and prophetic practices of the CAC is recommended to safeguard its unique heritage while addressing contemporary challenges.

These recommendations point to a key idea found in Jeremiah 23:26-32: true prophetic authority does not come from flashy claims or a charismatic personality, but rather from being faithful to God's revelation, maintaining moral integrity, and being accountable to the faith community. Therefore, revitalising prophetic ministry within the CAC is not just about holding onto its charismatic roots; it also involves ongoing assessment and ethical oversight in light of Scripture. This leads to the study's conclusion that genuine prophetic ministry should be viewed as a sacred trust, not a stage for personal power, manipulation, or profit. Jeremiah 23:26-32 frames prophetic authority as something sacred, not something to be owned. Christ Apostolic Church should stay true to this principle, which can help maintain a prophetic legacy grounded in Scripture, marked by integrity, tested through discernment, and practised with accountability. This approach can safeguard the Church's charismatic heritage while minimising the risks of manipulation, commercialisation, and spiritual abuse, ultimately enhancing its theological credibility and prophetic voice in today's Christianity.

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