

An Investigation of Old Testament Prophecy from an African Cultural Heritage Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Intermediaries who convey messages between humans and the divine are common across cultures. This study examines Old Testament prophecy from a Shona perspective, comparing ancient Israelite prophets with Shona spirit mediums (mudzimu/svikiro), who mediate communication with Mwari (God). Both traditions suggest that direct contact with the divine required a chosen intermediary. The study addresses: (1) the functions of prophets in ancient Israel, and (2) the functions of spirit mediums in Shona society, using a literary-rhetorical approach to show that prophecy is not exclusive to Israel but also present in Shona beliefs.

KEYWORDS: African cultural heritage, Intermediaries, Prophecy, Ancient Israel, Old Testament, Shona people, Spirit medium, *vadzimu/svikiro*

A INTRODUCTION

While extensive literature exists on the definition and practice of prophecy in ancient Israel, there is comparatively little discussion of the function of the prophet in relation to that of the spirit medium among the Shona people of Zimbabwe. The demonisation of African cultural practices, particularly Shona customs, by missionary churches, has been widely criticised.¹ Due to a

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I dedicate this study to Madipoane (Ngwana' Mphahlele) Masenya. Prof Masenya is a pioneering scholar whose work has profoundly shaped African feminist theology and Sesotho literary studies. Masenya's insightful analyses bridge culture, language and spirituality, offering transformative perspectives that elevate African women's voices in scholarship. Her contributions continue to inspire critical thought and intellectual courage across disciplines. Although not discussed in the present essay, Madipoane's iconic contributions remain influential and colossal in my career as a researcher.

¹ Gordon L. Chavunduka, *Traditional Medicine in Modern Zimbabwe* (Harare: UZ

fundamental misunderstanding of Shona religious traditions, missionaries in colonial Rhodesia labelled the Shona people as “heathens, evil and wicked.”² Nonetheless, for many Shona readers familiar with Old Testament prophets, their traditional beliefs in ancestors and spirit mediums do not contradict the biblical depiction of prophecy. A prophet is defined as a human medium who receives and transmits messages from a deity—an understanding that closely mirrors the Shona conception of a spirit medium or *svikiro*, as an intermediary between Mwari (God) and the people.³ Prophets in ancient Israel fulfilled multiple social and religious functions,⁴ similar to the role of spirit mediums in Shona society. Both Silvio Kokan⁵ and Jaco De Bruyn⁶ note that the prophet served as a vessel through whom God communicated—a sentiment supported by Lovemore Togarasei who asserts that because God is unseen, humans require mediators to represent the divine.⁷

This belief in divine intermediaries is not unique to the Hebrew tradition but is prevalent in many African societies,⁸ though it manifests differently depending in specific cultural contexts.⁹ Among the Shona, Mwari, also known as Musikavanhu (Creator of humans), communicates through spirit mediums or *mudzimu/svikiro*.¹⁰ Notably, this role is not gender-exclusive. Women such as

Publications, 1994); Ezra Chitando, “Narrating the Past, Resisting the Present: Biblical Allusions in Zimbabwean Political Discourse,” *Scriptura* 78 (2001): 146; Temba T. Rugwiji, “Reading the Exodus Tradition from a Zimbabwean Perspective” (MA Diss., University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2008): 101–102.

² Herbert Aschwanden, *Karanga Mythology: An Analysis of the Consciousness of the Karanga in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989), 34.

³ Martti Nissinen ed., *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 18–19.

⁴ Eugene Hillman, *Toward an African Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 63–64.

⁵ Silvio Kokan, “Priest, Shaman, King,” *JJRS* 17/2-3 (1990): 111.

⁶ Jaco de Bruyn, “And the Word Became Prophet,” *OTE* 26/1 (2013): 71.

⁷ Lovemore Togarasei, “The Prophet and Divine Manifestation: On the Translation of the Word ‘Prophet’ in the Shona Union Bible,” *OTE* 30/3 (2017): 821.

⁸ Emmanuel Joseph O. Ndubisi and Paul O. Ejikeme, “Intermediaries in the African and Western Thought: A Comparative Analysis,” *Igwekuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* 2/1 (2016): 30–41; Prince Boaheng, “God and the Traditional African Experience: Shattering the Stereotypes,” *Thinking about Religion* 10 (2012): 1–13; Akwasi K. Opong, “A Comparative Study of the Concept of the Divine in the African Traditional Religions in Ghana and Lesotho” (PhD Thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2002).

⁹ John S. Mbiti, *Concept of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), 220.

¹⁰ Trust Kazembe, “Divine Angels” and Vadzimu in Shona Religion, Zimbabwe,” *The Rose+Croix Journal* 8 (2011): 92; Michael F.C. Bourdillon, *The Shona People: An Ethnography of Contemporary Shona with Special Reference to that Religion* (Gweru:

Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi are revered as powerful spirit mediums (*mhondoro*) in Shona history.¹¹ This openness to gender parallels Martti Nissinen's observation¹² that prophetic roles in ancient cultures, including Israel, were open to males, females and even transgender individuals. Deborah, the prophetess and judge (Judg 4:4), exemplifies how prophetic roles were not limited by gender. African religious symbols and practices served as tools of political liberation.¹³ While this view may resonate with African audiences, its relevance to post-colonial and non-African contexts is more limited. Furthermore, not all prophets or spirit mediums were (or are) genuine. Instances of exploitation by self-serving individuals are well documented, such as among the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania¹⁴ and in modern African societies.¹⁵

Despite these concerns, many biblical scholars stress that Old Testament prophets were primarily moral and social critics who spoke against the evils of their time (Jer 11:18; 21:12; Hos 5:4; Mic 3:4).¹⁶ This study explores this controversy by examining the function of the prophet in ancient Israel alongside that of the spirit medium in Shona tradition. Using a comparative framework, the essay investigates three key themes: (1) the call and function of prophets in ancient Israel, (2) the role of spirit mediums among the Shona people and (3) the similarities between these two figures. Special attention is given to the

Mambo Press, 1976), 263; Nisbert Taringa, "African Metaphors for God: Male or Female?" *Scriptura* 86 (2004): 2.

¹¹ Oyekan Owomoyela, *Culture and Customs of Zimbabwe* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 16; Diana Auret, "The Mhondoro Spirits of Supratribal Significance in the Culture of the Shona," *African Studies* 41/2 (1982): 173–187.

¹² Martti Nissinen, "The Socio-Religious Role of the Neo-Assyrian Prophets," in *Prophecy in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context: Mesopotamian, Biblical and Arabian Perspective* (ed. Nissinen Martti; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 91–93.

¹³ Samuel I. Munga, *Beyond the Controversy: A Study of African Theologies of Inculturation and Liberation* (Lund: Lund University Press Munga, 1998), 41.

¹⁴ Eugene Hillman, *Toward an African Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 63-64.

¹⁵ Matern M. Masanja, "Albinos' Plight: Will Legal Methods Be Powerful Enough to Eradicate Albinos' Scourge?" *International Journal of Education & Research* 3/5 (2015): 231.

¹⁶ Willie J. Wessels, "The Prophet versus Prophet in the Book of Jeremiah: In Search of the True Prophets," *OTE* 22/3 (2009): 740; David P. Melvin, "Why Does the Way of the Wicked Prosper? Human and Divine Suffering in Jeremiah 11:18-12:13 and the Problem of Evil," *EQ* 83/2 (2011): 99–106; Freddy Y. Mamahit and Pieter M. Venter, "Oracle against Israel's Social Injustices: A Rhetorical Analysis of Amos 2:6-8," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66/1(2010): Art. #729, 11 pages. DOI:10.4102/hts/v66i1.729; Kevin P. Wax, *The Intricate Relationship between Politics and Religion in the Hebrew Bible: The Prophet Amos as a Study Case* (PhD Thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2013); Gunther H. Wittenberg, *Prophecy and Protest: A Contextual Introduction to Israelite Prophecy* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1993), 114.

importance of dreams, visions and ecstatic experiences, which are common to both traditions. The essay further interrogates the notion that prophecy is primarily about foretelling the future and employs a literary-rhetorical approach to argue that divine communication through human agents is not exclusive to the Hebrew Bible. Ultimately, the study contends that the role of the Shona spirit medium closely parallels that of the Old Testament prophet. Both function as intermediaries between the divine and the people, delivering messages that often challenge social and political norms. Their authority is rooted not in institutional power, but in perceived spiritual calling and legitimacy.

B STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

First, numerous contributions published to date on the concept of intermediary among Africans and in ancient Israel have neither sufficiently explored this theme nor substantiated the argument in the context of the Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe. From an indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) perspective, this essay attempts to discuss, compare and contrast the call and function of a spirit medium (*svikiro*) among the Shona with that of a prophet in ancient Israel.

Second, recent published works have tended to disfranchise Shona cultural belief systems such that anything to do with *chivanhu* (African tradition/culture) is dismissed as anti-logical.¹⁷ The present research attempts to demonstrate that the cultural belief systems of the Shona people are not demonic or evil as usually portrayed by the church. In fact, as will be shown, the Shona *mudzimu/svikiro* plays a unique role that is similar to that of the biblical prophet.

C RESEARCH AIM

The aim of the present research is twofold. First, this study aims to demonstrate that although there are some divergences in certain respects between the Shona concepts of *mudzimu/svikiro* and prophecy as practised in ancient Israel, the striking similarities are so overarching that readers cannot continue to be prejudiced by ideological differences. Second, the study seeks to discuss the concept of spirit medium among the Shona people of Zimbabwe to stimulate local knowledge systems in African societies, which are not only misunderstood but also undermined by some non-African peoples.

D METHODOLOGY

The current study adopts a literary-rhetorical analysis as its primary methodological approach, with the aim of exploring the conceptual and

¹⁷ Munyaradzi Mawere, Chipo Tandi, Tendayi M. Zhou and Ennet Tapiwa Mapfumo, "The Misreadings, Misinterpretations and Misrepresentations of Women's Rights in African Cultures: Challenging the Systems of Power that Influence Relationality and [Mis-]interpretations of Women in Shona Culture and beyond," *Equity in Education & Society* (2025): 1-17.

functional parallels between intermediaries such as *vadzimu* (ancestral spirits) in Shona cosmology and prophets in ancient Israel. The literary-rhetorical method involves a close reading of texts with particular attention to narrative structure, rhetorical devices, thematic patterns and the socio-cultural contexts that shape meaning.¹⁸ This approach is especially suitable for comparative religious studies in which meaning is often encoded not just in what texts say, but also in how they are said—through metaphor, structure and rhetorical persuasion. In this study, the literary-rhetorical approach enables a nuanced analysis of textual representations of intermediaries, both in biblical literature and in documented Shona oral and written traditions. It pays close attention to the communicative strategies used in texts to present prophets and *vadzimu* as authoritative figures as well as the theological and ideological frameworks within which their legitimacy is constructed. As such, this method does not merely focus on historical reconstruction but rather on how narratives are shaped to influence communal perception, authority and religious experience.¹⁹

Methodologically, the study is grounded in desk research, involving secondary data analysis. This includes a comprehensive review and critical synthesis of existing literature — peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, dissertations and ethnographic studies that focus on prophetic traditions in ancient Israel and ancestral mediation within the Shona worldview. This form of data collection allows for the integration of diverse perspectives and facilitates the identification of thematic resonances and contrasts across cultural and religious contexts. By relying on secondary sources, the study follows established practices in religious and cultural studies in which primary fieldwork is supplemented or, in some cases, substituted by extensive literature-based analysis.²⁰ While acknowledging the limitations of desk-based research, particularly in terms of direct engagement with living traditions, the study mitigates this by engaging critically with a wide range of academic sources, including both insider and outsider perspectives on Shona religion and Israelite prophecy. Furthermore, the study is informed by a comparative theoretical framework that draws on interdisciplinary scholarship from religious studies, anthropology, and biblical studies.²¹ This framework supports the investigation

¹⁸ June Dickie, "Rhetoric, Narrative and Theology: The Literary-Rhetorical Approach to the Hebrew Bible," *JBS* 34/2 (2017): 77–102.

¹⁹ Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2008).

²⁰ Lisa M. Given, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008).

²¹ Michael Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel and Its Ancient Near Eastern Environment* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990); Michael F.C. Bourdillon, *Where Are the Ancestors? Changing Culture in Zimbabwe* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1993).

of how cultural systems construct and authorise figures of mediation — whether prophets or ancestral spirits — and how such figures function within their respective religious communities.

E THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in intercultural biblical hermeneutics, which encourages dialogue between biblical texts and local African contexts.²² Specifically, it explores Old Testament prophecy through the lens of African cultural heritage, using the Shona people of Zimbabwe as a case study. It therefore challenges the traditional Western interpretive monopoly that often alienates African worldviews from biblical studies.²³ Drawing on postcolonial biblical criticism, the study interrogates how colonial-era missionary theology dismissed African spiritual practices, such as ancestor veneration and spirit mediation, as pagan or demonic.²⁴ This framework enables a re-evaluation of African religiosity, especially the role of the *svikiro* (spirit medium), in ways that resonate with Nissinen’s understanding of a prophet as a divinely inspired human medium.²⁵ Furthermore, comparative anthropology informs the analysis by highlighting cross-cultural parallels between Israelite prophets and African spirit mediums, particularly in divine communication through dreams, visions, and ecstatic states.²⁶ This interdisciplinary approach affirms the validity of African indigenous knowledge systems in biblical interpretation, arguing that prophecy is a universal religious phenomenon rather than exclusive to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

F CALL AND FUNCTION OF PROPHETS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Prophecy in ancient Israel emerged during times of spiritual crisis, particularly when the Israelites strayed from Yahweh and began associating with the religious practices of surrounding pagan nations. As a religion, Judaism

²² Justin S. Ukpong, “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995): 6; Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2010), 27.

²³ Ntozakhe Simon Cezula, “Identity Formation and Community Solidarity: A Postcolonial Reading of the Noahic Covenant,” *OTE* 28/3 (2015): 131–153; Temba T. Rugwiji, “Faith-Based Healing and African Traditional Medicine in Zimbabwe: A Postcolonial Perspective,” *Theologia Viatorum* 43/1 (2019): a25. <https://doi.org/10.4102/TV.v43i1.25>. Ezra. Chitando, “Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa: The African Context and Hermeneutics,” *OTE* 14/1 (2001): 146.

²⁴ Aschwanden, “Karanga Mythology,” 34.

²⁵ Nissinen ed., *Prophets and Prophecy*, 18–19.

²⁶ Mbiti, *Concept of God in Africa*, 220; Michael F. C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to Their Religion* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1976), 263.

demanded strict obedience to the Torah, which explicitly forbade occult practices such as divination, spiritism and necromancy (Exod 22:16–20; Lev 19:26–31; 20:6; Deut 18:10–11).²⁷ These prohibitions aimed to protect the Israelites from adopting the “abominations” of Canaanite religion, including witchcraft and other forms of magical manipulation.²⁸ The prophetic call was a divine initiative, typically accompanied by dramatic encounters, visions or supernatural experiences. Jaco Gericke²⁹ argues that the account in Exodus 3–4 reflects the prototypical hesitation that often accompanied a prophet’s calling. Yahweh required a human vessel to deliver His message, thus necessitating the role of the prophet.³⁰ Gerhard von Rad had earlier stated that “God’s thoughts and designs began their historical fulfilment at the point at which they became words on the lips of the prophet.”³¹ The essence of the prophetic role, according to Lindblom,³² lies in the prophet’s unique capacity to experience the divine and act as a mouthpiece for God. The prophet’s life is one of total devotion and submission to Yahweh, characterised by moral obedience, communion with God and unreserved availability for divine service.

Although the term “prophet” is often used in the singular, it refers to a broader prophetic tradition³³ and to hear the words of a prophet was to hear the very words of God, which demanded obedience. All true prophets shared a vision of a redeemed Israel and universal peace under Yahweh’s rule.³⁴ The functions of the prophets varied, including intercession, moral guidance, social critique, political engagement and covenant enforcement. Abraham, although not classified among the “classical prophets” (e.g. Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah), is explicitly called a prophet in Gen 20:7, where he is tasked to pray for healing. This reflects one dimension of the prophetic role—intercession.³⁵ Amos, a

²⁷ Choon S. Bae and Pieter J. van der Merwe, “Ancestor Worship: Is It Biblical?” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 64/3 (2008): 1302.

²⁸ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 21–24.

²⁹ Jaco Gericke, “The Meaning of Moses’ Life: An Analytic and Comparative-Philosophical Perspective,” *OTE* 30/2 (2017): 332.

³⁰ Thaddeus Metz, “God’s Purpose as Irrelevant to Life’s Meaning: Reply to Affolter,” *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 457–464.

³¹ Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (Translated by D.M.G. Stalker London: SCM, 1972), 73.

³² Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), 1.

³³ Young S. Han and Jaco C. Beyers, “The Critical Evolution of the Understating of God in John S. Mbiti’s Theology,” *Acta Theologica* 37/2 (2017): 5–29.

³⁴ Shimon Bakon, “The Day of the Lord,” *JBQ* 38/3(2010): 149.

³⁵ David Tuesday Adamo, “Teaching the History of Ancient Israel from an African Perspective: The Invasion of Sennacherib of 701 B.C.E. as an Example,” *OTE* 23/3 (2010): 494; Hercules F. van Rooy, “Prophet and Society in the Persian Period According to Chronicles,” in *Temple Community in the Persian Period* (Second Temple

herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, was dramatically called by God to prophesy to Israel (Amos 7:14–15). He rejected the prophetic profession, claiming he had no prophetic heritage but was compelled by the divine hand. Amos was disturbed by the social injustices of his time and boldly proclaimed divine judgment. His visionary experiences (Amos 1:1–6) illustrate how God often communicated with prophets through visions.

Moses represents the archetypal prophet, enjoying direct and intimate communication with God (Exod 7:1; Deut 34:10). He functioned not only as a prophet but also as a political leader, lawgiver and covenant mediator. Moses' life was divinely orchestrated to fulfil a prophetic mission central to Israel's destiny.³⁶ Thus, scholars agree that Moses' broader political-religious roles were leading the Exodus and establishing Israel's covenant identity.³⁷ Elijah and Elisha were prophets of renewal, particularly in times of domestic oppression. Elisha's call (1 Kgs 19:19–21) came while he was ploughing his land, symbolising the transformation from secular livelihood to prophetic mission.³⁸ Though described as a man of wealth,³⁹ Elisha was chosen to serve a divine purpose. Jeremiah and Hosea exemplify the emotional and personal cost of prophetic ministry. Jeremiah's life was marked by suffering and internal conflict, as he proclaimed destruction upon Jerusalem.⁴⁰ Hosea's personal life, particularly his marriage to an unfaithful wife, became a prophetic metaphor for Israel's unfaithfulness.

The Hebrew Bible clearly distinguishes authentic prophets from false ones. In Deut 18:22, a prophet's legitimacy is confirmed when his or her message comes true; otherwise, the message is considered not from God. This concern is especially relevant in a context where divination and sorcery were common in surrounding cultures (cf. Deut 18:9–11). Prophets were meant to be radically different from diviners or spiritists, serving as instruments of Yahweh's will rather than manipulators of the supernatural. Prophetic ministry often came at great personal cost. Prophets were persecuted, rejected and isolated due to the unpopular messages they carried; yet, they were empowered by the phrase "Thus says the Lord," a formula that conveyed divine authority (e.g. Isa 7:7; Jer 2:2; Ezek 3:11; Amos 2:1; Zech 1:3). Even when this formula was absent, their words

Studies 2; ed. Tamara C. Eskenazi and Kent T. Richards; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 163–179.

³⁶ Gericke, "The Meaning of Moses' Life," 327.

³⁷ Andries G. van Aarde, "Jesus as Joshua, Moses en Dawidiese Messias in Matteus," *Scriptura* 84 (2003): 453–467.

³⁸ Fred Guyette, "The Genre of the Call Narrative: Beyond Habel's Model," *JBQ* 43/1 (2015): 56.

³⁹ Joseph D. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Random House, 2006), 103–106.

⁴⁰ Frank J.B. Huey, '*Jeremiah, Lamentations*' (The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 274.

carried divine weight. As Van Rheezen asserts, the prophet, having been "given" to the world, was detached from political convenience and committed to his divine mission.⁴¹ Prophets operated under divine commission, often at great risk, to bring God's message of justice, hope, warning and restoration to the people.

G ECSTASY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Ecstasy, as a religious phenomenon, played a significant role in the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel and "... has been a hallmark of prophecy in Israel."⁴² It involves a temporary suspension of the prophet's normal mental faculties, allowing room for spiritual invasion.⁴³ Under such influence, the prophet may exhibit hyperactivity or enter into an unusually passive or trance-like state. This altered state of consciousness often signalled divine possession or inspiration. One of the clearest biblical examples of prophetic ecstasy is found in the story of Saul, son of Kish. After his anointing by the prophet Samuel, Saul encountered a band of prophets involved in ecstatic worship—shouting, playing instruments and dancing with fervent enthusiasm (1 Sam 10:5, 10). Unexpectedly, Saul joined them and was overcome by the same prophetic fervour. The astonishment of the witnesses is reflected in their rhetorical question: "What has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?" (1 Sam 10:11). This reaction reveals that his behaviour had dramatically changed under the influence of the prophetic spirit.

It is held that non-inductive prophetic manifestations in the Old Testament were often accompanied by ecstatic elements, in which the prophet experienced altered states, including frenzied actions, trance and uncharacteristic speech or gestures.⁴⁴ This type of behaviour was typically interpreted as a sign of divine inspiration or contact with the supernatural. The association between kingship and divine influence may help explain Saul's experience. Hence, in the earliest records of human history, kings were often viewed as earthly representatives of the gods.⁴⁵ His assertion implies a close link between divine

⁴¹ Gailyn van Rheezen, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 14.

⁴² Obvious Vengeyi, "Zimbabwean Pentecostal Prophets Rekindling the 'True and False Prophecy' Debate," in *Prophets, Profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe: Festschrift for Aynos Masotcha Moyo* (ed. Ezra Chitando, Masiwa R. Gunda and Joachim J. Kügler; Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2013), 49.

⁴³ Vengeyi, "Zimbabwean Pentecostal Prophets," 49.

⁴⁴ Gerhard de Villiers, "The Origin of Prophetism in the Ancient Near East," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66/1 (2010): 3. Art. #795, 6 pages. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v66i1.795.

⁴⁵ Arthur Hocart, *Kingship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); Silvio Kokan, "Priest, Shaman, King," *JJRS* 17/2 (1990): 105.

authority and royal identity, suggesting that Saul's sudden ecstatic behaviour might have been interpreted as an initiation into this sacred role.

Ecstatic experiences were not unique to Saul. The prophets of Baal also displayed ecstatic behaviour, including frenzied shouting and self-mutilation, as they tried to invoke their god on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:20–29). While their actions were condemned as misguided, they reveal that ecstatic worship was a well-known religious phenomenon in the ancient Near East. Similarly, Jeremiah was derisively described as a "madman" (Jer 29:26–27), possibly due to the intense emotional and spiritual experiences he had during his prophetic ministry. He also foresaw a time of joyful restoration, where the people would express their gratitude and divine ecstasy through music and dancing (Jer 31:13).⁴⁶ Hosea was likewise accused of madness during his ministry (Hos 9:7), a reflection of the suspicion and ridicule often directed at prophets whose behaviours defied societal norms. In another instance, Elisha delivered a prophetic oracle while music was being played (2 Kgs 3:15–19), possibly to induce a spiritual or meditative state conducive to receiving divine revelation. Moreover, one of Elisha's prophetic associates was referred to mockingly as "that crazy fellow" by a king of Israel (2 Kgs 9:11), again showing how prophetic ecstasy was often misunderstood or stigmatised.

Overall, the Old Testament presents numerous instances in which prophets entered into ecstatic states, marked by visions, music, trembling, altered consciousness, or spontaneous behaviour, as visible signs of divine encounter. Whether accepted as genuine inspiration or dismissed as madness, such experiences were central to the prophetic identity and the communication of Yahweh's message.

H DREAMS AND VISIONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, dreams and visions are consistently portrayed as significant channels of divine communication. Dreams, as Ustinova highlights, "were considered an important channel used by the god to announce his will to people in all walks of life. Perhaps that is the reason why dreams were deemed inferior to pronouncements by prophets."⁴⁷ Despite this perceived inferiority, the biblical narrative accords dreams and visions a central role in shaping prophetic experience and divine guidance. One of the earliest examples is found in the account of Jacob's dream during his journey to Paddan-aram. While sleeping in a "certain place," Jacob dreamt of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending upon it (Gen 28:11–12). This dream became a powerful theophany, affirming God's covenant with him. Similarly, Jacob's son

⁴⁶ Temba T. Rugwiji, "Rereading Texts of Music and Dance in the Hebrew Bible: The Spirituality of Music and Dance in Zimbabwe," *JSem* 25/1 (2016): 81.

⁴⁷ Yulia Ustinova, "Modes of Prophecy or Modern Arguments in Support of the Ancient Approach," *Kernos* 26 (2013): 34.

Joseph is remembered as a gifted dreamer. His brothers cynically referred to him as "the dreamer" (Gen 37:19), highlighting both their jealousy and Joseph's growing reputation as one whose dreams held prophetic significance.

Dreams and visions marked the lives of patriarchs and kings. In Gen 15:1, Abraham receives a vision in which God reassures him: "Do not fear, Abraham; I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." In another instance, after Abraham misled Abimelech by saying that Sarah was his sister, God appeared to Abimelech in a dream, warning him that Sarah was in fact Abraham's wife (Gen 20:3). These examples underscore that even non-Israelites could receive divine communication through dreams. The prophetic vocation was likewise shaped by dreams and visions. Samuel's call is a case in point. In 1 Sam 3:1, it is noted that "word from the Lord was rare in those days; visions were infrequent." However, it was through a vision-like experience that young Samuel heard God calling him in the night, to which he responded: "Here I am" (v. 4). The encounter inaugurated Samuel's prophetic ministry, establishing him not only as a judge but also as a seer (1 Sam 9:9). Interestingly, even King Saul, though not a prophet in the traditional sense, sought divine guidance through dreams, prophets and the Urim. However, in his disobedience, "the Lord did not answer him" (1 Sam 28:6), reinforcing the idea that spiritual insight through dreams and visions was contingent upon the recipient's relationship with Yahweh.⁴⁸

The significance of vision is further underscored by Prov 29:18: "Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained; but happy is he who keeps the law." This verse connects divine revelation with moral and legal obedience, suggesting that prophetic insight is granted to those who faithfully observe the Torah. However, there were times when visions ceased altogether. During periods of national disobedience or judgment, the prophets themselves were left without divine insight. As Lamentations 2:9 laments: "...The law is no more; also, her prophets find no vision from the Lord." The book of Daniel offers a particularly rich portrayal of dream and vision experiences.⁴⁹ Daniel is described as one who could "understand all kinds of visions and dreams" (Dan 1:17). When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was troubled by a dream, none of his court magicians, sorcerers, or diviners could interpret it (Dan 2:1-2). However, "the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision," prompting Daniel to praise "the God of heaven" (v. 19). This account emphasises the superiority of divine revelation over human wisdom. Finally, the prophetic book of Joel reiterates the enduring role of dreams and visions in divine communication. In Joel 2:28, God promises: "Your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions,"

⁴⁸ Ustinova, "Modes of Prophecy or Modern Arguments," 34.

⁴⁹ John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 39.

indicating a time when divine revelation will be democratised and poured out on all people.

In the New Testament, the significance of dreams continues, as in the case of Pilate's wife, who was so troubled by a dream about Jesus that she warned her husband: "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him in a dream" (Matt 27:19). Thus, throughout the Bible, dreams and visions serve as legitimate, powerful modes of divine revelation. While often regarded as secondary to the proclamations of formal prophets, they functioned as critical tools through which God communicated His will, both to Israelites and foreigners alike.

I THE FUTURISTIC CHARACTER OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

As previously noted in the introductory section of this study, one of the key issues in the discourse on prophecy is the ongoing scholarly debate about the futuristic character of Old Testament prophecy. Scholars remain divided on whether ancient Israelite prophets primarily functioned as predictors of future events or whether their messages were more concerned with immediate socio-religious realities. In the post-biblical context, many people commonly associate prophets with foretelling the future. For example, a seer was believed to possess a special gift of insight—able to perceive both past and future realities.⁵⁰ Similarly, Israel's prophets were conceived as individuals capable of discerning Israel's true identity and destiny.⁵¹ Accordingly, "a prophet could see the future, as well as the true identity of Israel."⁵² However, not all scholars agree with this futuristic interpretation. It is argued that the prophetic ministry in ancient Israel was not fundamentally focused on predicting distant future events.⁵³ Instead, their role was deeply embedded in addressing the spiritual, ethical and social concerns of their immediate context.⁵⁴ Further, key prophetic phrases, such as "The Day of the Lord," should not always be read as predictive markers pointing to future historical events.⁵⁵ Instead, they can be interpreted symbolically or thematically, reflecting the prophet's theological commentary on the present or near future.

⁵⁰ Togarasei, "The Prophet and Divine Manifestation," 825.

⁵¹ Jurie H. Le Roux, "Abraham's Reinterpretation and Life's Meaning," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36/3 (2015), Art. #1452, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v36i3.1452>.

⁵² Le Roux, "Abraham's Reinterpretation," n.p.

⁵³ Mark J. Boda and Lissa M.W. Beal, *Prophets, Prophecy and Ancient Israelite Historiography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 177.

⁵⁴ Boda and Beal, *Prophets, Prophecy and Ancient Israelite Historiography*, 177.

⁵⁵ Samuel H. Bess, "The Book of Zephaniah: A Premillennial Interpretation" (MTh Thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, 1953), 37.

In a similar vein, eschatological prophecies in the Old Testament should not be treated as fixed, fail-proof predictions.⁵⁶ The aforementioned caution is echoed by various scholars.⁵⁷ Despite these critiques, a rereading of numerous prophetic passages suggests a clear orientation toward future events. Texts such as Isa 2:12; 13:9; 34:8; Jer 46:10; Ezek 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18–20; Obad 15; Zeph 1:7–8, 14, 18; 2:2–3; Zech 14:1 and Mal 4:5 all contain prophetic declarations that look forward to an anticipated day of divine intervention or judgment, commonly referred to as “the Day of the Lord.” These texts suggest a prophetic vision that was not limited to the immediate present but often looked ahead to a time when Yahweh would decisively act in history. Thus, while the futuristic dimension of prophecy may not have been its only or primary function, it remains a significant aspect of the prophetic tradition in the Old Testament. The prophets often straddled the line between forth-telling (addressing the present) and foretelling (predicting the future), making their role both complex and multifaceted.

J MWARI AND THE ANCESTORS AMONG THE SHONA PEOPLE OF ZIMBABWE

In African religiosity, Mwari is regarded as the Supreme Being who provides food, health, shelter, and all necessities of life.⁵⁸ Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, Mwari is the most commonly used name for God.⁵⁹ In Shona belief, Mwari is not polytheistic; rather, it reflects monotheism with diverse attributes.⁶⁰ Various names given to Mwari, such as Musiki (Creator), Musikavanhu (Creator of human beings), Chidzachepo (the Eternal Being) and Dzivaguru (Great Pool), highlight roles associated with creation, fertility, rain and national well-being.⁶¹ Mwari is perceived as the supreme authority, higher than *vadzimu* (ancestors) who are more directly involved in daily life.⁶² Mwari is believed to be intimately

⁵⁶ Christopher M. Hays, “Prophecy: A History of Failure?” In *When the Son of Man Didn’t Come. A Constructive Proposal on the Delay of the Parousia* (ed. Christopher M. Hays; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 23–38.

⁵⁷ Robert C. Kashow, “Zechariah 1-8 as a Theological Explanation for the Failure of Prophecy in Haggai 2:20-23,” *JTS* 64/2 (2013): 393–402; Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, “Prophecy as Way of Cancelling Prophecy: The Strategic Uses of Foreknowledge,” *ZAW* 117/3 (2005): 340.

⁵⁸ Stanislaus I. G. Mudenge, *A Political History of Munhumutapa 1400-1902* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988), 28.

⁵⁹ Nisbert Taringa, “African Metaphors for God: Male or Female?” *Scriptura* 86 (2004): 175.

⁶⁰ Frans I. Verstraelen, *Zimbabwean Realities and Christian Responses* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1998), 81.

⁶¹ Fransisca Chimhanda, “The Liberation Potential of the Shona Culture and the Gospel: A Post-feminist Perspective,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae* 40 (2014): 313–314; Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples*, 293–327.

⁶² Verstraelen, *Zimbabwean Realities*, 81.

involved in human affairs and is responsible for weather patterns, land fertility and even moral character.⁶³

Similarly, Mwari is not only a creator but also an active sustainer and moral governor of both the natural and the human world.⁶⁴ A Shona belief holds that Mwari dwells at Matonjeni,⁶⁵ a sacred shrine in the Matopo Hills. However, this belief is not universally accepted among all Shona people. There is no definitive origin story for how Mwari came to reside at Matonjeni.⁶⁶ Despite this, many believe that Mwari communicates through spirit mediums at the shrine. No one sees Mwari, but the divine presence is believed to speak through rocks via spirit possession.⁶⁷ Annual pilgrimages and thanksgiving rituals are often conducted at Matonjeni in honour of Mwari. This may parallel biblical accounts, such as Moses receiving revelation from Yahweh on Mount Sinai (Exod 19), suggesting a conceptual overlap of divine-human encounters on mountains or rocky places.

Among the Shona, spirit mediums (*svikiro*) serve as messengers between the people and Mwari. Their utterances are treated as the voice of Mwari himself.⁶⁸ The Shona believe that *mudzimu* (spirit of the dead) remains connected to the living, as the body may die but the spirit lives on.⁶⁹ Within the spiritual hierarchy, *mhondoro*, often associated with lions (*shumba*), are royal ancestral spirits believed to be messengers of Mwari.⁷⁰ Though less powerful than Mwari, *mhondoro* are deeply involved in guiding and protecting communities.⁷¹ Below *mhondoro* are the ancestral spirits (*vadzimu*). The calling or possession of a person to become a spirit medium often follows a ritualised process. In ceremonies involving mediums, such as the Nyajena *svikiro*, a designated participant presents *fodya* (snuff) in a special horn (*gonamombe*).⁷² The medium, seated on a mat and dressed in ritual attire (*jira*), snuffs the tobacco, triggering

⁶³ Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples*, 293–327.

⁶⁴ Tabona Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion in Zimbabwe: Health and Well-Being* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

⁶⁵ Marthinus L. Daneel, *The God of the Matopo Hills: An Essay on the Mwari Cult in Rhodesia* (Paris: Mouton, 1970), 10.

⁶⁶ Daneel, *The God of the Matopo Hills*, 10.

⁶⁷ Michael Gelfand, *An African's Religion: The Spirit of Nyajena: Case History of a Karanga People* (Cape Town: Juta and Co Ltd, 1966), 9.

⁶⁸ Ovyo Dodo, Gift R. Banda and Godfrey Dodo, "African Initiated Churches, Pivotal in Peace-Building: A Case of the Johane Masowe Chishanu," *JRS* 16 (2014): 10.

⁶⁹ Yukari Matsuhira, "Rain-making Ceremony," *African Religious Dynamics* 1 (2013): 169.

⁷⁰ David N. Beach, *War and Politics in Zimbabwe, 1840–1900* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986), 120–122.

⁷¹ Oyekan Owomoyela, *Culture and Customs of Zimbabwe* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 31.

⁷² Gelfand, *An African's Religion*, 18–25.

signs of spirit possession, such as yawning and belching (*kudzvova*). Once possessed, the spirit speaks through the medium, who later does not recall what was said.⁷³ During possession, the spirit medium delivers messages from Mwari or the ancestors concerning national matters, such as drought, war, disease or divine displeasure due to societal wrongdoing. These pronouncements often include both the diagnosis (e.g. drought as punishment) and the remedy (e.g. a rain-making ceremony involving beer offerings to *mudzimu*, *mhondoro* and Mwari).⁷⁴

In addition to spiritual intercession, mediums often take on roles as community leaders, ritual healers or advocates against injustice. In the past, figures like Mbuya Nehanda protested against colonial oppression and land dispossession. She is believed to have been executed by British colonial forces due to her resistance.⁷⁵ Before her death, Nehanda is said to have prophesied: *Mapfupa angu achamuka* ("My bones shall rise").⁷⁶ Such figures remain significant in national memory. In post-colonial Zimbabwe, the popularised "prophecy" of Nehanda is often manipulated by power-seeking individuals who appropriate patriotic symbolism as a means to legitimise and prolong their hold on power.⁷⁷ Spirit mediums often receive dreams and visions to warn of impending events.⁷⁸ During Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, spirit mediums such as Nehanda, Kaguvi and Chaminuka were venerated for guiding the resistance and their influence is credited with the eventual victory in 1980 and the country's

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Thomas N. Huffman, "The Soapstone Birds from Great Zimbabwe," *African Arts* 18/3(1985): 68; Matsuhira, "Rain-making Ceremony," 165–182.

⁷⁵ Robert G. Mugabe, *Inside the Third Chimurenga* (Department of Information and Publicity, Office of the President and Cabinet, Harare, 2001), 92–93.

⁷⁶ Ruramisai Charumbira, "Mapfupa Angu Achamuka: My Bones Shall Rise: The Intellectual Legacy of Mbuya Nehanda of Zimbabwe," *JPE* 1/2 (2002): 131.

⁷⁷ The younger generation (ma "2Ks"—those born from the 2000s upwards) may struggle to see any real difference between colonial and post-colonial governments. This is because the oppression they face today feels just as severe, if not worse than what previous generations endured. Despite political independence, systemic injustices remain deeply rooted. As a result, hope for real change continues to fade for many. For many young people and even some of older generations, there is a longing for the spirit of Prophetess Nehanda to rise again, not just in memory but in action. They yearn for a liberation of their own time, one that brings true economic freedom. Political independence has not fulfilled the promises made to their ancestors. In this sense, Nehanda's bones are yet to bring the freedom they hoped for. See Gilbert T. Zvaita and George C. Mbara, "Echoes of Violence: Intergenerational Trauma, Fear and Political Apathy among Zimbabwean Youth Post-2008 Electoral Violence," *Social Sciences* 14/6 (2025): 327; <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14060327>.

⁷⁸ Joost Fontein, *Traditional Connoisseurs of the Past: The Ambiguity of Spirit Mediums and the Performance of the Past in Southern Zimbabwe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2004), 19.

independence.⁷⁹ Thus, spirit mediums not only functioned as religious figures but also played key political and cultural roles. Mbuya Nehanda exemplifies the integration of spiritual authority and political leadership in traditional Shona cosmology.⁸⁰

K CONCLUSION

This study has explored the emergence and function of prophecy in ancient Israel as portrayed in the Old Testament. It has been argued that the concept of prophecy arose from the belief that Yahweh communicated with His people through specially chosen individuals known as prophets. These prophets were often selected from ordinary backgrounds, typically rural or agrarian settings. For example, both Moses and Amos were shepherds, while Elijah was a farmer. While prophecy often involved warning people of impending disaster or divine punishment for disobedience, it also included social critique and advocacy. Prophets such as Amos, Elijah and Micah not only conveyed divine messages but also actively protested against the oppression of the poor by the ruling elite. Their prophetic missions were rooted in socio-economic and geo-political realities, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of prophecy in Israelite society. Other prophets, like Daniel and Joel, functioned as visionaries and interpreters of dreams, offering spiritual insight and practical guidance. Daniel, for instance, interpreted dreams that had profound implications for national policy, such as preparing for famine or avoiding disaster. These visions were not merely mystical experiences but were often deeply connected to economic and political survival.

The study also examined the concept of spiritual intermediation in Shona religion in Zimbabwe, particularly in relation to the figure of the spirit medium (*svikiro*) or ancestor spirit (*mudzimu*). While a direct comparison between Old Testament prophets and *masvikiro* may not be entirely appropriate due to cultural and theological differences, significant functional parallels were noted. Like the Old Testament prophets, *masvikiro* serve as channels of divine communication, warning communities of impending dangers or advising them on necessary rituals to avert calamity. In Shona cosmology, it is believed that Mwari Nyadenga or Mwari Wokumusoro controls the rain and other natural elements. When human conduct, such as violence or moral failure, offends Mwari, the rain may be withheld as a form of divine punishment. In such instances, spirit mediums consult the ancestors, who in turn petition Mwari on behalf of the

⁷⁹ Temba T. Rugwiji, "Appropriating the Judean Postexilic Literature in a Postcolonial Discourse: A Case for Zimbabwe" (PhD Thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2013), 191.

⁸⁰ Tapiwa P. Mapuranga, "Phenomenological Investigation into the Effect of Traditional Beliefs and Practices on Women and HIV & AIDS, with Special Reference to Chipinge District, Zimbabwe" (PhD Diss., University of Zimbabwe, 2010), 49.

people. A resolution typically involves ritual ceremonies, such as brewing and offering traditional beer, to appease the spiritual realm. At the national level, the role of *mhondoro* (royal ancestral spirits) is pivotal. These spirit beings, often embodied in prominent mediums, such as Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi, address national crises, including droughts, epidemics, foreign invasions and war. Historically, they provided both spiritual and political guidance, including military strategies. It is widely believed that the victory over the colonial Rhodesian regime was due in part to the interventions of the ancestors and the *mhondoro*. Mbuya Nehanda's famous prophetic word, *Mapfupa angu achamuka* ("My bones shall rise"), has become a symbol of enduring spiritual and national resilience.

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