

"Do My Prophets no Harm" (Ps 105:15b): Bible and Leadership in the Neo-Prophetic Movement in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Since the rise of the Neo-Prophetic Movement in the Christian landscape in Ghana, several cases of questionable behaviour of Church leaders have been recorded and widely circulated in the media. These behaviours, ranging from uncouth language to criminal conduct, have sometimes warranted the intervention of law enforcement agents, who step in to apprehend or caution offenders. Surprisingly, the wider Ghanaian society has been largely tolerant of these church leaders, affording them wide coverage on national television and marks of respect during social events. Using the distinct interest approach of African Biblical Hermeneutics, this study examines Ps 105 as a biblical passage whose interpretation or misinterpretation appears to contribute to perceptions of immunity for church leaders in Ghana, particularly within the Neo-prophetic movement. The study argues that a clearer understanding of passages such as Ps 105 could contribute to greater accountability among church leaders in Ghana.

KEYWORDS: Neo-Prophetism, Ps 105, Ghana, Church Leadership, African Biblical Hermeneutics

A INTRODUCTION

Prophetism, as an expression of Christianity in Ghana, is not entirely new. Scholars of Church Mission History have duly acknowledged, in the early mission narratives of Ghana, the contributions of early prophets, particularly of the African Indigenous Church tradition, like Wadé Harris and Samson Oppong.¹ Since the early 2000s, however, a new trend seems to have emerged within the Christian landscape in Africa and in Ghana in particular. This has to do with the emergence of the Neo-Prophetic Movement, characterised by increasingly

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¹ Peter White, "Decolonising Western Missionaries' Mission Theology and Practice in Ghanaian Church History: A Pentecostal Approach," *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 51/1 (2017): 1–7, doi:10.4102/ids.v51i1.2233.

flamboyant, sometimes provocative and often controversial leaders, who on some occasions have had run-ins with law enforcement agents.²

The issue described above opens up wider questions regarding the nature of leadership within the church in contemporary Africa and the debate regarding the perceived immunity of church leaders. While church leaders in the Europe and America have been under intense scrutiny in the past decade, the levels of impunity observed by church leaders in Africa raise questions regarding both the structures of accountability and the level of tolerance of their followers.³ Such perceptions of immunity of church leaders arise from various sources, including the interpretation of some biblical texts. Aidoo notes that "the literal view of "Do not touch my anointed ones, and do my prophets no harm" (1 Chr 16:22; Ps 105:15) is upheld in Charismatic ministries to counter criticism against them" and as a defensive weapon to silence those who dare question the authority of church leaders.⁴ This is often aggravated, particularly in Neo-Prophetic movements in which church leaders are restrained by little or no internal regulatory structures. This study thus proceeds in three steps. First, it revisits Ps 105 as a biblical text that could be perceived as supporting the immunity of church leaders and offers an exegetico-theological evaluation of the passage. Second, it studies the nature and praxis of leadership in the Neo-Prophetic Movement in Ghana and, finally, it discusses the implications of reading Ps 105 in the context of the Neo-Prophetic Movement in Ghana.

B METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Hermeneutics has been defined as "the theory of the activity of understanding and interpreting texts."⁵ Applied within the context of biblical studies in Africa, Adamo describes it as a methodological resource that "appraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-views, cultures and life experiences, with the purpose of correcting the effect of the cultural ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected in the business of biblical interpretation."⁶ For the scholar who engages in African Biblical Hermeneutics,

² The Inspector General of Police, Dr. George Akuffo-Dampare issued a warning to prophets against prophecies which cause "fear and panic" in society in Today Online, "Ban on Harmful Prophecies Still in Force: Dampare Tells Clergy." <https://www.todaygh.com/ban-on-harmful-prophecies-still-in-force-dampare-tells-clergy/>.

³ David Finkelhor, "The Legacy of the Clergy Abuse Scandal," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 27/11 (2003): 1225–1229.

⁴ Mark Aidoo, "'If This Is of God': Choosing to Curse in Ghanaian Charismatic Christianity," *JSR* 34/2 (2021): 14–15.

⁵ Luis Alonso Schökel and José María Bravo, *A Manual of Hermeneutics* (trans. Liliana M. Rosa; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 13.

⁶ David T. Adamo, "What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?" *Black Theology* 13/1 (2015): 59, doi:10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000047.

the exegesis of the biblical text is not an end in itself. Reading the Bible should ultimately lead to the transformation of the reader and the wider society.⁷

African Biblical Hermeneutics has been applied in varied ways in the study both of the biblical text and the African context. Ossom-Batsa outlines four broad approaches that scholars adopt in the study of the Bible in the African context.⁸ These include the interfaith or comparative approach which involves a dialogue among diverse religious traditions;⁹ the postcolonial approach, which emphasises the dismantling of colonial and neo-colonial structures of power and control which continue to influence contemporary biblical interpretation;¹⁰ cultural or inter-cultural approaches which study parallel elements in the biblical and African cultures and people-based approaches which focus particularly on the ordinary reader by adopting traditional myths, proverbs and songs as vehicles for interpreting biblical texts.¹¹

Adamo, contributing to the discussion of approaches used in African Biblical Hermeneutics, identifies what he calls the distinctive interest approach. This approach, which relates to the interpretive interests and life interests of the researcher, ensures that the socio-religious, cultural and political concerns of contemporary African society are brought into dialogue with the biblical text.¹² The approach involves an exegesis of the biblical text, analysis of the contemporary African context and engagement between text and reality.¹³ This approach is particularly suited to the study of the contemporary phenomenon of prophetism in the Neo-Prophetic Movement in Ghana and especially questions regarding leadership in the movement. The study thus proceeds in three steps:

⁷ Alan J. Meenan, "Biblical Hermeneutics in an African Context," *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 1/ 2 (2014): 269, doi:10.7252/JOURNAL.02.2014F.11.

⁸ George Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspective," *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* 2 (2007): 27–28.

⁹ Cf. Alexander Salakpi, "Ancestral Stool Veneration Revisited within the Lens of 1 Cor 8:1-13," *Urbaniana University Journal* 75/2 (2022): 107–126.

¹⁰ Cf. Hulisani Ramantswana, "Not Free While Nature Remains Colonised: A Decolonial Reading of Isaiah 11:6-9," *OTE* 28/3 (2015): 807–831, doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n3a14. Itumeleng D. Mothoagae, "Biblical Discourse as a Technology of "Othering": A Decolonial Reading on the 1840 Moffat Sermon at the Tabernacle, Moorfields, London," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78/1 (2022): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7812.

¹¹ Cf. Michael K. Mensah, "Interpreting Paired Phenomena in the Hebrew Psalter and in African Indigenous Sacred Texts," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80/2 (2024): 1–8, doi:10.4102/hts.v80i2.8878.

¹² David T. Adamo, "The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutic(s)," *OTE* 28/1 (2015): 45, doi:10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n1a4.

¹³ Michael K. Mensah, Comfort Max-Wirth and Alexander Salakpi, "Forget Your People and Your Father's House" (Ps 45:11): The Hebrew Bible, Marriage Rites and Spousal Abuse in Contemporary Ghana," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45/1 (2024): 2, doi:10.4102/ve.v45i1.3203.

first, an exegesis of Ps 105; second, a study of leadership in the Neo-Prophetic Movement in Ghana and third, the implications of reading Ps 105 for church leadership in contemporary Ghana.

C LEADERSHIP IN PS 105

Psalm 105 has attracted scholarly attention for several reasons. Early form critics like Gunkel sought to understand the relationship between the Psalm and other psalms which narrate Israel's history, such as Ps 78.¹⁴ Other scholars like Zimmerli, interested in the canonical approach to the Psalter, have identified the psalm as an example of a "twin psalm" alongside Ps 106.¹⁵ Intertextual approaches have highlighted the relationship between Ps 105 and 1 Chr 16:8-36¹⁶ or the Wisdom of Solomon.¹⁷ Rhetorical analysis has brought to the fore the poetic and stylistic features in the poem,¹⁸ while thematic approaches have often focused on the tradition of the plagues found in the psalm.¹⁹ Additionally, contextual approaches, like the contribution of Ellington have sought to read the Psalm in light of contemporary Christian experiences such as the narration of testimonies within Pentecostal Christianity.²⁰ Lastly, Lombaard²¹ and Gosse²² focus their attention on the question of the patriarchs which the latter describes as one of the "seriously under-emphasized themes" deserving of greater attention.²³ This study thus focuses on the portrait of the patriarch as leader in Ps

¹⁴ Hermann Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen: Die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels. Zu Ende Geführt von J. Begrich*, HK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933), 323–324.

¹⁵ Walther Zimmerli, "Zwillingspsalmen," in *Wort, Lied und Gottesspruch: Beiträge zu Psalmen und Propheten. FS J. Ziegler* (ed. J Schreiner; Forschung zur Bibel 2; Würzburg, 1972), 107; Michelle A. Stinson, "Turning Tables in Israel's History: Food Language and Reversals in Psalms 105 and 106," *CBQ* 83/4 (2021): 588.

¹⁶ Ralph W. Klein, "Psalms in Chronicles," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 32/4 (2005): 264.

¹⁷ Streeter S. Stuart, "The Exodus Tradition in Psalm 105 and the Wisdom of Solomon: Notable Similarities," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 90/2 (2019): 133.

¹⁸ Richard J. Clifford, "Style and Purpose in Psalm 105," *Biblica* 60/3 (1979): 420–427.

¹⁹ W. Dennis Jr. Tucker, "Revisiting the Plagues in Psalm Cv," *VT* 55/3 (2005): 401; Marc Zvi Brettler, "The Poet as Historian: The Plague Tradition in Psalm 105," in *Bringing the Hidden to Light: The Process of Interpretation. Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller* (ed. Kathryn F. Kravitz and Diane M. Sharon; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 19.

²⁰ Scott A. Ellington, "The Reciprocal Reshaping of History and Experience in the Psalms: Interactions with Pentecostal Testimony," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 16/1 (2007): 18, doi:10.1177/0966736907083264.

²¹ Christo Lombaard, "Some Remarks on the Patriarchs in the Psalms," *OTE* 11/1 (1998): 67.

²² Bernard Gosse, "Abraham dans les Ps 105 et 47," *BZ* 54/1 (2010): 83–84.

²³ Lombaard, "Some Remarks on the Patriarchs in the Psalms," 67.

105, while interrogating the implications for church leadership in contemporary Ghanaian contexts.

1 The Structure of Ps 105

The structure of Ps 105 has stirred considerable debate among scholars. While Clifford posits that the main sections of the poem are "easily discovered,"²⁴ the truth remains, as Ceresko admits, that "no real consensus on the more detailed features of the structure" have been achieved by scholars.²⁵ Thus, while Ravasi (vv. 1-7, 8-45 [8-15, 16-22, 23-36, 37-43, 44-45])²⁶ and Gartner (vv. 1-6, 7-45 [7-11, 12-41, 42-45])²⁷ divide the psalm into two main sections, Clifford (vv. 1-6, 7-11, 12-45)²⁸ and Alden (vv. 1-11, 12-41, 42-45)²⁹ prefer a three-part division. Other divisions include the six-part proposal by Lombaard (vv. 1-7, 8-15, 16-23, 24-38, 39-41, 42-45)³⁰ and the seven-part chiasmic arrangement (vv. 1-6, 7-11, 12-15, 16-23, 24-36, 37-45b, 45c) by vanGemeren.³¹

There is good reason, with minimal variations, to agree with Lombaard's six-part structure.³² Strophe I (vv. 1-7) which opens with an invitation to give thanks to YHWH, receives a response in Strophe IV (vv. 42-45) with a similar call to praise Him, at the closing of the psalm. Moreover, the invitation to the descendants of Abraham, (אברהם, v. 6) to remember (זכר, v. 5) his wonders, receives an explanation in v. 42; It is because YHWH remembers (זכר) Abraham his servant (אברהם, v. 42). The opening and closing strophes thus form a frame around the psalm.

The four central Strophes II-V are arranged in an alternate manner. Strophes II (vv. 8-15) and IV (vv. 23-38) narrate the struggle of Israel in the hands of foreign nations. Thus, in Strophe II, the mention of Israel and Jacob (v. 10) and their struggle against kings (מלכים, v. 14) occur in the land of Canaan

²⁴ Clifford, "Style and Purpose in Psalm 105," 421.

²⁵ Anthony R. Ceresko, "A Poetic Analysis of Ps 105, with Attention to Its Use of Irony," *Biblica* 64/1 (1983): 24.

²⁶ G. Ravasi, *Il Libro Dei Salmi: Commento e Attualizzazione* (vol. 3; Lettura Pastorale Della Bibbia 17; Bologna, 1984), 143.

²⁷ Judith Gärtner, "The Historical Psalms: A Study of Psalms 78; 105; 106; 135, and 136 as Key Hermeneutical Texts in the Psalter," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 4/4 (2015): 383, doi:10.1628/219222715X14604539713303.

²⁸ Clifford, 'Style and Purpose in Psalm 105,' 421.

²⁹ Robert Alden, "Chiastic Psalms (III): A Study in the Mechanics of Semitic Poetry in Psalms 101–150," *JETS* 21/3 (1978): 201.

³⁰ Lombaard, 'Some Remarks on the Patriarchs in the Psalms,' 63.

³¹ W. A. VanGemeren, *Psalms* (EBC 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 664.

³² Lombaard's proposal of "Joseph's history" extends from v. 16-23. While it is possible to consider v.23 a conclusion to the Joseph narrative, stylistic considerations suggest that v.23 could rather be part of the subsequent section, vv. 23-38. This is due to the *inclusio* מצרים in vv. 23, 38.

(כנען, v. 11). In Strophe IV, the same Israel and Jacob are mentioned (vv. 23) in a struggle against kings (מלכיהם, v. 30) in the land of Egypt (מצרים, vv. 23, 38). Strophes III (vv. 16-22) and V (vv. 39-41) are distinct from the former in that they contain no direct mention of a nation. In these two strophes, the struggle is one against the forces of nature. Thus, in Strophe III, the mention of famine (רעב, v. 16) is resolved through the provisions (קנין, v. 19) which Joseph acquires. In Strophe V, the drought (ציוות, v. 41) of the desert is overcome by the provision of food (להם, v. 40). The structure of Ps 105 may thus be illustrated as follows:

Table 1: Structure of Ps 105

Strophe	Remembrance of the Patriarch	Israel	Food	Famine	Nations	Remembrance of the Patriarch	Arrang.
I: (vv. 1-7)	זכר	ישראל	קנין	רעב	כנען	אברהם	<i>a</i>
II: (vv. 8-15)							<i>b</i>
III: (vv. 16-22)							<i>c</i>
IV: (vv. 23-38)							<i>b'</i>
V: (vv. 39-41)	אברהם	ישראל	להם	ציוות	מצרים	זכר	<i>c'</i>
VI: (vv. 42-45)							<i>a'</i>

As illustrated in Table 1 above, the frame of the psalm in Strophes I and VI indicates the content of Ps 105. It is about the remembrance (זכר) of the patriarch (אברהם). This remembrance focuses on two struggles they encountered and the wonders (נפלאות) of YHWH by whose power and provision these were achieved. The first, in Strophes II and IV, is the political struggle, the liberation from foreign nations, named as Canaan and Egypt. The second, in Strophes III and V, regards the deliverance from the afflictions of nature, symbolised by the mention of famine and drought through YHWH's miraculous provision both in the time of Joseph and in the desert. These events form Israel's collective memory, hence, the remembrance of YHWH's Servant, are deemed relevant for future generations.

2 The Identity of the Anointed in Ps 105:15a

Psalm 105:15 could be described as the *crux interpretum* of the Psalm. Lorenzin describes the problem as an anachronistic attribution of the title "messiah" and "prophets" to the patriarchs.³³ Kraus equally describes the attribution as "unusual,"³⁴ while Clifford notes that the term "anointed is not used of any patriarch in Genesis."³⁵ The problem runs even deeper as there is little scholarly consensus as to whom exactly the term "anointed" refers to in Ps 105:15. The

³³ Tiziano Lorenzin, *I Salmi* (I Libri Biblici; Primo Testamento 14; Milano: Paoline, 2000), 408.

³⁴ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen 60 – 150* (7. Aufl.; BK 15/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003), 894.

³⁵ Clifford, "Style and Purpose in Psalm 105," 424.

most widely held position is to understand their occurrences as references to the patriarchs.³⁶ As Hossfeld and Zenger argue, the appearance of Abraham among the Canaanite kings in Gen 14 and the promise of a royal descent in Gen 17:6 could be the reason the patriarch is referred to as "anointed."

A second position, represented by Vesco, is to understand the attribution as referring to the post-exilic anointed Levitical priests, *הַמְשִׁיחַ הַכֹּהֵן* (Lev 4:3,16; 6:15), who, according to Vesco, would have taken up the role of the prophet in their dynastic priesthood.³⁷ This argument, he argues, is supported by the parallel text in 1 Chr 16, a text which could arguably be dated to the post-exilic period. Vesco's proposal runs into two difficulties. First is the lack of reference to the priesthood in Ps 105, which undermines this position.³⁸ Second, as Lee and Klein observe, 1 Chronicles' re-interpretation of Ps 105, along with Pss 96 and 106, involves a warning to the nations and kings "not to harm Israel, God's anointed ones and prophets (1 Chr 16:20-22)³⁹, thus "democratizing these titles so that they applied to the whole people of God."⁴⁰ The suggestion that the messiah in Ps 105 refers to the Levitical priests based on 1 Chr 16 is thus implausible.

What remains clear, despite the scholarly disagreements, is that the title *מְשִׁיחַ* (anointed), overwhelmingly used in the Psalter to refer to David or his royal line (Pss 2; 28; 20; 89; 132), does not apply in this Psalm.⁴¹ Ravasi thus argues that the reference "anointed," here is not just to the patriarchs but to the entire people of Israel, showing a shift from the exclusive use of the term to the descendants of David.⁴² Indeed, Seybold observes that Ps 105 is the only psalm in the Hebrew Psalter that uses the title "anointed" for someone other than the

³⁶ Phillip McMillion, "Psalm 105: History with a Purpose," *Restoration Quarterly* 52/3 (2010): 175; Frank-Lothar Hossfeld et al., eds, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150* (Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 71; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 667; L. Alonso Schökel and C. Carniti, *I Salmi* (trans. Antonio Nepi, Edizione Italiana; vol. II; Commenti Biblici; Roma: Borla, 1993), 446.

³⁷ J.-L. Vesco, *Le Psautier de David: Traduit et Commenté* (vol. II, LeDiv 211; Paris: Cerf, 2006), 980.

³⁸ Klein, "Psalms in Chronicles," 264–265.

³⁹ Archie C. C. Lee, "Reading the Psalms of 1 Chronicles 16:8-36 Cross-Textually and Inter-Textually," *Ching Feng* 14 (2015): 18.

⁴⁰ Klein, "Psalms in Chronicles," 267.

⁴¹ Ake Viberg, "The Concept of Anointing in the Old Testament," *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 16/1 (1996): 19, doi:10.1179/jep.1996.16.1.003.

⁴² Ravasi, *Salmi*, 3:138.

king.⁴³ If the position of these scholars is upheld, it would suggest that the meaning of the anointed in Ps 105:15 is to be sought outside the royal sphere.

3 The Anointed as Prophets in Ps 105:15

The second part of Ps 105:15 refers to the patriarchs and Israel as prophets. Both Ravasi and Alonso-Scholke agree that the reference in Gen 20:7 to Abraham as a prophet (נביא) is sufficient reason to designate him and his descendants as prophets. Moreover, the use of the term נביא in parallel with the term משיח makes it probable that the kind of anointing referred to in verse 15a is a prophetic anointing. The parallel relationship between the two half-cola of Ps 105:15 can be illustrated as follows:

Table 2: Chiastic Terrace Parallelism in Ps 105:15

Neg. + Vb. (Hi) Impf.	Prep. + mp Subst.	Neg. + Vb. (Qal) Impf.	v.v.
		אל־תגעו	15a
	במשיחי		15a
אל־תרעו:	ולנביאי		15b
<i>a'</i>	<i>bb'</i>	<i>a</i>	

As illustrated in Table 2, Ps 105:15 is composed of two half-cola arranged in what corresponds to a chiastic terrace parallelism. The expressions אל־תגעו (v.15a) and אל־תרעו (v. 15b) are parallel on a grammatical level (negation + verb *Qal/Hifil* imperfect 3rd person masculine plural). The two verbs are also parallel on a semantic level. The verb גע in the *Qal* means to touch or to strike something or someone. The verb רעע in the *Hifil* means to injure or harm someone. Either term thus refers to engaging in a violent conduct. The two expressions thus occupy the position *aa'* in the chiastic arrangement. The expressions במשיחי and לנביאי are also grammatically parallel.⁴⁴ Either of them is composed of a preposition + masculine plural + 1st person singular suffix construction. Watson observes that "when chiasmus and the terrace pattern are combined, the result is what could be termed a 'cyclic couplet', the outer elements being parallel and the inner elements being identical."⁴⁵ This being structurally the case in Ps

⁴³ Klaus Seybold, "מָשִׁיחַ māšāḥ I; מְשִׁיחַ māšîaḥ," (TDOT IX; ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, H. Ringgren and H-J. Fabry; trans. D. E. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 52.

⁴⁴ Adele Berlin, "Grammatical Aspects of Biblical Parallelism," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 50 (1979): 20.

⁴⁵ Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (JSOTS 26; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 211.

105:15, a strong case is made for identifying the anointed (משיח) in Ps 105:15a as the prophet (נביא) in verse 15b.

The above structural solution to the identity of the prophet in Ps 105:15 is corroborated by evidence elsewhere. The Hebrew Bible does record cases of the physical anointing of prophets, as in the case of Abel-meholah (1 Kgs 19:16), as well as the metaphorical usage, as in the case of Isaiah (Isa 61:1-2). Further evidence for such prophetic anointing, as Jassen observes, is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain several references to the term משיח "that should be understood as a prophetic designation rather than in a messianic or a royal sense."⁴⁶ The above sustains the argument that Ps 105:15 tilts toward a prophetic anointing, distinct from that of royalty, which is the image of Israel and her patriarchs portrayed in the Psalm.

4 The Anointed Prophets as Sojourners (גרים) and Servants (עבד)

Two further designations are important for understanding the portrait of the anointed prophet in Ps 105. The first regards the term גר (sojourner) mentioned in Ps 115:12, 23. Indeed, in Ps 115:10, it is the people of Israel, characterised as sojourners in verse 12, who are subsequently designated as anointed and prophets in verse 15. In verse 23, the same people are identified as having sojourned in the land of Ham, an allusion to Israel's servitude in Egypt. Horner explains that the term גר, which occurs about 92 times in the Hebrew Bible, essentially refers to one who resides for a time "in someone else's land."⁴⁷ Socially, the sojourner is one of the categories of persons, together with the widow and orphan, protected from oppression by Israel's legal codes (Exod 22:21; 23:9.13; Lev 25:33; Num 35:15; Deut 5:14; 24:19).

A second designation used for Israel in Ps 105 is the term עבד (servant). The term is used to refer both to the patriarchs and Moses (vv. 6, 25, 26, 42) and, in a more literal sense in Ps 105:17, to refer to the patriarch Joseph, who was enslaved in Egypt. The term עבד (servant), as a noun, occurs about 56 times in the Hebrew Psalter. Bridge notes that it is used metaphorically to refer to six categories, namely, creation (Ps 119:91); Israel as a nation (Pss 79:2; 102:15); named individuals (Pss 18:1; 36:1); other peoples (Ps 102:29); worshippers (Pss 34:22; 69:37) and the speaker in the psalm.⁴⁸ Bridge emphasises that the literal use of the term to mean "slave" in Pss 105:17 and 123:2 "encapsulates much of the metaphoric use of עבד in the Psalms."⁴⁹ The use of the same term עבד, to

⁴⁶ Alex P. Jassen, *Mediating the Divine: Prophecy and Revelation in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Second Temple Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 86.

⁴⁷ T. M. Horner, "Changing Concepts of the 'Stranger' in the Old Testament," *ATR* 42 (1960): 50.

⁴⁸ E. J. Bridge, "Loyalty, Dependency and Status with YHWH: The Use of 'bd in the Psalms," *VT* 59 (2009): 364.

⁴⁹ Bridge, "Loyalty, Dependency and Status with YHWH," 362.

characterise YHWH's people (עַמּוֹ) in Ps 105:25 is thus consistent with the humble image of the sojourner. Both designations thus reinforce the portrait of Israel as humble anointed prophets who, on the one hand, find their protection in YHWH and, on the other, are faithful to his service.

D THE NEO-PROPHETIC MOVEMENT IN GHANA

Prophetism in Ghana is not an entirely new phenomenon. Mission historians have well documented the rise of indigenous Christian prophets in Ghana such as Theophilus Opoku (1842-1913), Wadé Harris (1860-1929) and Sampson Oppong (1884-1965) at the turn of the 20th Century.⁵⁰ What is relatively new is the "modern form of Pentecostalism that focuses on prophecy/foretelling and spiritual matters that concern their spiritual wellbeing as reflected in their day-to-day problems."⁵¹ Quayesi-Amakye also defines neo-prophetism in Ghana as "the emergent prophet led churches within Ghana's charismatic churches/ministries (CMs) from the early 1990s."⁵² Manu, Sarfo and Antwi point to the distinct character of this movement as consisting in their ability to effectively combine the belief systems of the African Indigenous Churches and those of the neo-Pentecostal/Charismatic groups.⁵³ Moreover, Ghanaian prophetic activities emphasise the life problems of the followers, one reason which Boaheng puts forward to explain their attractiveness and wide followership.⁵⁴

1 Leadership and the New Prophetic Movement in Ghana

The rise of the Neo-Prophetic Movement (NPM) in Ghana has been accompanied by the prominence given to its leaders, particularly those designated prophets. Ramantswana makes an important distinction between prophets in African Indigenous Churches and those of the Neo-Prophetic

⁵⁰ David Lindenfeld, "Indigenous Encounters with Christian Missionaries in China and West Africa, 1800-1920: A Comparative Study," *Journal of World History* 16/3 (2005): 327-369; Cephas N. Omenyo, "Agenda for a Discussion of African Initiatives in Christianity: The West African/Ghanaian Case," *Missiology: An International Review* XXXIX/3 (2011): 133; Charles Amarkwei, "The Church, Prophetism and Ministry of the Prophets in Ghana," *Pentecostalism, Charismaticism and Neo-Prophetic Movements Journal* 3 (2023): 6, doi:10.38159/pecanep.2023411.

⁵¹ Eric Manu, Emmanuel A. Sarfo, and Emmanuel K. E. Antwi, "Televised Neo-Prophetic Christianity and Its Socio-Economic Effects in Ghana," *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture* 4/1 (2023): 24.

⁵² Joseph Quayesi-Amakye, "Prophetism in Ghana's New Prophetic Churches," *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 35/2 (2015): 162, doi:10.1179/1812446115Z.00000000019.

⁵³ Manu, Sarfo, and Antwi, "Televised Neo-Prophetic," 24.

⁵⁴ Isaac Boaheng, "Contemporary Prophetism in Ghana in the Light of Old Testament Precedents," *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* 5 (2021): 38.

Movement, emphasising, that the prophets play a central role in the latter.⁵⁵ In these movements then, the prophet is clearly the leader. Some of the most visible in Ghana are Apostle Owusu-Bempah of the Glorious Word Power Ministries International, Prophet Nigel Gaisie, founder of the Prophetic Hill Chapel Worldwide and Prophet Stephen Adom Kyei-Duah, founder and, General Overseer of the Believers Worship Centre, all based in Accra. Quayesi-Amakye notes that the prophet plays quite a significant role in the lives of their followers, who "almost always place his or her word on a par with Scripture itself."⁵⁶ The result is that believers depend on the direction of the prophet, practically for every decision, be they simple matters like whether to undertake a journey or more consequential ones like whom to get married to. What is clear is that contemporary prophets do provide spiritual guidance and support for many Ghanaians, some of whom do not find the answers they seek in their own churches, explaining their popularity in the Ghanaian Christian landscape.

The rise of the Neo-Prophetic Movement in Ghana has not been without its challenges. Abuse and excesses, associated with the exercise of the prophetic ministry, have been widely reported, bringing the phenomenon under increased scrutiny.⁵⁷ Three dimensions of these excesses broadly summarise the extent of the problem and are subsequently examined in greater detail. These are the manipulation of the vulnerable, coercion through the use of imprecatory language and violence.

1a Prophets, Leadership and Manipulation

The result of trusting contemporary prophets, unfortunately, creates avenues for some vices. The first of these is the manipulation of their followers through the use of fear. Boaheng documents cases in which some prophets weaponise prophecies of death, accidents, illness or other forms of misfortune to harass the vulnerable. This sometimes results in the extortion of varying amounts of money from the faithful as payment for warding off the said evil.⁵⁸ The seriousness of this sort of harassment, which often includes publicly announcing the imminent death of prominent persons in society, attracted a warning against doomsday prophecies at watch night services in December 2022 by the Inspector-General of Police in Ghana.⁵⁹ The intervention of law enforcement in what should have

⁵⁵ Hulisani Ramantswana, "Prophets Praying for, or Preying on People's Faith: A Reflection on Prophetic Ministry in the South African Context," *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 53/4 (2019): 4, doi:10.4102/ids.v53i4.2495.

⁵⁶ Quayesi-Amakye, "Prophetism in Ghana's New Prophetic Churches," 163.

⁵⁷ Amarkwei, 'Prophetism,' 8.

⁵⁸ Boaheng, "Contemporary Prophetism in Ghana," 43.

⁵⁹ Mohammed Kabore, "Police Warn against Doomsday Prophecies Ahead of Watch Night Services," <https://radiogoldlive.com/police-warn-against-doomsday-prophecies-ahead-of-watch-night-services/>.

been a purely religious matter demonstrates the level of concern these prophecies had begun to elicit in the wider society.

1b Prophets, Leadership and Imprecatory Discourse

Another worrying trend associated with prophetic leaders in the New Prophetic Movements in Ghana has been the adoption of different forms of verbal attacks on persons with whom they disagree or whom they hold in contempt. A common type of such verbal attacks is the use of curses. Asamoah-Gyadu describes curses as "verbal imprecations or inveighing against others, intending for them to come to some harm."⁶⁰ Aidoo observes that a curse is a religious taboo among the Akan of Ghana.⁶¹ Traditionally, persons who utter curses illegitimately are required by the traditional authorities to recant and to offer reparation in the form of sacrifices to the gods. Moreover, civil authorities have also been known to charge people who have uttered curses against others as violating the law.⁶²

Despite these traditional and civil restrictions, Ghanaian pastors of the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition, as Asamoah-Gyadu notes, have been known to utter curses freely and openly on television and radio.⁶³ In this respect, some prophets of the Neo-Prophetic Movement have not been different. In September of 2024, in the heat of Ghana's crisis of illegal mining, the founder of Heaven's Gate Ministries, Prophet Nicholas Osei, also known as prophet Kumchacha is reported to have cursed persons involved in the canker as follows:

"All those MPs who are associated with galamsey, I curse them. They should all get a stroke. All the ministers that are involved in galamsey should go blind, suffer a stroke, or get cancer. All those chiefs who are refusing to stop galamsey, God should let you get hernia, go blind."⁶⁴

As reprehensible as the activities of illegal miners are, questions remain about how ethical it is for a 'Christian' prophet to utter such imprecations against others. As Aidoo notes, much as some of these imprecations are explained away as prophetic, positive confessions or ammunitions for spiritual warfare, they remain "culturally illegitimate" and ought to be discouraged.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Bless and Do not Curse': Weaponisation of the Spoken Word in African Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity," *Studies in World Christianity* 29/3 (2023): 243, doi:10.3366/swc.2023.0444.

⁶¹ Aidoo, "Choosing to Curse," 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶³ Asamoah-Gyadu, "Bless and Do not Curse," 249.

⁶⁴ Eric N. Y. Kwafo, "Kumchacha Curses MPs, Ministers, and Chiefs Involved in Galamsey with Blinders and Death," <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1340434/kumchacha-curses-mps-ministers-and-chiefs-involv.html>.

⁶⁵ Aidoo, "Choosing to Curse," 18.

1c Prophets, Leadership and Violence

A third disturbing trend from the prophetic leadership of churches in Ghana is the tendency either to condone violence or to incite it. Amarkwei observes how gullible adherents of quack prophets end up being physically abused, with pregnant women sometimes trampled underfoot.⁶⁶ Beyond such episodes, however, prophets in Ghana have been reported to have issued threats of violence against others. In one such episode which occurred in September 2023, Prophet Owusu Bempah of the Glorious Word Power Ministry International threatened another Rev. Minister Patricia Asiedu of the Heavens Way Church with the words, "If they don't stop what this woman is doing and they want us to take the laws into our own hands, we will and we will shoot each other in Ghana."⁶⁷ Similarly, another prophet, Apostle Kwabena Owusu Agyei, General Overseer of Hezekiah Prayer Ministries, was charged in the year 2020 for threatening to kill the Chairperson of the Electoral Commission of Ghana, Mrs. Jean Mensah.⁶⁸ While law enforcement should be commended for their intervention in some of these cases, it remains true that a certain level of permissiveness remains, which is the reason for the increasing number of reports of misconduct among these prophets.

2 Evaluating Societal Response to Prophetic Misconduct

The question of why violations against the dignity of congregants and infractions against general societal norms continue to persist in the Neo-Prophetic Movements has engaged the attention of scholars across the continent. Ramantswana details three broad reactions of followers towards their prophets when they are exposed as fraudsters or caught in immoral conduct.⁶⁹ The first is the inclination to support the prophet and to brand the accusers as agents of spiritual attack, especially if they are non-members of the church, or as betrayers if they are. It must be noted that followers might interpret such accusations not simply as targeting the prophet as an individual but as disparaging the church as a body, hence, the show of solidarity. The second, upon the incidence of scandal, is the tendency for followers to leave the church quietly or to gradually dissociate themselves from the church. This action is taken both to safeguard personal reputation relative to the wider society, but also to avoid the backlash of those

⁶⁶ Amarkwei, "Prophetism," 9.

⁶⁷ Ghanaweb.com. "Owusu Bempah vrs Agradaa: I'll Take Matters into My Own Hands If Akufo-Addo, Bawumia Don't Intervene — Rev Owusu Bempah," <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Owusu-Bempah-vrs-Agradaa-I-ll-take-matters-into-my-own-hands-if-Akufo-Addo-Bawumia-don-rsquo-t-intervene-Rev-Owusu-Bempah-1841906>.

⁶⁸ Ernest Arhinful, "'Prophet' Who Allegedly Threatened EC Boss Slapped with Three Charges," <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/06/prophet-who-threatened-ec-boss-slapped-with-three-charges/>.

⁶⁹ Ramantswana, "Prophets Praying for, or Preying on People's Faith," 7.

members who remain loyal to the prophet and consider the former to be traitors. The third is a mixed reaction of followers, ranging from a desire to please the prophet, who could sometimes also be a benefactor, to the fear of attracting curses or spiritual consequences from perceived ingratitude. This latter reaction is not unrelated to the African traditional religious worldview in which, as Musoni observes, "religious leaders were/are perceived as spiritual mediators between the living and the divine," such that offences against the religious leader are held to attract divine retribution.⁷⁰ Factors such as these sustain the "untouchable" image of leaders of the prophetic churches in Ghana, an image bolstered by the distorted interpretation of passages like Ps 105:5 and illustrate the complexity of the reactions of adherents of the movement.

E READING PS 105 IN CONTEMPORARY GHANA

There are at least three important lessons from Ps 105 from which the New Prophetic Movements in contemporary Ghana could draw. The first regards the Psalm's portrait of the anointed prophets. As has been demonstrated, Ps 105:15 presents the people of Israel as the anointed prophets. This portrait suggests that rather than viewing the church leader as the sole anointed one, the faithful are those the psalm considers as anointed prophets, a position which Aidoo emphasises.⁷¹ Such an understanding should have a direct impact on the relations between leaders of churches in Ghana's New Prophetic Movement and their followers. Highlighting the anointing of the members suggests that they are also to be protected from all harm arising from manipulation, from threats of curses and from violent conduct. Moreover, those leaders who perpetuate such behaviour could then be exposed as acting contrary to the scriptures.

A second lesson relates to the humility of the anointed prophets. The term עַבְדָּ (servant) used to characterise the anointed prophets in Ps 105 underlines the disposition towards humble service. This suggests that all who identify themselves with a prophetic anointing are fundamentally not only servants of God but also servants of his people, as the patriarchs were. The foregoing challenges the portrait of leaders of the New Prophetic Movement in Ghana in two ways. As servants of God, contemporary prophets must live above reproach and must reflect the sort of moral conduct compatible with the prophetic word they are called to transmit. This way, the immoral and sometimes outright criminal conduct associated with the ministry can be curtailed. Moreover, as regards their relationship with their followers, contemporary prophets must

⁷⁰ Phillip Musoni, "'Touch not Mine Anointed! ...': An Enchanted Worldview within the Millennium African Pentecostal Churches (MAPCs)," *Alternation Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa* SP38A (2021): 493, doi:10.29086/2519-5476/2021/sp38a20.

⁷¹ Aidoo, "Choosing to Curse," 15.

position themselves as advocates for the poor, consistent with the biblical prophets, not exploiting the flock they lead.⁷²

The third offers a lesson of trust in God for contemporary prophets. The use of the term גַּר (sojourner) for Israel in Ps 105 is an indication of the vulnerability of the anointed prophets as well as the confidence that God protects them. As the situation in Ghana shows, contemporary prophets risk being misinterpreted or even targeted when their prophecies go against corrupt and influential people in society. Prophets should rely on their faith in God to continue speaking truth to power. Nevertheless, these prophets should equally be mindful that, in the same way, God will protect the vulnerable whom they abuse and manipulate with their fake prophecies.

Curtailling the problems associated with contemporary prophetism in Ghana cannot be left to the prophets alone. Scholars have already recommended a raft of measures to deal with these challenges.⁷³ These include legislation, as issued by countries such as Rwanda, though the risk of abuse and suppression of the religious rights of citizens has been highlighted. Training programmes designed to shape the practice of contemporary prophecy could be designed in seminaries and even secular faculties of religion aimed at equipping those engaged in these ministries and to guide other church leaders and administrators about the need to protect the vulnerable in their congregations. Finally, chaplaincies in law enforcement agencies should be equipped with the necessary skills to handle recalcitrant religious leaders and to deal firmly with those who persist in criminal behaviour.

F CONCLUSION

The rise of the Neo-Prophetic Movement in Ghana has brought along with it concerns about the integrity of leadership offered by some of its prophets. From unethical conduct to fear-mongering, contemporary prophets have been accused of abusing the trust reposed in them by their faithful. Despite these accusations, many of these prophets continue to rely on the Bible, particularly texts such as Ps 105:15, to shield themselves from public scrutiny. Indeed, even their followers tend to accept a warped interpretation of the psalm as reasons to tolerate otherwise anti-social behaviour of these prophets.

This study has, however, shown that the reference to the anointed ones in Ps 105:15 refers to a prophetic anointing associated with Israel as a people distinct from the trappings of royalty. Moreover, this portrait of the anointed is qualified by images of the sojourner and the servant, which emphasise vulnerability and humility rather than power and control. Those who respond to the prophetic call in the church in Ghana are therefore called to serve God's

⁷² Amarkwei, "Prophetism," 8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 10.

people with humility and to be mindful of the God who protects the vulnerable. The findings further demonstrate the importance of an informed reading of the biblical text in ways that engage the lived reality of the African and contribute to the positive transformation of the continent.

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