



Popularity, Populism and Prophetism in the Neo-Pentecostal Movement: the Jehoshaphat-Ahab Narrative

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Abstract

The Jehoshaphat-Ahab narrative is used as a textual base for popularity, populism and prophetism in the current political landscape and in the Neo-Pentecostal Movement. The two kings formed a political alliance strengthened through marriage. The alliance was subtly and subliminally influenced by a foreign power in the name of the Phoenician Queen Jezebel, who was an embodiment of state capture. At the height of this alliance, stepped in the prophetism that took two strands of popular prophets who saw socio-political life from the prosperity viewpoint, and the unpopular but authentic prophecy embodied in a character known as Micaiah. The modern Neo-Pentecostal Movement is characterised with popularity, populism and prophetism that may be popular or unpopular due to its humanistic proclivities. The discussions start with Jehoshaphat (popularity), followed by Ahab (populism), Jezebel the state capturer, then Israel's prophets who sided with populism, and Micaiah who is the representative of Yahweh's authentic prophetism. Ahab's prophets were prophesying in the name of the Lord. They were either backsliders or syncretic believers due to Phoenician idolatry that had 'slithered' itself into Israel. This pictures the modern prophets who do almost everything in God's name, but their prophecies are often highly questionable. The narrative is put into the context of Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism, exposing their activities – strange practices that disregard human dignity; and their proclivity to the political powers that are populist oriented. Weaknesses identified are poor hermeneutics, and the shift from Christ as the object of faith to objects such as water, oil etc. Recommendations made include the return to the fundamentals of faith, and sensible consideration of church regulation in South Africa.

Keywords: Populism, popularity, prophetism, Jehoshaphat-Ahab, Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism, prophets.

Introduction

The Old Testament narrative of the two kings in the eighth century of Israeli's history is used as an object lesson for understanding the current Prophetism in Neo-Pentecostal Movement. The narrative is found in 1 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 17-22. This paper shows King Jehoshaphat of Judah (Southern Kingdom) as a popular character known for righteousness and achievements in religious revivals and economic resuscitation. Then it continues to expose King Ahab of Israel (Northern Kingdom) as a populist who ruled by dominance and outrageous politics marked with economic views, though with religious syncretism of the time. The two kings formed a political alliance strengthened through marriage. The alliance was subtly and subliminally influenced by a foreign power in the name of the Phoenician Queen Jezebel, who was an embodiment of state capture. At the height of this alliance, stepped in the prophetism that took two strands of popular



prophets who saw socio-political life from the prosperity viewpoint, and the unpopular but authentic prophecy embodied in a character known as Micaiah.

The bottom line remains that the modern Neo-Pentecostal Movement is characterised with popularity, populism and prophetism that may be popular or unpopular due to its humanistic proclivities. The discussions start with Jehoshaphat (popularity), followed by Ahab (populism), Jezebel the state capturer, then Israel's prophets who sided with populism, and Micaiah who is the representative of Yahweh's authentic prophetism. The narrative is put into the context of Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism, exposing their activities – strange practices that disregard human dignity; and their proclivity towards the political powers that are populist oriented. Weaknesses in the movement are elaborated, and recommendations are made.

Popularity: Jehoshaphat

King Jehoshaphat was the fourth king of Judah after the monarchy was divided between the north (Israel) and the south (Judah). He is introduced as the son of Asa in 1 Kings 15:24 who succeeded his father as the king at the age of thirty-five (1 Kings 22:42). Jehoshaphat according to 1 Kings 15:24, was the fourth king of the Kingdom of Judah, in succession to his father. He reigned in Jerusalem for twenty-five years. The comprehensive narrative about his career is journaled in 1 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 17-22.

Politically, he went all out to reestablish or build some diplomatic relations with Israel, the Northern Kingdom which had religiously embraced syncretism by moving away from Yahweh and moved closer to Baal worship – the idolatry of the land. Second Chronicles 18 shows how Jehoshaphat formed an alliance or entered into a diplomatic partnership with Ahab. He sealed this diplomatic alliance through the marriage of his son to Ahab's daughter; for "He made a marriage alliance with Ahab" (2 Chronicles 18:1). He linked his kingdom to that of Northern Kingdom by the bond of marriage, which was a common practice in the ancient world. This is interpreted as an unwise decision. Ideally, he was supposed to seek obedience instead of compromise with the wicked King Ahab of Israel and his most wicked wife, Jezebel. The alliance was strengthened by Jehoshaphat's state visit to Ahab. The text tells us that "After some years he went down to Ahab in Samaria" (2 Chronicles 18:2). He left his royal throne in Jerusalem for a little while, the city that God chose to put his name to. He abandoned his proper responsibilities as God's regent and went to be with Ahab. They had some revelries and debaucheries with their confidants. One sees Jehoshaphat trying to enhance his political alliance with Ahab of Israel and he entered a military cooperation alliance with Ahab to attack Ramoth-Gilead where he missed death by narrow escape. This created a platform for political ambivalence, because Ahab "induced" or enticed him to form a league with him to retake a disputed city in northern Israel – Ramoth-Gilead. His conflicted decision can be discerned in his proclamation or response to Ahab: "I am as you are, my people as your people. We will be with you in the war" (2 Chronicles 18:3).

Jehoshaphat tried to enhance his international relations further from the economic point of view by undertaking a ship-building project in cooperation with the wicked king of Israel called Ahaziah. This alliance was thwarted through prophetic rebuke, and the investment was aborted dismally (1 Kings 22:41-50; 2 Chronicles 20:35-37).

His popularity militarily is presented through his projects of constructing fortified defences against the Northern Kingdom (2 Chronicles 17:1-3). His national military power brought fear to the surrounding nations, ending up these nations bringing tributes to Judah (2 Chronicles 17:10-19).

The zenith of Jehoshaphat's political career was when a confederation of four military armies attempted to invade Judah (2 Chronicles 20: 1-30). He put his faith in God in a very remarkable manner and miraculously the enemies were defeated. This enhanced his faith in that Yahweh is



the fighter on behalf of his people when they fully trust in him. It also enhanced his political will as the nation experienced some political stability and peace (Douglas, 1965).

Jehoshaphat's popularity was enhanced by his phenomenal religious revivals due to his positive faith in Yahweh as the only God for the nation. He opted to differ religiously from the Northern Kingdom by following in the footsteps of his ancestor, David. He became a reformer, as his heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord (Hirsch, 1906). He nullified and destroyed Baal worship that was enmeshed in the nation's religious worship. He purified the nation by removing high places and the Asherah poles from the national public space (Douglas, 1965). He initiated the priestly itinerant ministry of teaching people God's commands. He sometimes personally got involved in this ministry (2 Chronicles 17:7-9; 19:4-8).

Economically, he was blessed as he amassed a great wealth and nations paid tribute to him (2 Chronicles 17). Jehoshaphat amassed wealth and gained some abundant honour because of his personal commitment to following the Lord (2 Chronicles 17:1-4). He was not ashamed to take this commitment to the Lord to the public (2 Chronicles 17:7-10). As a result of his commitment to the Lord, he was blessed by being granted favour from the neighbouring nations.

In the area of legal justice, Jehoshaphat entrenched his popularity by instituting and perpetuating legal reforms by appointing judges throughout the land. Their mandate was to handle disputes righteously (2 Chronicles 19:4-11)

Populism: Ahab

King Ahab, the king of the northern kingdom of Israel was a very wicked man, who opposed Yahweh. His populism was enhanced by his wife, Jezebel, the infamous queen. She was a Phoenician princess (Douglas, 1965). The marriage was a treaty with her father, King Ethbaal. 'Such marriages were normal seals of formal alliances' (Wood, 1970:310). These kinds of marriages acted as a seal of bilateral agreement between the two political powers entering into some diplomatic relations. Ahab-Jezebel marriage sealed a mutual economic cooperation and advantages. The two powers would also be power blocks against Damascus, their common enemy. This marriage introduced a new religio-cultural practice since it opened the way for Phoenician religion – the worship of Baal-Melqart into Israel. This new religious trend changed the personality and character of Ahab.

We see the same bilateral agreement by marriage between Ahab's daughter Athalia to Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram (2 Kings 8:26). The two kingdoms of Judah and Israel became an alliance as a result. For Ahab-Jezebel marriage, Israel would gain cedar from Lebanon and imported merchandise from maritime Phoenicia; and Phoenicia gaining grain and olive oil from Israel (Wood, 1970:310). For Jehoram-Athalia marriage, Ahab's kingdom established a firm alliance with economic benefits for both, but alliance was harmful religiously for Judah.

There was nothing righteous about Ahab. Merrill (1994:235) is correct that 'he inaugurated an age of transgression unparalleled thus far.' He chose his own way of worship, which was influenced by the Phoenician syncretic worship by introducing a completely new, foreign gods into the worship of Yahweh. He deliberately opted to take side with Baal worship and accommodate Melqart religion. The man was a weakling, dancing under the influence of his Phoenician wife, Jezebel. She was a crafty woman with unscrupulous and cruel behaviour. 'Because of Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, the Sidonian princess, he forsook God as not even Jeroboam had done and began to worship Baal' (Merrill, 1994:235). Ahab was enticed into this religion, and this was enhanced by his idolatrous Phoenician wife, Jezebel, champion of foreign culture, a woman as imperious and able as she was vindictive and unscrupulous, was his undoing (Lockyer, 1971:156).



He certainly did not walk in God's ways. You will remember him from the encounters with Elijah – another field of study that can expose Ahab's populism of the eighth century monarchical rule.

The Israeli kingdom fell under the populist ideals of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. The Bible is clear that "Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him" (1 Kings 16:30). The Phoenician or Tyrian god called *Melqart* was introduced in Israel by Jezebel rather than Ahab. Ahab permitted it, therefore was inevitably responsible when his wife effected it. Wood (1970:311) captures the state of affairs that this introduction of the new religion 'involved an outright substitution of deity – even polytheism for monotheism – and degrading, licentious observances, including religious prostitution.' According to Resane (2015:180), this Phoenician religion had been a competitor of Yahweh's.

Setting religio-cultural aspects as a contribution towards Ahab's populism, we see he typically became a capable ruler, endeavouring to follow his father Omri's pattern of rule. He succeeded with building projects, especially building cities for his people (1 Kings 22:39). Militarily, he was effective, because he twice defeated the Aramean forces as per prophetic utterances from the Lord's prophet (1 Kings 20:1-34). He defeated Benhadad (second victory over the Arameans), after Benhadad received the ill advice about the God of Israel as the God of hills, not of valleys (Hirsch, 1906). Damascus was subdued and Ahab received some rebuke from the prophet of God (1 Kings 20:35-43). Typical of the erratic politics of the populists, Ahab joined forces with Benhadad to attack Shalmaneser III of Assyria. Populists claim that there is no permanent friend in politics. In the same year after a united effort with Benhadad to defeat Shalmaneser III, the same Ahab the populist attacked Benhadad in Ramoth-Gilead, where he was killed. His death was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Micaiah (1 Kings 22:13-39). His populism is highlighted by VanGemeren (1990:36):

Ahab followed the political ambitions of his father, Omri, who had begun making Israel into a political-military power of international renown. Ahab's administration had opened Israel to a grand future of economic prosperity and military might, as Israel had become a "power" among the nations. The people had rejected the covenant and the way of revelation and had become enamored with a new way of life. Realpolitik had triumphed!

Jezebel was a state capturer

State capture, as we have recently understood it in South Africa, is the domination of policy making by external or foreign forces. State capture is essentially a type of systemic political corruption in which mainly private interests pointedly influence a state's decision-making processes for their own advantage.

These forces can be corporate, individuals or a social group. It involves inter alia bribery being practiced or a major embezzlement or plundering of public funds. It is a form of corruption whereby businesses and politicians conspire to influence executive decisions in order to advance their own interests (Momokhere, 2018). It is both an ideology and an oligarchy, always sabotaging authorised hierarchical apparatus of the state, pushing the state into the corners of succumbing, with some kickbacks offered. Freedom From Fear Magazine defines it as:

State capture occurs when the ruling elite and/or powerful businessmen manipulate policy formation and influence the emerging rules of the game (including laws and economic regulations) to their own advantage. The captured economy is trapped in a vicious circle in which the policy and institutional reforms necessary to improve governance are undermined by



collusion between powerful firms and state officials who extract substantial private gains from the absence of clear rule of law.¹

State capturers are always people with a strong possession of wealth or economic influence. For state capture to succeed, the state must be weak, under weak leadership, and therefore a relatively strong, institutionalized state may be necessary in order to avoid state capture. An institutionalized party system may equally be important, for where parties are weak, traditional forms of elite interaction tend to prevail, enabling elites to capture the state apparatus.² Unfortunately, the narrative under research here shows that Jezebel was a full embodiment of state capture, since she was a foreigner, but exerted much influence in state affairs. Jezebel was at the forefront of the politics of the state, implementing and employing the famous 'state capture' mechanisms which are so prevalent in the current South African politics. She was persistent and dominant, was never satisfied with the co-existence of her Phoenician religion with that of Yahweh worship. Her ambitions were almost fulfilled when she authorised the vicious slaughtering of the native prophets of Yahweh (1 Kings 18:4). This was not akin to a foreigner, but to demonstrate that she has captured the state, and she managed to do it. Slaughtering prophets meant that she was already 'on the saddle' of state religious affairs, which flowed into socio-economic affairs as demonstrated by the Naboth's vineyard narrative (1 Kings 21).

Many democracies entrench in their constitutions some laws to ensure that state capture does not happen. Under the populists, endeavours are made to weaken these laws with the aim of neutralizing any agencies that protect the constitutional rudiments.

Queen Jezebel knew that religion is powerful and can influence state decisions, and state bureaucracies fell under her spell. The palace took over the politics of the state. Here in South Africa, the populists excel with this approach. The former President Jacob Zuma, the well-known populist fell under the clutches of state capture and continued a strong allegiance with some African Independent Churches and some Charismatic Churches that publicly demonstrated their support for him. These religious fanatics claim some prophetic affirmations on or about the status quo. We see this happening in Ahab, consulting the popular prophets concerning the attack on Ramoth-Gilead.

Prophetism in the biblical narrative

The Old Testament narrative presents us with the encounter of three types of prophetism of the eighth century Israel. It is of great benefit to remind the reader of the definition and nature of biblical prophecy. First, etymologically, the Hebrew word translated prophet is *nābi*, which literally means 'one who is called' or 'one who calls.' A prophet speaks a word or message (Reddy & Nicolaides, 2022). A prophet is someone 'who receives divine messages which were then spoken to those to whom the prophet was sent' (Miller, 1987:23; Reddy & Nicolaides, 2022). To prophesy (*nibba'*), as per Old Testament was not principally to predict the future, but 'to tell forth the will of God which He had communicated by revelation' (Archer 1985:303). The original understanding of *nibba'* from Akkadian verb, *nabû* carries the meaning to summon, announce or call (Reddy & Nicolaides, 2022). It is therefore indisputably correct to conclude that *nibba'* signifies 'one who has been called or appointed to proclaim as a herald, the message of God Himself' (Archer,

¹ Lugon-Moulin, A. 2010. 'Understanding State Capture' *Freedom From Fear Magazine* 2010, (March) [Understanding state capture - f3magazine.unicri.it](http://www.f3magazine.unicri.it) (Viewed 8 August, 2022)

² Anne Mette Kjaer, state capture, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/state-capture> (Viewed 15 August, 2022)



1985:303). This leads to conclusion that *nābi*, was never a self-appointed or self-ordained orator to convince others about his or her opinions, but as Archer continues to point out; ‘one called by God to proclaim as a herald from the court of heaven the message to be transmitted from God to man’ (1985:303).

The second prophetic encounter was the one called a ‘seer’. In Hebrew this one is called *rō’eh* or *chozeh* (1 Samuel 9:9, 11; 2 Samuel 24:11; Amos 7:12). The seer was not distracted by external forces, therefore was not prophesying according to observations made in ecosphere. This prophet ‘would see issues as they really were from the perspective of God Himself’ (Archer, 1985:303). A seer would receive special visions and revelations from God and apply some spiritual meanings and significances of these as others could not see or fathom them (Reddy & Nicolaides, 2022). Seers always held on to what has been revealed to them, without applying their psychological analyses on these revelations. As a seer, he or she sees things that are hidden from the common being.

The third prophetic encounter was those called *īš Elōhim* (the man of God). This prophet was someone who belonged to God, was wholly devoted to His cause and enjoyed fellowship with this God. This prophet was trusted to transmit God’s word, because he or she spoke only what God has revealed (Reddy & Nicolaides, 2022). Prediction of the future was not the uppermost intention. Their ministry was ‘a proclamation of God’s intentions with regard to His people and the world’ (Von Allmen, 1967:345).

From these three encounters, one finds a commonality, that prophets regardless of specific designation, were ‘not inductive divinizers of the type common in the ancient world, but rather “heard” God speaking and, on this basis, brought “messages”’ (Miller, 1987:24). In a nutshell, prophecy is a transmission of God’s revelation and setting forth His will to people. Prophetic responsibility encapsulates encouraging people to have faith in God rather than trusting human devices or schemes; and of course, turning towards this God as he is the source of life (Reddy & Nicolaides, 2022). ‘The prophets encouraged, promised, warned, and pronounced God’s judgement on people...They charged them in a *rib* (“accusation”) pattern, condemned the people, pronounced the judgement of a coming “Day of the Lord”’ (VanGemeran, 1995:269; Reddy & Nicolaides, 2022).

The Jehoshaphat-Ahaz narrative brings to the discussion platform the two types of prophecies at the loggerhead. The four hundred prophets of Ahab were probably the false prophets with close allegiance to the syncretic Phoenician cult mixed with that of Yahweh of Israel. They did everything in the name of the Lord. Although the texts refer to them as Ahab’s prophets, it looks like they were followers of Yahweh but were seduced by Ahab’s shallow repentance three years earlier (1 Kings 21:27-29). Due to Ahab’s populist’s rhetorics, they began to align with him uncritically, probably shouting *Uyenzeni uMngameli?* or *akana tjala uMngameli* (What has the leader/master done?). This is the famous isiZulu saying even in a song form by the Charismatic leaders who support the former President Jacob Zuma. These prophets prophesied in the name of the Lord but did not prophesy truthfully. They were not pagan prophets, but unfaithful prophets of the true God. They were the “professional prophets” who told the kings what they wanted to hear. Ahab’s prophets predicted Ahab’s victory over Ramoth-Gilead. They even fashioned visual aids. One of them, Zedekiah, used a symbol of iron horns to demonstrate this assumed victory. This was a typical method of prophetic revelation, and here the *horns* used as a symbol of strength. This is probably why the righteous King Jehoshaphat of Judah did not trust or believe their prophecy and proposed for consultation with the prophet of the Lord: “Is there no longer a prophet of the Lord here whom we can inquire of?” (2 Chronicles 18:6; 1 Kings 22:7).



Then Micaiah was the embodiment of Yahweh's real prophet. He was the son of Imlah, and one of the four disciples of Elijah. Unlike the paid or professional prophets, he chose character over conformity. Instead of following the professional and pragmatic prophets of Ahab, Micaiah held firmly to his prophetic calling and integrity of having faith in God. He opted for conviction over compromise as did Jeremiah (Reddy & Nicolaides, 2022), by refusing the king's messenger who advised him to agree with the other prophets. He knew that agreement with this advice meant promotion accompanied by some financial gains. He stood for his calling and vocation by denouncing social, moral, and religious lapses. As a typical Old Testament prophet of God he has been seen in the clarity and forthrightness with which they denounced the social and religious wrongs of their society, so that it was by this means that they became the heralds of a truly moral understanding of the kingdom of God (Clements, 1978:132).

Micah's conviction was costly. He suffered public disgrace by being verbally and physically attacked by Ahab's prophets for his honesty and integrity. For him, consequence over comfort was a better option. He succumbed to Ahab's sentencing to prison until the king returned safely from the battle – a dream or a wish that was never realised as Ahab came back to the city as a corpse.

Prophetic churches in South Africa are generally apolitical. There are 'Ahab's' prophetic types that are closely associated with the regime, those who are totally non-partisan and are sitting on the fence; those of 'Jehoshaphat' affiliation – prophetic enough to always seek God's directions in civil affairs, and those that are totally anti-government and regard the government as the instrument of evil in the world. Micaiah's prophetic affiliation seems to be rare, standing for the truth no matter the cost. It is not the intention of this paper to point out examples of these categories, but to point out that prophets and politicians' relationship is the journey of cautions that may lead to some compromises if not handled with care. Frahm-Arp (2018) has done a very important empirical research on this topic which is worth investigating.

Prophetism in Neo-Pentecostalism.

Neo-Pentecostalism surfaced in the last three decades or so, reviving the ministry of the prophet. Resane (2017:4) points out that 'the dawn of democracy opened the doors for the Neo-charismatic churches, especially those from West Africa (especially Nigeria) into the South African Christian terrain.' Anderson (2019:16) in reference to Ghana with similarities to South Africa gives rationale for their growth as 'the field is liberal, open, and lacks rigorous state regulation.' There arise within the movement prophets related to the so-called fivefold ministry exemplified in Ephesians 4. Like in any movement, heretics are an inevitable reality. Extremes and strange manifestations under the guise of the Spirit has become phenomenal. In the company of the redeemed, there is always the 'mixed multitudes'- those who are in the community due to impressions of God's work, but have not experienced this God personally, or like Ahab's prophets have become unfaithful prophets of the true God. This is prophetism encountered in the Neo-Pentecostal movement. How does it deviate from the understanding of biblical prophetism? In trying to define this phenomenon, Anderson (2019:17) reveals that:

Prophetism is a religious phenomenon that involves an individual who is supernaturally endowed with extra-sensory capabilities that enables him/her to perform supernatural functions. It involves the supernatural ability to gain spiritual insight of spiritual matters and the use of the knowledge thus gained to improve the human situation in the material realm.

Neo-Pentecostal Prophets or Prophecy (NPP) are very common in South Africa. The media reports them and their activities almost on a daily basis. The Neo-Pentecostal prophecy is and



anthropocentric prophecy (Banda, 2021), due to the emphasis or focus on human-centered prophetic activities. Some scholars refer to the NPPs as 'New Pentecostal Churches' (Tsekpoe 2019:6) or 'New Prophetic Churches' (Kgatlé, 2021:6) to emphasise their unique focus on human centered prophecy. Banda expounds this further that:

Among NPPs, prophecy can be described as anthropocentric prophetism because it is primarily concerned with solving human problems in the present earthly life. It is this anthropocentric view of prophecy which opens room for the questionable activities reported among NPPs.

Frahm-Arp (2019:327), in reference to Prophet Bushiri, mentions that people should look to him as a 'Man of God' with prophetic abilities to alleviate their poverty, illness etc., since these evil forces need to be exorcised by a 'Man of God' such as himself. The movement is more known by prophets than by their *kerygma* or *diaconal* activities. For them, prophecy is the most significant feature, and this is attributable to their growth in South Africa (Kgatlé, 2020:3). Prophecy has become the African Pentecostal phenomenon to be reckoned with. Nel (2018:22) points out that prophecy is a significant and integral element that characterises African pentecostalism for the reason that prophetism is an integral feature of the African pentecostalisation process, especially as found in neo-pentecostalism, an integral feature of African Pentecostalism.

However, one needs to note that apart from prophecy, Neo-Pentecostal Prophecy places emphasis on theological themes such as the enemy, spiritual guidance, anointing, prosperity, purpose of life, deliverance, breaking curses, exorcism and healing (Anderson, 2019:21). Yet above all, these prophets should take note that biblically, historically and hermeneutically, *kerygma* should always conclude with 'an appeal to repentance, the offer of forgiveness and of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of salvation, that is, of the life of the Age to Come to those who enter the elect community' (Ladd, 1977:329). It is therefore theologically correct to assume that all prophetic activities should lead to this realisation.

In Ahab-like prophets, one encounters the embodiment of Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism. These are the people who possess *the form of godliness*, but to a certain degree, *denying its power* (2 Timothy 3:5). Their prophetic activities are in the name of the Lord, with activities accompanied with strange practices that can easily lead to the conclusion that they are the false prophets. The iron horns that Zedekiah used as a visual aid to authenticate his prophecy is a common application in the Neo-Pentecostal Prophecy. South Africa experienced with horror in the past decade or so, some 'visual aids' dubbed prophetic revelation that continue to baffle theologians and sociologists and leave them bewildered. Various forms of dangerous healing practices such as stepping on a woman's private parts, eating grass and snakes, petrol drinking, and the spraying of 'Doom' on congregants, has left both Christians and non-believers with many questions with regards to this kind of ministry (Pondani, 2019:37-38).

These strange behavioural practices put them and their ministry under the radar. They are constantly under theological scrutiny and subjected to human rights' assessments. In some places they are discarded as pure heretics, cultists and/or occultists. In some corners, their commercialisation endeavours put them under some serious 'lie detection suspicion'. Anderson (2019:16) highlights this reality:

Prophets who belong to this Christian tradition are seen to engage in commercialising religious items and services, perform strange religious practices in their churches, demonise and verbally abuse each using different media platforms. These disgusting situations raise the question of the possible future prospects of this brand of



Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity given the way its leaders
approach and express Christianity today...

Ewool and Diboro (2021) raise the concern that in recent times, sound theological and ethical issues have become the concern of some Christian leaders among Charismatic churches. The proliferation of charismatic churches calls for a crucial attention. Charlatans are perverting the gospel because of the love of money. In line with popularity and populism, neo-pentecostalism prophecy was displayed before the two kings (Jehoshaphat and Ahab) seated on their thrones i.e. places of their royal authority, the position of their political decision making and influence. This prophetism connives with the political powers, either for these powers to accord them some recognition, or for political powers to have some 'rubber-stamps' for their populists' ideals. Many populists run to Neo-Pentecostal and African Independent Churches in order to receive some form of divine validation for their political aspirations.

The consortium between populists and prophets made some indelible presence in the recent past. In the narrative under the discussion, it is Ahab's prophets' proximity to the throne, and uttering what the royal wants to hear. Populists on political platforms visited the late "super-pastor" TB Joshua's Synagogue Church of All Nations in Lagos, Nigeria. These include the likes of Julius Malema, the leader of the third biggest political party in South Africa, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), his one-time mentor, the late Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Malawi's late president Bingu wa Mutharika, who died after a prophecy by Joshua to that effect, and Zimbabwe's late Morgan Tsvangirai.³ On their return, Malema's statement was clear: 'It was a spiritual visit to meet and create friendship with this son of Africa and his congregation, and ask for blessings for the journey ahead.'⁴ One will never forget the same visit of the late populist President Frederick Chiluba of Zambia who declared Zambia a Christian state. In an interview after attending a church service at the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN) in Lagos, Nigeria, Chiluba said leaders who depended on God led their nations peacefully. During the interviews, Chiluba extolled the virtues of Emmanuel TV, TB Joshua's Christian television station that is growing and increasing popularity throughout Zambia and indeed Africa.⁵

Politicians of populist and popular orientations are known for proximity to the prophets as seen in the Jehoshaphat-Ahab narrative. It is a well-known fact that here in South Africa politicians visit the cultic centers frequently and more than any other time especially during the year of an election. Frahm-Arp (2019:314) highlights this fact that 'in the months leading up to the presidential elections the leaders in the churches focused on citizen-oriented political activism.' Populists visit the religious centers either to receive affirmations or to seek God's favour. Ahab looked for prophetic affirmation that his decisions and steps are God-ordained, while Jehoshaphat sought God's favour to go into battle. Look at examples such as in 2016 when the then Minister of Water and Sanitation, Ms Nomvula Mokonyane, a dedicated Catholic believer, visited the controversial Prophet Mboro Motsoeneng of Incredible Happenings Ministries in Katlehong, Ekurhuleni. It was a year of drought in Southern Africa and Mokonyane embarked on prayers for rain.⁶ During the political upheavals of Jacob Zuma's presidency and at the time when Commission for Religious

³ Verashni Pillay, Up in alms: Malema finds Jesus in Lagos. <https://www.ru.ac.za/perspective/2013archive/upinalmsmalemafindsjesusinlagos.html> (Viewed 11 August 2022).

⁴ Verashni Pillay

⁵ <https://www.scoan.org/blog/2009/11/26/it-is-critical-that-leaders-watch-emmanuel-tv-chiluba/> 26 November 2009). (Viewed 11 August 2022)

⁶ Macupe Bongekile, 'Nomvula Mokonyane joins Mboro in rain prayer' *Sowetan*, 07 November 2016 - 13:10 <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2016-11-07-nomvula-mokonyane-joins-mboro-in-rain-prayer/> (Viewed 12 August, 2022)



and Linguistic Rights (CRL) was investigating some prophets whose ministries had been under spotlights, moving against human rights and dignity, police top brass accompanied by the Minister of Police, Nathi Nhleko, visited the controversial prophet later known for a 'resurrection scandal', Pastor Alph Lukau in Sandton. The prophet went further to give the minister an award.⁷

The Twelve Apostles Church's Chief Apostle, Caesar Nongqunga addressed congregants at their annual Thanksgiving Day at the Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban with President Zuma in attendance. In affirming the then President embroiled with cases of corruption, the apostle said: "If this man was really corrupt - would he still be here? [Because] you hate him, and you don't like him - would you negotiate for him to resign? No, you won't. Just because you can't find a thing on him," he said.⁸

These citations demonstrate the fact that prophecy is a *kerygmatic* method in the Neo-Pentecostal Prophetic movement. Prophecies are always directed to the individuals, political leaders and business leaders that are concerned or aspire for an economic boom for the nation. Followers or seekers of the truth are gullible 'because the prophets are being regarded as men of God who stand in the presence of God. Hence whatever they do or say is highly valued because they are the mouthpiece of God (Fenga, 2018:205). In the midst of this prophetic decadency, South Africa needs political leadership in the pattern of Jehoshaphat, who could stand in the midst of debased prophets and enquire: "First seek the counsel of the LORD (1 Kings 22:5) and Is there no longer a prophet of the Lord here whom we can inquire of?" (2 Chronicles 18:6).

Concerns about Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism

Pentecostal Christianity in South Africa is proliferating, therefore raising numerous theological questions. This is caused by the manner in which Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism represents itself. This theological scrutiny is exacerbated by strange practices by Neo-Pentecostal Prophets who are continually reported in the media for a range of abusive practices. Anderson (2019:24) highlights that they perform strange religious practices; commanding wedding rings and passports to appear in church, instruct congregants to carry cement bags as punishment for refusing to state lottery numbers, manipulate their congregants, give out lottery numbers, and engage in sexual relations with their congregants.

The fundamental problem with this movement is the shallow hermeneutical principles. There is a lot of injustice to the scriptures as texts are always quoted out of context. Gordon Fee (in Spittler, 1976:119-123) highlights this fact that Pentecostals are known for their bad hermeneutics. They employ a kind of pragmatic hermeneutic, meaning obeying the texts literally, spiritualization of the text, interpreting the text allegorically, and devotionallising everything in the text. Fee's appeal is that Pentecostals should consider the literary meaning of the Scripture passage by investigating grammar, philosophy and history etc. Shortcoming to this hermeneutical application creates a fertile ground to breed naïve prophets formulating irrational ideologies based on false hermeneutics leading to abuse of the innocent people genuinely seeking divine intervention in their lives. People devastated by poverty and fear easily become gullible to anything that promises

⁷ Man of cloth honours men in blue: Top cops visit controversial pastor's church to receive special prayer. *Rosebank Killarney Gazette*, January 26, 2017 <https://rosebankkillarneygazette.co.za/207154/man-of-cloth-honours-men-in-blue/> (Viewed 12 August, 2022)

⁸ Kubheka Anelisa, 'Twelve Apostles Church stands behind Zuma', *East Coast Radio*, Updated Dec. 5, 2016, 7:36 a.m. <https://www.ecr.co.za/news/news/twelve-apostles-church-stand-behind-zuma/> (Viewed 12 August, 2022).



them alternatives. They sell their souls to what they see (miracles), not realizing these are the schemed devices to lure them into believing the prophet. These prophets claim to acquire some spiritual powers to see secrets and solve problems, hence massive followership. The people without proper understanding of the Bible and Christian faith always run after the fads of miracles, promises of prosperity, and protection from witchcraft. Their faith is placed on the prophet rather than on Christ. The concern should be registered that these prophets should follow the biblical prophetism, especially the New Testament prophetism where prophets were men endowed by the Holy Spirit prophesied future events (Acts 11:28; 21:10) but more often spoke words of revelation for the edification of the church (Ladd, 1977:353).

Since miracles are seen, they normally don't last long; "for we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal..." (2 Corinthians 4:18). Once this biblical truth is discovered, some discover how they were abused, manipulated, tricked, or indoctrinated by a prophet. Many adherents end up either finding the true faith or denouncing anything that is 'God' because their expectations were not fulfilled or left them more devastated. The crucial choice and assessment that any person claiming to be a prophet should discern, is whether his or her prophetic proclivities are towards Ahab's prophets or Micaiah's prophetic authenticity.

One of the concerns is when people seeking answers of life, are shifted from Christ to objects such as oil, water, handkerchiefs, portraits etc. This is interpreted as idolatry. People are hypnotized to believe in the power of these objects. This concern is raised by Fenga (2018:170):

People today have been made to believe that the mark of Christianity is to have instant results by the use of hallowed objects like anointing oil, holy water, and wrist bands. This is being caused by the twisting and manipulation of the word of God by the preachers today who preach the word to accommodate various forms of subjective interests and motives.

These normally don't come free but are rather purchased which articulates into buying Jesus Christ. They are forced to opt for Jesus who is 'up for sale'. Their faith gets focused on miraculous powers of the object, rather than on Christ. This leads to confessions by the followers that the prophet is their mediator, and their problem-solver, forgetting the biblical teaching that "...there is one God, one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). It is the wish of the broader *ecclesia* that the followers of this movement should know and accept that the 'heart of the early Christian confession is the Lordship of Christ' (Ladd, 1977:339). Prophetic utterances or activities lead people to Christ, not to his messengers, the prophets.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper examined popularity, populism, and prophetism, using the Jehoshaphat-Ahab narrative as the basis of the argument. The argument is motivated by how politics manipulate prophets, and prophets in turn use tactics including strange religious practices, commercialisation of the gospel, abusive behaviours such as using the name of the Lord in vain. There is a concern when the prophet and the king, like Ahab and his four hundred prophets, dine around the same table. The future of these prophets is not bright as it perpetuates more hermeneutically shallow teachings that lead people to devastation, some may discover the truth, while other departing from the truth completely. Theological ignorance, textual misapplication or misappropriation lead to wrong hermeneutical or even prophetic conclusions being drawn. For decades, within the



Pentecostal circles, the Bible was used at face value without complicating its historical data and it was literally interpreted before it was applied pragmatically (Barr, 1983:27).

There should be an emphasis on the return to the fundamentals of the Christian faith, the unadulterated faith that through its Christocentricity should address the anthropocentric needs through soteriological message of redemption. Their prophetic activities shift emphasis from Christ, the cross, the kingdom, sacrificial living and eternity. Their *kerygma* is more on success, self, immediate reward and empire building (Ukachi, 2013:366). The missional zeal for Christ and discipleship, intimacy with Christ, fellowship with the Holy Spirit, etc. has cooled down. However, the fundamentals of the Pentecostal faith remain and should be pursued:

Without doubt one prominent motive of the early Christians was that Christianity met the human desire for truth, that is, for knowledge of the actual truth about God, the world and human beings in the face of frustration and uncertainty. From the knowledge of this truth people were promised redemption, which they sought in liberation from fate and guilt, and which they found in Christianity. The early converts were not promised material prosperity, they were not taught that the risen and ascended Lord was a means to their ends, rather they believed that Jesus their Lord was an end in Himself (MPEG n.d:3).

These emerging prophets should regain some sanity and start by searching the history, essence, and culture of the broader Pentecostal Movement. In agreement with Noel (2015:210), 'we must once again focus on the roles of the Holy Spirit as taught in the biblical account.' Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism should embark on engaging theology, the kind of theology that McGrath (2022:108) refers to when he asserts that 'Theology engages our minds, hearts and imaginations. It helps us to make sense of our world and our lives.' It should be the theology that does not hypnotise people to engage senseless and disrespectful activities as these prophets promote.

The South African constitution provides for freedom of religion and belief, including the right to form, join, and maintain religious associations.

Religious freedom of expression does not extend to advocacy of hatred based on religion; and this freedom should not work against human rights as entrenched in the constitution. Although the law does not require religious groups to register, it however does not encourage any form of abuse in the name of religion, as has been observed recently in some Neo-Pentecostal prophetic groups. People's bodies are constantly exposed to some form of abuse as has been observed when controversial Pastor Penuel Mnguni of End Time Disciples Ministries who had in the past given his members snakes, grass and fabrics to eat as part of his deliverance session, said he heals the sick by stepping on them.⁹ The recommendation is that the constitutionality of the freedom of religion be revisited and revised. There should be some rigorous state regulatory measures to protect human dignity and rights from unscrupulous entities posing as people of God. This will address and minimize abuses and the excesses found in the Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism as witnessed today. This interrogation of how things ought to be will bring some sanity into the religious field of South African Pentecostalism.

⁹ <https://dailypost.ng/2016/03/02/south-african-pastor-steps-on-members-to-deliver-them-photos/>



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