International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies (IJMSSPCS), Vol.6 No.2 June, 2023; p.g. 243- 251; ISSN: 2682-6135

THE PROPHET AS A TEACHER IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The Prophets are regarded as God's mouth-pieces or oracles because they proclaim divine words in that right. They declare the total counsel of God to their audience as they are moved by the Holy Spirit. The Prophets will either fore-tell, that is predict future events or forth-tell, that is, address current lapses in human society that are capable of destroying the relationship between God and humans. Previous studies on Prophets have paid little or no attention to the teaching role of the Prophets. The thrust of this paper is to examine the role of the Prophet as a teacher in ancient Israel and the Nigerian society. The paper adopted the historical method. It was discovered that Prophets in ancient Israel were great Teachers. Most the times their audience listened to them because their oracles are from God. The Prophets are expected to carefully explain their message so that the audience will understand it. In the Nigerian society Prophets play the role of Teachers by taken time to explain the oracle received from God and appealing to their audience to give the right response to the message they delivered to them. Some Prophets in Nigeria lack the courage to deliver divine oracles because of the fear of being molested or attacked by those in the corridor of power. The Prophets in Nigeria need to be firm, courageous, fearless and truthful in declaring the counsel of God that is able to cause socio-economic and religious revival in our nation today. The Prophets in Nigeria must exemplify their teaching both in the private and public domains; they must be in the forefront praying, exhorting and interceding for the country.

Keywords: Prophet, Teacher, Ancient Israel, God, Nigeria.

Introduction

Prophets stood in the gap between the people and God in ancient Israel. They are communicators of divine counsel to their audience. These divine messages unfolding the mind of God constitute what is generally called prophecies, revelations, disclosures of God's self-revelations or self-disclosures or self-manifestations, or oracles. In other words, a Prophecy is a divine message from God transmitted to man through His appointed human agents called the Prophets. A divine message declares God's will on a matter, situation or people, either by way of an admonition or prediction of future events. According to Idowu, three elements are found in prophecies as in a revelation. These are: (i) God who discloses Himself to Man (ii) man to whom, and , or through whom He discloses Himself, and who seeks to apprehend, or comprehend the message, as well as, (iii) the substance of God's self-disclosure(s) (1978:52). The Prophets have the powers of sight, insight, hindsight, or foresight.

They double as preachers, teachers, interpreters, oracles, social critics, instructors and transformers, as well as, social reformers, statesmen and heralds of a better future.

This paper explored the teaching responsibility of the Prophets in ancient Israel and the Nigerian context.

The Office of the Prophet

The Priests were the regular spiritual leader of Israel before Yahweh raised up Prophets to deal with emergency issues. The Prophets were Yahweh's fire brigades, called in special situations to put out strange spiritual fires (Palmer, 2011: 111). Emergence of Prophets placed them as distinct personalities in ancient Israel. This is because the office of a Prophet is not by inheritance but by divine calling. As members of divine council, the Prophets stand as watchmen for their nations because they enter into the supernatural realms to receive oracles from God for their audience. Through this, they shape the religious, economic, social, and political lives of nations (Griffin, 1997). The Prophets were great leaders whose influences were felt in every facet of lives of their audience. Due to the fact that they have direct link with God the Prophets will always receive something which they have to share with the people of God (Gangi, 1984: 4).

The office of the Prophet developed in Israel's history. In their early days, prophets lived together in communities like monasteries in our contemporary times. They were found in cities like Ramah, Gibeah, Bethel and Gilgal (Jacob, 1958: 239-240). From the Bible account, Samuel, Saul, Elijah, and Elisha lived in one of these cities. For instance, when Samuel and Saul arrived in Gibeah, they were welcomed by a guild of prophets (1 Sam. 10: 10). Samuel at a point in time was the leader of a group of prophets in Ramah (1 Sam. 19: 20). When the prophets were under attack by King Ahab and Jezebel in the days of Elijah, Obadiah hid two groups of prophets in caves (1 Kgs. 18: 4). Elijah and Elisha met companies of prophets in Bethel and Jericho (2 Kgs 2: 3, 5). Elisha was very active in the lives of companies of prophets after the departure of his master Elijah (2 Kgs. 4: 38- 41; 6: 1-7).

The Prophets do prophesy as they are moved by the Holy Spirit. There were situations in the Old Testament where persons who are not Prophets prophesied For instance, at Gibeah, Saul prophesied with the band of Prophets (1 Sam. 10: 10). Also, the men who were sent to capture David at Ramah and King Saul prophesied (1 Sam. 19: 20-24). Prophets are called seer because of their ability to see visions and hidden things (1 Sam. 9: 6, 8, 9). Some of the Prophets were ecstatic. In other words, they enter into the realm of the Spirit to receive oracles from God. This made the prophets to behave in an abnormal way and this damage their reputation before the people who labeled them as mad fellows. A court official in Jerusalem said: "any madman who acts like a prophet" to be put in prison (Jer. 29: 26).

The word "prophesy" in Greek means to speak for God. The prophet is one who stands in the presence of God to receive a message for the people. Before a man can stand in the presence of God the individual must have received a divine call (Jacob, 1958: 241). For instance, Amos said he was not a Prophet but a farmer. "But Yahweh took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel' (Amos 7: 14-15). Isaiah encountered the God who called him in a vision (Isa. 6: 1-8). God appointed Jeremiah a Prophet to the nations while he

was in the womb (Jer. 1: 5). Ezekiel while in Babylonian exile by the river Kebar was called by Yahweh to be a Prophet to Israel in captivity (Ezek. 1-3).

The primary message of the Prophets is to turn their audience back to Yahweh. Prophet Jeremiah declared: "Return, faithless Israel… return, faithless people…return (Jer 3: 12, 14, 20). The message of the Prophets is always based on the covenant Yahweh made with Israel at Sinai. It was in Sinai Yahweh entered into a covenant agreement with Israel. The law provided the conditions of this relationship. Whenever Israel broke this relationship, the Prophets would call the nation to return to the God who cut covenant with her. It was a personal relationship. The prophets were obliged to reveal the will of God to the people. This in most cases came in form of instruction, admonition and exhortation, promises or stern rebukes. The prophets as it were, were the ministerial monitors of the people and the interpreters of the law (Awojobi, 2020: 2). In ancient Israel prophets were known to have protested against mere formalism, stressed moral duty, encourage spiritual services and promote truth and righteousness. They had the responsibility of calling the backsliding nations to Yahweh.

The Prophet as a Teacher in Ancient Israel

A teacher is someone who impact knowledge. The teacher must thoroughly know the lesson to teach, teach with a full mind and clear understanding. The teacher is confident in giving guidance and helps to inspire leaner's' love for study. Through teaching learners acquire an appreciation of deeper meanings and gain the ability to apply what they are taught to life's daily encounters. One of the five-fold ministries is a teacher (Eph. 4: 11-12). The difference between preaching and teaching is that; preaching motives us to act, teaching tells us how to act. The object of teaching is to bring clear understanding. Teaching should have a positive impact on learners' lives and should enable them to grasp the practical implications of such teaching throughout their life.

In ancient Israel, four categories of people played the role of teacher. They are: the Priests, the Rabbis, the Sages and the Prophets. As mentioned earlier, the Priests were the regular spiritual leaders of Israel before the emergence of the Prophets. The Priests focused teaching on worship. They led in ritual, altar, and sacrifice presentations. Both Children and adults learnt how to honour God through the religious activities. Among the Jews of post exilic era, the word rabbi was used for a teacher. Originally, it was a respectful term used for teacher generally in any field of learning. The term meant "great", "my great one", or 'lord". Initially, it was the custom of the pupil to address his teacher as rabbi; the word became commonly used by anyone greeting a teacher (Kittel & Friedrich 961). In the time of Jesus, the term was highly respected and reserved for those who were regarded as scholars of God's word. Jesus was called a rabbi or teacher. The Sages were regarded as "Wise Teachers". They were considered as "wise" because of their teaching styles, and the way they made use of words turned into proverbs to teach lessons of life. They were advisers and counselors to Kings and people in their time. The Scribes and Rabbis were those who received training as Teachers. They interpreted the sacred scriptures and gave instruction to be followed according to what the word of God said. Most often they lived by what they taught and serve as role-models. They kept biblical records and were responsible as stewards and proclaimed God's truth. Teaching then was relational. A relationship of love, trust, openness, honesty, acceptance,

caring, support, forgiveness, correction, and affirmation were the characteristics of the interactions between teachers and students (Richard, 1973: 314). The Prophets were teachers and social educators" "They proclaimed knowledge of the will of God drawn from events in daily affairs and from inner experiences" (Tidwell, 1996: 20). Prophets were interpreters of events and foretellers. They also declared spiritual insights and gave ethical mandates, teaching people how to distinguish between clean and unclean things and behavior. A good example was Samuel who established Schools of Prophets in Ramah, Shiloh, and Mizpah. The major purpose of the establishment of the school is to cushion the effect of sanctuary at Shiloh and priesthood. However, though this group worked under his direction, Samuel was not likely living with them. At the exit of Samuel, sons of prophets came to the scene at the time Elijah and Elisha (Schenk, 1955:2466).

Gleaning from the Old Testament prophetic literature, we discovered that the message of the Prophets is in twofold: fore- telling (predictions) and forth- telling (preaching, teaching, etc). Our concern in this paper is forth- telling especially teaching. Forth telling is preaching, teaching and encouraging and it covers 75% of biblical prophecies while fore telling is predictions and it covers 25%. This is an indication that prophecy is more of preaching and teaching than prediction of the future (Awojobi, 2018). Prophecy is not primarily the prediction of the future, but it is the speaking of God's word to his people in their present situation (Palmer, 2011: 117). In the book of Amos, we find oracles of exhortation. "Seek me and live" introduces an oracle of exhortation 9amos 5: 4). The oracle of exhortation tells Israel what God expects of them.

Prophets in ancient Israel displayed adequate knowledge in the transmission of their teaching to their audience. They showed adequate knowledge of their environment, the prophetic task and the people they were to teach. The Prophets were passionate and courageous in the discharge of their teaching duty as they condemned leaders and people who were involved in vices such as: abuse of the vulnerable individual such as the poor, widows, orphans, strangers and women. The Prophets spoke and taught against oppression, adultery, drunkenness, exploitation, and the disparity wealth distribution (Asaju, 2016: 50).

The Prophets informed their audience through teaching that conditional covenants attract blessings, curses, reward and punishment. They maintained that the Covenant between God and man involved responsibilities on both part and that God will always fulfill his own part of the deal. However, failure on the part of man to fulfill his part will spell doom and calamity, whereas fulfillment of the expected responsibilities will constantly bring blessings and unprecedented joy (Jer. 11: 7-8; 18: 7-10).

Besides, the Prophets in ancient Israel taught social justice. They maintained that Yahweh is a God of justice and as such frond at any form of injustice. They accused the monarch of time as perpetrators of injustice in the land. Isaiah and Amos were good examples of Prophets of social justice. For instance, Isaiah in his teachings dealt extensively with vices such as: Idolatry (2:8); Injustice (5:7; 59:8); Bloodshed (59:7); Rebellion (1:5; 57:4); Neglect of widow (1:23; 10:2); Excessive drinking (5:11; 28: 1-7) and oppression of the poor (3: 14-15; 10:2).

The Prophet viewed justice as basis of the Law and pillar of Israel society. They desire was to build an egalitarian society where there will be equity and justice for all and sundry. The Prophet through teachings were able to lay a solid foundation for true religion in Israel and revive the moral, civil and religious laws which had been long jettisoned by the Israelites (Lasebikan, 1996: 13)

The Teaching Role of a Prophet in Nigerian Context

It is an undeniable fact that the ministry of the ancient Israelite Prophets is still very much relevant in the Nigerian context. These Prophets were great teachers as they did not leave any stone unturned in the discharge of their prophetic duty. This is because the Prophets through their oracles addressed different social, economic, religious and political issues that have bedeviled our nation today. The teaching role of the Prophets in Nigeria would the discussed under the following headings:

Repentance/ Restitution

Repentance means to turn a new leaf. It is a personal and deliberate action from an individual. In biblical terms, repentance means to turn form ones wicked way to God (2 Chron. 7: 14). One of the emphases of the Prophets in ancient Israel was to bring back the erring nation or individual. Prophetic oracle or teaching comes to the fore whenever the people turned their back away from God (Jer. 3: 12-20). As a member of divine council, the Prophet enters the realm of the supernatural to receive his message. The decisive quality of a Prophet is that he speaks God's word. God will tell him what to speak: "I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him" (Deut. 18: 18). When Jeremiah was called, God touched his mouth and said, "Now I have put words into your mouth" (Jer. 1: 9). The Prophet is that person who speaks for God. The words that are spoken or taught can regulate and control human behavior. This is the case many times with those who have been living careless life that suddenly change by the prompting of the oracles from the Prophets to that those consequences of their bad action as prophesied by the Prophet be averted. Arm robbers, murderers, and the likes have turned from their wicked ways to God (Dada, 2018:190).

Prophetic messages and teachings ought to be kingdom-centered for people to repent of their short comings and turn to God in spirit and truth. The Prophets in Nigeria are expected to teach the undiluted word of God. It is disheartening to note that some Nigerian Prophets have become hirelings and diviners because of money. They teach what people want to hear so as not to offend the rich, the political office holders and the influential people in the society who are their sponsors and godfather.

Justice/ Equity

Justice means giving to people what is due to them. It connotes liberty, freedom, equality and fair play. Justice implies that we must endeavor to defend innocence and promote fairness and truth among mankind. Also, justice connotes equality of all persons irrespective of race, colour, sex, language, religion, opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Injustice is denying people their legitimate rights. In ancient Israel there were situations or occasions of injustice especially on the poor by those in the hems of affairs. The Prophet condemned any form of injustice by people in the corridor of power. The Prophets influenced the affairs of the nation of Israel (Hinson, 1990). For instance, the intervention of Samuel is

outstanding with reference to the institution of monarchy (1 Sam. 9-15). Nathan reprimanded King David when committed murder (2 Sam. 11-12) and this made David to repent what he has done. Justice is demonstrated by the impartiality of God. As evident in Job 34: 18- 19; Matt. 5: 45; Acts 10: 34-35; Rom. 10:12.The chastising role of the Prophets in relation to political leaders is lacking in Nigeria today. Prophets in Nigeria are to protest against the evils of injustice, war, hatred, nepotism, oppression and the like that are the order of the day in our nation today. These moral evils if not checked can cause a breakdown of faith in God and law and order in the nation (Haring, 1979).

Godliness

It is often said that godliness with contentment is a great gain (1 Tim. 6: 6). Godliness connotes being like God in all our actions. The expectation of God is that his people will be like him. In the beginning God created man in his own image and after his likeness (Gen. 1: 26). Humans are God's representatives on earth. The concern of the Prophets is to make everyone like God. God his holy and righteous, and demands same from his people. To this end "righteousness and right behavior clearly expressed the fact that a person knew and serve God" (Shields, 2004). The Prophets must not shy away from their duty of declaring the total counsel of God to the people at every point in time and in all places. They must be ready to face challenges in the form of persecution from the church and political powers that be (Abioje, 2010).

Some Nigerians have thrown godliness to the wind today. There is corruption in every sphere of our national life. Indeed, corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of our nation. Corruption is a sign that something has gone wrong in the management of our country. The only antidote for corruption is 'genuine word of God' and life of holiness. Prophets in Nigeria must rise to this occasion. Our nation is ripe for a transformation. The recovery envisaged in political, religious, social, and economic spheres cannot be realized without a recovery of values (Claude, 2007). This is the time for the Prophets to tell Nigerians the truth on God's position about the nation.

Hard work

Nigerians believe and practice the culture of hard work. The economic mainstay of Nigeria for a long time was Agriculture. Most Nigerians obtain a living from agricultural production. As a matter of fact, agriculture used to be the principal foreign exchange earner in Nigeria. At a time Nigeria was the World's largest exporter of Cocoa, palm oil and groundnuts. About 60% of Nigerians work in the agricultural sector and the country still has vast areas of underutilized arable land (Agboluaje, 2010: 84). However, since the 1970s Oil became dominant in the nation's economy and Nigeria became one of the major producers and exporters of crude oil. This made many Nigerian who were in agricultural sector to abandon it for oil. There are other renewable and non-renewable resources, which have remained untapped in Nigeria today. There is high level of corruption in the oil sector in Nigeria today.

It should be noted that despite the fact that Nigeria is making a lot of money from the Oil sector there is poverty in the land. Nigerian is ranked among the poorest nations in the world. This suggests that the poor tends to be cut off from the economic societies. The poor in Nigeria suffer not only materially but socially, culturally, and politically, as well as in the area of human rights and job opportunities (Agboluaje, 2010: 94). The situation is not that citizens are

not willing to work but that the work or jobs are not available. There are millions of Nigerian graduates that are not gainfully employed. The Government of this country is not creating jobs for the masses. It appears that those in government are only there for themselves and their family members and not for the masses. The epidemic of corruption has eaten deep into all sectors in the nation. Embezzlement of public funds is celebrated and falsehood is exalted in the nation today. Like their counterparts in ancient Israel, the Prophets in Nigeria should speak out on the state of our nation.

Restoration/ Hope

Restoration is to bring back what was lost. Israel was regarded as the bride of Yahweh, but many times went away from him. God was the husband was the wife. God's wife runs off to be with another god and this made God sad. Israel's prostitution resulted in sorrow and anguish in God's heart (Heschel, 1962: 109). God was like a wounded husband who pleads with his wife: "Return, faithless people, for I am your husband" (Jer.3: 14). God sent Jeremiah the Prophet to declare how he felt when Israel left him. Although he was not happy yet he wanted her to return him. Old Testament Prophets have always informed the people of the need to come back to God. For Instance, God declared: "in that day I will restore David's fallen tent… I will plant Israel in their own land" (Amos 9: 11-15). It was sin that earned Israel exile but if she repents God will forgive and restore. In the same fashion the Prophets in Nigeria must have the courage to declare to the government and people of Nigeria their sin and God's provision of restoration.

Prayer

In the Bible "prayer" is used in a simpler and a more complex a narrower and a wider signification. In the former case it is supplication for benefits either for one's self (petition) or for others (intercession). In the later it is an act of worship which covers all soul in its approach to God. Prayer is at the heart of worship. "Prayer, and indeed all true worship, is fundamentally communion with God. The greatest gift of God is himself, and the supreme end of worship is to be lifted into the spirit of God, to share his life, his thought, his purpose" (Rowley, 1967: 264). Prayer is a personal encounter with God. Supplication is at the heart of it, for prayer always springs out of a sense of need and a belief that God rewards those who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). But adoration and confession and thanksgiving also find a place, so that the suppliant becomes a worshipper. But the fact should be noticed that in the Hebrew and Greek alone there are on the one hand words for prayer that denote a direct petition or short, sharp cry of the heart in its distress (Ps. 30:2; 2 Cor. 12:8), and on the other "prayer" like that of Hannah (I Sam. 2:1-10), which is in reality a song of thanksgiving, or that of Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ, in which intercession is mingled with doxology (Eph. 3:14-21) (Blackwood,1958:60).

One of the characteristics of the Prophets is that they are men of prayer and communion. The Prophets have the mark of solitude and constant communion with God (Yates, 1942: 4).

Conclusion

From the foregoing, Prophets are persons of like passion who God in his sovereignty called in critical situations with special endowment and charisma not common with ordinary persons. Prophets were regarded as the guardian of the people, to warn them of God's

impending anger against them and to lead them in the way of Yahweh. They are called to declare the message which they have received from God. As Teachers, they are to passionately instruct their recipients in a persuasive manner for the audience to grasp the message and give the right response to it. Through the teaching ministry of the Prophet a new understanding of religion and its ethical requirements were established.

In Nigeria today, it has been observed that some Prophets do not have the courage to speak because of fear of being attached or embarrassed by those in the corridor of power. As the Prophets in ancient Israel called the nation to get it right with God, their counterparts in Nigeria should do the same. They should revive the ancient practice of Old Testament Prophets in bringing forth the word of God without fear and standing for what is right in the society. The Prophets in the Nigerian nation must be the mouthpiece for God. Prophets in Nigeria should reposition themselves in their teaching ministry and challenge the unjust political, social and economic system that pervades Nigeria presently. It is then that the prophetic ministry will be more relevant in the Nigerian nation

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