

The Priest As Agents Of Transformation In Ancient Israel And Its Reflections In Pastoral Ministry In Nigeria

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Abstract

Priesthood is one of the oldest institutions in ancient Israel by Yahweh. Priesthood was established for Israel to truly worship Yahweh. A Priest was a worship or spiritual leader in ancient Israel. Priesthood played significant role in the religious and social lives of the ancient Israel. The aim of this paper is to consider Priesthood as agents of National Transformation in ancient Israel and its reflections in pastoral ministry in Nigeria. Historical method was used for the research. It was discovered that the Priests in both contexts have played and are still playing transformational roles as mediators between God and the people, interpreters and teachers of the law, spiritual leaders and counselors, promoters of education and literacy, and social justice and development. However, there are challenges facing the role of priests in Nigeria, including political interference, corruption, lack of unity among religious leaders, and lack of financial autonomy. In repositioning the Priests or Pastors for national transformation adoption of strategies like collaboration among religious leaders, encouraging interfaith dialogue and harmony, building capacity and providing training for Priests, and empowering Priests financially and politically are highly recommended.

Keywords: Priest, Ancient Israel, Transformation, Pastoral Ministry and Nigeria

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I. Introduction

Priesthood has played a significant role in the religious and social development of many nations throughout history. In ancient Israel, the priesthood held a unique and revered position as intermediaries between God and the people, interpreters and teachers of the Law, and spiritual leaders and counselors (Heschel, 1962). Priesthood can be defined as a religious office or function that involves the mediation between a deity or deities and human beings (Smith, 2015: 319-327). Priests often hold a special and revered position within their respective religious communities and are responsible for performing sacred rituals, offering sacrifices, interpreting religious texts, and providing spiritual guidance to their congregations. In many societies, priests also play an important role in the social and political spheres, advocating for justice, promoting education, and contributing to national development (Bryan, 2015: 34-45).

In the early period of Israelite history, priests played a crucial role in maintaining the sanctity of the Tabernacle and later the Temple, performing sacred rituals, and offering sacrifices to God on behalf of the people (Lev. 1:1-17) (Harrington, 2016: 393-406). The High Priest, who was the chief representative of the Aaronic priesthood, played a particularly important role in the annual Day of Atonement ceremony, during which he entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the sins of the people (Lev. 16:1-34). In addition to their roles as religious functionaries, priests also served as interpreters and teachers of the Law. They were responsible for preserving and transmitting the sacred texts of the Torah and for instructing the people in their interpretation and application (Lev. 10:8-11, Deut. 33:10, Mal. 2:7) (Grabbe, 2011: 263-276). This study, therefore, examined priesthood as agents of transformation and its reflections in pastoral ministry in Nigeria. Historical method was used for the research.

II. The Priest in Ancient Israel

In ancient Israel, the Priest is presented as one who is set apart for the service of Yahweh. The Priest is considered to be the ambassador of Yahweh and as such a ruler or a theocratic and charismatic leader (Berekiah, 2009: 131). The Priests represented the people before God, officiated in the prescribed offerings (Exod. 28; Lev. 16), taught the law to the laity, and were responsible for ministering at the tabernacle. The sanctity of the Priests as described in Leviticus 21: 1-22: 10 reflects a contrast with heathen practice (Schultz & Smith, 2001: 36). The office of the Priest is that of a counselor. A guardian to give proper guidance in matters of right and wrong,

interpreting the written code in such a way as to make it applicable and practicable contemporary context. According to Eichrodt, the origin of Priesthood in Israelite religion is difficult to ascertain, he however assert that priesthood had been part and parcel of Yahwism since inception, the eminent role of the priest include the 'work of counselling and teaching' (1969: 395).

To facilitate understanding, the Priest as agent of transformation in ancient Israel shall be discussed under the following headings:

1. Mediator between God and the People

The priests played a vital role as mediators between God and the people. They were seen as the intermediary between the divine realm and the human world, responsible for interpreting God's will and communicating it to the people. Like the Prophets, the Priests are seen as members of the divine council and as such were expected by the people to be able to discern the divine will concerning any situation (Berekiah, 2009: 132). In this sense, priests were seen as essential figures in maintaining the relationship between God and the community (Mbiti, 1969). In ancient Israel, priests were responsible for performing the various religious ceremonies and sacrifices required by the Torah (Harrington, 2016: 393-406). They were seen as the only ones who could enter the holy of holies, the most sacred space in the Tabernacle and later the Temple, to make atonement for the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:1-34). As mediators, the priests stand between the people and God for reconciliation purposes. The Priests plead with God if need be to forgive or overlook the trespasses of the people. Through their actions, the priests were believed to bring about reconciliation between the people and God. In this way, the people who have gone away from Yahweh are brought him in true reconciliation to serve him. In a nutshell, the Priests acted as mediators between God and the people, offering prayers and sacrifices on behalf of the people and seeking God's forgiveness for their sins. Through their work as mediators, priests helped to maintain the Israelites' relationship with God and promote their spiritual well-being.

2. Interpreters and Teachers of the Law

In ancient Israel priests played a crucial role as interpreters and teachers of the Law. They were responsible for studying and understanding the religious texts and traditions and teaching them to the people. Through this role, priests helped to shape the cultural and moral values of the community and ensure that they were in line with the divine will. In ancient Israel, the priests were responsible for interpreting and teaching the Torah, the central religious text of Judaism (Harrington, 2016: 340). They were responsible for ensuring that the people understood the laws and commandments of God and could follow them faithfully. The priests also played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the religious traditions and practices of Israel from generation to generations. A good understanding and interpretation of the law is important to the transformation of the society.

3. Spiritual Leaders and Counselors

In ancient Israel, priests have played a vital role as spiritual leaders and counselors. They were responsible for guiding the people in matters of faith, morality, and ethics, and providing spiritual support and guidance during times of crisis and change. The priests were not only responsible for conducting the rituals and sacrifices in the temple, but they were also spiritual leaders and counselors to the people (Harrington, 2016: 393-406). They provided guidance and advice on moral and ethical issues and mediated between God and the people. They were also responsible for offering comfort and support to individuals and communities during times of distress and hardship. In order words, the Priests have the responsibility of give proper guidance in matters of right or wrong, interpreting the written code in such a way as to make it applicable and practicable in contemporary context (Berekiah, 2009: 131)

4. Religious reformers

One of the critical roles of priests in ancient Israel was promoting the worship of Yahweh. In the tabernacle and later in the Temple, the Priests informed the people of their responsibility to Yahweh. As representatives of Yahweh they presented Yahweh as the only and true God. They enjoined the people to be completely devoted to Yahweh who in turn will bless them. Priests conducted daily sacrifices in the temple, offered prayers and blessings, and played a key role in maintaining the religious calendar (Gane, 2011). Through their work in the temple, priests helped to create a strong sense of community and belonging among the Israelites. Priests also played a critical role in providing guidance and counseling to the people. They were responsible for interpreting and teaching the law to the people, providing guidance on moral and ethical issues, and mediating disputes between individuals and communities (Smith, 2010).

Moreover, priests acted as mediators between God and the people, offering prayers and sacrifices on behalf of the people and seeking God's forgiveness for their sins. Through their work as mediators, priests helped to maintain the Israelites' relationship with God and promote their spiritual well-being.

5. Promotion of Religious Harmony and Peaceful Coexistence

One way that priests promoted religious harmony and peaceful coexistence was through their work as mediators. They were responsible for resolving disputes between individuals and communities, promoting justice and fairness, and ensuring that the rights of all were protected (Stone, 2013). By promoting these values, priests helped to create a stable and cohesive society where different religious groups could coexist peacefully. Another way that priests promoted religious harmony was through their role in promoting the worship of God. The temple was a central place of worship for all Israelites, regardless of their religious affiliation. By promoting a shared religious identity, priests helped to create a sense of community and belonging among the Israelites, which helped to reduce tensions between different religious groups (Grabbe, 2007).

Moreover, priests were responsible for interpreting and teaching the law to the people. This included laws related to social justice and fairness, which were critical for promoting peaceful relations between different groups. By promoting these values, priests helped to create a society where all were treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their religious affiliation.

6. Promotion of Education and Literacy

One of the ways that priests promoted education and literacy was through their role as teachers. They were responsible for teaching the law to the people, which included the study of scripture, history, and ethics. This education helped to create a literate and educated society, where individuals had the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in political and social life. Priests also played a role in the development of the Hebrew language (Kass, 1976). The Bible was written in Hebrew, and the priests were responsible for preserving and teaching the language to the people. This helped to create a shared cultural identity and promoted communication and understanding between different groups. Moreover, priests were involved in the establishment and maintenance of schools (Njoku, 2015). They were responsible for the development of the curriculum and the training of teachers. This helped to ensure that education was of high quality and accessible to all, regardless of social or economic status.

7. Promotion of Social Justice and Development

Priests have historically played a critical role in promoting social justice and development in ancient Israel. As spiritual leaders, they are uniquely positioned to advocate for the oppressed and marginalized members of society and to promote policies and programs that lead to greater social equity and development. In ancient Israel, priests were charged with enforcing the laws of the Torah, which included numerous provisions for protecting the rights of the poor and vulnerable (Wenham, 1979). Priests were also responsible for overseeing the distribution of tithes and offerings, which were used to support widows, orphans, and other needy members of society (Njoku, 2015). In this way, priests played a key role in promoting social justice and ensuring that everyone had access to basic necessities. Their role in promoting justice and fairness helped to create a stable and cohesive society.

III. Reflections of Priests as Agents of Transformation in Pastoral Ministry in Nigeria

The Pastoral ministry started after the inauguration of the church by the Holy Spirit after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The word Pastor is found once in the Bible (Eph. 4: 11). The Pastoral office was established to cater for the members to the Church of Christ. Other words used for Pastor in the Scriptures are Priest, Prophet, and Shepherd (Ezek. 34:1-16). The pastoral office was established to nurture the Church of God into maturity in Christ. Therefore, the pastoral ministry is the ministry that cater for the social, moral, physical and spiritual needs of Christians so that they can be like Christ. According to Barthel and Edling (2012: 67), the word 'pastor' came from the Latin word for shepherd. The pastoral ministry is all about shepherding the people of God.(2012: 67). The term pastor is the Latin translation of the Greek word *poimen*, which literally means a "herdsman, a "Shepherd". A Pastor is a person that feeds the Sheep. The Sheep is the people of God and the Pastor has been divinely appointed to guide and feed the flock. The Pastor is expected to be concern about the physical, moral and spiritual state of the flock under him. Consequently, the pastoral ministry is strategic to the physical, moral and spiritual growth of the Church

Pastoral ministry in this paper entails the roles play by the ordained and lay leaders in the contemporary Church in Nigeria. In Nigeria they are called Priests, Pastors, Elders, Teachers, Bishops, and Evangelists and so on. The people see them as their spiritual leaders and as such accord them some respect and honour. This is in line with the view that every believer in Jesus Christ is a Priest. Unlike the Levitical Priesthood one does not belong to this order by birth but, by calling (Heb. 5: 4). In the New Testament, all believers, from Jews and Gentiles, are constituted "a kingdom of priests, (Rev. 1: 6) "a holy priesthood," (1 Pet. 2: 5), and "royal priesthood". All Christians are part of the priesthood, with Jesus at the apex of the priesthood, being the High Priest. But even within the priesthood, there is a hierarchy due to the diversity of gifts and graces among believers.

Christians are under the care of Pastor, Teachers and Leaders, who stand relatively to them in the priest's office as Jesus stands ultimately as the ultimate High Priest over all (Berekiah, 209: 136).

Historically, before the advent of Islam and Christianity many of the leaders in African Traditional Religion were called Priests. These Priests were the spiritual leaders and as such they played a central role in religious, social, and political life. These priests were often believed to have direct communication with the gods or ancestors and acted as intermediaries between the spiritual realm and the community.

With the arrival of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, the role of priesthood changed significantly. In Islamic communities, religious leaders known as Imams or Ulama took on the role of spiritual guides, leading prayers, interpreting the Quran, and providing moral guidance to their communities (Falola, 2008). In Christian communities, Priests, Pastors, and other religious leaders took on a similar role, presiding over religious ceremonies, interpreting scripture, and providing spiritual guidance to their congregations. As far as the New Testament is concerned, all believers in Jesus Christ whether they are Jews or Gentiles are Priests (Rev. 1: 6). Jesus Christ is considered as the High Priest. The chief task of the priesthood of the New Testament dispensation is to teach the people the will of God (Matt. 28: 18-20).

In addition to their religious duties, Priests in Nigeria have played a significant role in social and political transformation of the Nigeria nation. During Nigeria's colonial period, Christian missionaries established schools and hospitals, and priests played a key role in education and healthcare. In the post-colonial era, Priests have been active in political movements, advocating for human rights and social justice (Adogame,). The Priests has been vocal in calling for greater government accountability and transparency, and has played a key role in promoting human rights and democratic values.

Also, the Priests in Nigeria has been to promote education and literacy. The Church, for example, has been actively involved in providing education and healthcare services throughout the country. The Church has established numerous schools and universities throughout the country. These institutions provide high-quality education to thousands of students, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Haran, 1978). In addition to establishing schools, Priests have also been involved in promoting adult literacy programs. These programs have helped to increase literacy rates and promote economic development in rural areas. Through its network of schools and hospitals, the Church has helped to improve the lives of millions of Nigerians, particularly those in rural and underserved areas.

Furthermore, the Priests have been involved in promoting social justice and development, advocating for the rights of workers, farmers, and other marginalized groups (Agbese, 2014: 47-67). In Nigeria priests have also been at the forefront of promoting social justice and development. The Church, for example, has been actively involved in advocating for the rights of workers and farmers, as well as in promoting healthcare, education, and other basic services. Priests have also been involved in promoting environmental sustainability and conservation (Onuoha, 2016: 71-80). In Nigeria, the Church has been actively involved in promoting sustainable agriculture and forestry practices, as well as in advocating for the preservation of natural habitats and wildlife.

In addition to their work as social advocates, priests in Nigeria have also played a critical role in promoting spiritual development and renewal (Osadolor, 2018: 93-117). Through their preaching and pastoral work, they have helped to strengthen faith and promote values such as honesty, integrity, and compassion. In Nigeria, priests have played a critical role as spiritual leaders and counselors. They have provided guidance and support to individuals and communities in matters of faith and morality, and they have offered spiritual guidance and counseling during times of crisis and change. For instance, during the Biafran War, priests played a significant role in providing emotional and spiritual support to individuals and communities affected by the conflict (Ukah, 2012: 118-140).

In Nigeria, Priests are often seen as the conduit between God and the community. They are responsible for leading religious ceremonies and prayers, interpreting sacred texts, and providing moral guidance to their followers. The Priests are responsible for offering sacrifices and performing religious rituals, and for interpreting and teaching religious law to their followers (Mckane, 1974). They are also tasked with providing pastoral care and counseling, and helping their congregants to grow in their faith and spiritual lives.

Similarly, in Nigeria, priests have played a central role as interpreters and teachers of religious texts and traditions. In traditional African religions, priests were responsible for understanding and interpreting the myths and stories of the gods and communicating them to the community. In modern times, Priests in Nigeria continue to play a crucial role in interpreting and teaching religious texts and practices, whether it be the Quran for Muslims or the Bible for Christians (Falola, 2008).

The Priests in Nigeria function as agents of social justice and development. They have been involved in advocating for the rights of the poor and marginalized, and in promoting education and literacy (Agbese, 2014: 47-67). They have also played a role in promoting peace and reconciliation, and in building bridges between different religious and ethnic groups.

Unlike the ancient Israel were the Priests were responsible for maintaining the purity of the Jewish faith and ensuring that the nation remained faithful to its covenant with God (Osadolor, 2018: 93-117). In Nigeria, by

contrast, priests are called upon to promote unity and reconciliation across religious and ethnic lines, and to work towards a more peaceful and harmonious society. In Nigeria, priests often have a more holistic approach to their ministry, which includes social and political dimensions (Ogbuagu, 2017: 43-61). Nevertheless, the relevance of the roles of priests in both contexts for national transformation cannot be overstated. As Nigeria continues to grapple with social, economic, and political challenges, the role of priests in promoting education, social justice, and peaceful coexistence remains critical. Their advocacy for good governance, accountability, and human rights is essential for the transformation of Nigerian society.

IV. Challenges Facing the Pastoral Ministry in National Transformation in Nigeria

Despite the critical roles of priests or pastor in promoting national transformation, their efforts in Nigeria are faced with several challenges. This section examines the major challenges facing the pastoral ministry in national transformation in Nigeria. They are:

1. **Political Interference:** One of the significant challenges facing pastoral ministry in national transformation in Nigeria is political interference. The Nigerian political system is highly influenced by corruption and nepotism, and politicians often use religion to achieve their political goals (Adogame, 2013: 169-187). Consequently, religious leaders, including priests or pastors are often coerced or manipulated by politicians to support their political aspirations, regardless of the moral implications of such support. This political interference hinders the ability of pastor to promote national transformation without fear or favor.
2. **Corruption:** Corruption is endemic in Nigerian society and has permeated all sectors of the economy, including the religious sector. Priests, as moral leaders, are expected to be above board and to set a good example for their followers (Akinboye, 2015: 33-46). However, some priests have been accused of engaging in corrupt practices, which undermine their credibility as moral leaders and diminish their ability to promote national transformation.
3. **Lack of Unity among Religious Leaders:** The religious landscape in Nigeria is highly fragmented, with several denominations and religious groups vying for prominence and influence (Obaji, 2019: 20-30). The lack of unity among religious leaders often leads to conflicts and undermines the collective efforts of pastors to promote national transformation.
4. **Lack of Financial Autonomy:** In many cases, religious institutions depend on donations and support from wealthy individuals and the government (Obaji, 2019: 20-30). This dependence on external funding often compromises the independence and autonomy of religious institutions, including their ability to promote national transformation.

V. REPOSITIONING THE PASTORAL MINISTRY FOR NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN NIGERIA

To reposition the Pastoral ministry in Nigeria for national transformation, the following strategies are recommended:

1. **Collaboration among religious leaders:** Collaboration among religious leaders, regardless of their faith, is crucial to promote national unity and transformation (Okafor, 2017: 53-68). This will help to bridge the gap between different religions and promote mutual understanding and tolerance among the people.
2. **Encouraging interfaith dialogue and harmony:** Interfaith dialogue and harmony are important in promoting peaceful coexistence and national transformation (Ezeibe, 2017:1-11). Priests should encourage and actively participate in interfaith dialogue and activities to foster understanding and promote social harmony.
3. **Building capacity and providing training for priests:** Capacity building and training are essential for enhancing the effectiveness of priests in promoting national transformation (Ezeibe, 2017: 1-11). Training can focus on areas such as leadership, conflict resolution, community development, and social justice.
4. **Empowering priests financially and politically:** Priests need to be financially and politically empowered to effectively carry out their roles in national transformation. Financial empowerment can be achieved by providing financial support for their work while political empowerment can be achieved by involving them in decision-making processes at various levels of government (Agbiji, 2017: 165-177).

VI. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear from our study that the Priests have played crucial roles in national transformation in ancient Israel and Nigeria. In both contexts, Priests have played significant roles as mediators between God and the people, interpreters and teachers of the law, spiritual leaders and counselors, promoters of education and literacy, and social justice and development. However, there are challenges facing the role of priests in Nigeria, including political interference, corruption, lack of unity among religious leaders, and lack of financial autonomy. In repositioning the Priests or Pastors for national transformation adoption of strategies like collaboration among religious leaders, encouraging interfaith dialogue and harmony, building capacity and providing training for Priests, and empowering Priests financially and politically are highly recommended.

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