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YAHWEH's Reprobation of the Shepherds of Israel (Ezekiel 34:1-10) in the Context of the 21st Century Church Leadership in Nigeria

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Abstract

The shepherd-leader motif has occupied a pride of place in scholarship, it is found in various texts of the Old Testament and the New Testament. One of such texts that has increasingly come to the fore is Ezekiel 34, concerning the nature and function of pastoral leadership. Though it may be argued that in the studies of pastoral leadership, some scholars have discussed the implication of the motif of 'shepherd-leadership' in Ezekiel 34 for modern ecclesiastical structure. Nevertheless, the nexus between the ineptitude and corrupt dispositions of Christian leadership practices in Nigeria in the 21st century and YAHWEH's reprobation of the profiteering and corrupt shepherds of Israel has not gained considerable attention. This leaves a lacuna in literature filled by this paper, which focuses on contextualisation of the shepherd motif of Ezekiel 34:1-10 and its lessons for pastoral ministries and Church leadership in Nigeria using rhetorical textual criticism/analytical approach. This is based on Clines (2014)'s rhetorical criticism as the theoretical framework. Rhetorical criticism focuses on "the way the language of the selected texts is deployed to convey meaning"



(Clines, 2014: 31). Findings reveals that, like the shepherds of Israel condemned by YAHWEH many Nigerian Church leaders in the 21st century have become economically bankrupt, sexually corrupt, and lacking integrity in many fronts. This is a great departure from God's expectation of His shepherds. However, the life, leadership and contributions of many faithful church leaders who had joined the Church triumphant and some who are still part of the church militant are praise worthy. It is recommended therefore, that probity, civility and integrity should be promoted among church leaders in Nigeria.

Keywords: Christian Leadership in Nigeria, Church, 21st century, Exegesis of Ezekiel 34: 1-10, Shepherds of Israel, YAHWEH

Introduction

The shepherd motif is found throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament God strong rebuked and warned bad shepherds. He also prophesied the coming of a good shepherd. In the New Testament, Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd and we find in the epistles the notion of good shepherding extended to those who would lead in the church. This paper unravels the pains associated with the lapses among some Church leaders in Nigeria in the 21st century. These include economic profiteering, hypnotism, sexual immorality, inordinate ambition for leadership positions, false prophesies and idolatry. This will serve as a reminder to present-day Church leaders of the demands of leadership calling; it will also present a blueprint for Christian leaders on carrying out the divine assignment of guiding and guarding God's people with utmost care and sense of responsibility to God. The theoretical framework is premised on Clines (2014) theory which is "in the devices of writing, in metaphor and parallelism, in narrative and poetic structures, and stylistic figures" (Clines, 2014: 32). In principle, this approach focuses on the actual situation of the composition and promulgation of ancient texts and their intended effect upon their audience" (Clines, 2014: 32). Muilenburg (2007) writes that "the ultimate goal of rhetorical analysis is to discover the authorial intention and how that is transmitted through a text to an audience". Furthermore, this approach is also known as "close reading." Therefore, it engaged a



retorical criticism or close reading of the “shepherd motif” in Ezekiel 34:1-10 to ascertain the contextual intention of the prophecy to make valuable inferences for the contemporary Christian leadership in Nigeria.

The “shepherd” motif runs deep and wide throughout the Old Testament (Rodgers, 2010: 2), and the New Testament (Gan, 2007: 12). This shepherd imagery is often associated with the leadership of varying kinds, from patriarchs to kings, prophets to Israel’s leaders (Gan, 2007: 12). In the Old Testament, two prominent figures Moses and David are seen as ideal shepherds of Israel. Moses led the people of Israel during the exodus and reception of the Torah, he spent four decades shepherding flocks. David was Israel’s greatest king. He was out in the fields shepherding when the prophet Samuel anointed him king over Israel. These two prominent leaders in Israel’s history oversaw important events such as the exodus and the establishment of the kingdom (Laniak, 2012: 42-93). It may be said that their background as shepherds aided their sense of responsibility and accountability in leadership. As such, there is a close relationship between leader and shepherd. In fact, in the second book of Samuel, Yahweh introduces the two tasks as the same, “You will shepherd my people Israel and will become their ruler” (2 Sam. 5:2). Therefore, the term ‘shepherd’ is synonymous with leadership in Ancient Israel’s cultural milieu. Subsequently, the rise and fall of Israel’s society were tied to the leadership abilities of the shepherds of Israel. The survival and continual fidelity of the nation to YAHWEH, with whom they had a covenant, is seen to depend on the religious policies of the shepherds of Israel. Furthermore, Taylor (1983: 7) writes that the concept of pastoral ministry is related to the idea of shepherding. The shepherd is a well-known figure among many rural peoples, and in ancient Israel, everyone understood what the work of a shepherd was.

Most Nigerians in the 21st century living both in the rural and the urban cities do not understand the world of shepherds; however, the poor perception of most people is the aggressive killings, wanton destruction



of farm lands and kidnapping credited to the herdsmen in Nigeria (Atowoju, 2007: 21).

The idea of the caring shepherd was so familiar and meaningful to the people of Israel that many preachers and writers use it as a picture language about God and the human shepherd. Leupold (1971: 87) thinks that “The shepherd image has a long association with spiritual leadership within the Judeo-Christian tradition, and there are many instances of the term being thus employed. It is also clear that problems and difficulties with the shepherd of the people of God are no new occurrence. Some of the most scathing indictments voiced in the Word of God are directed at those who have exercised the role of shepherd poorly, resulting in much harm to the flock.”

Influence of Church Leadership in Nigeria

The leadership of God’s people has always been a matter of utmost interest to God due to the pivotal role it plays in the overall good and well-being of the assembly or community of God, particularly, in fulfilling the divine purpose by individual members in their specific micro-environment and the larger society. God recognises that the depravity of the flesh does not allow humankind to do what is right when left alone unguarded, and unguided; therefore, he invented the principle of leadership and authority. He appoints individuals as leaders to be guides and guardians to his people. God expects those selected and assigned to lead his people to adhere strictly to his patterns and not otherwise. Therefore, he holds these individuals personally responsible for exercising the authority that he gives them. As a result of the divine involvement, significant power and control are vested in the leadership of the community’s religious practice (Atowoju, 2007: 53)

With the advent of Christianity in Nigeria in the late 19th century and on gaining firm grounds, the church has contributed enormously to the development of the country, socially, economically, politically and religiously. Junaid-Eko (2003) notes that formal schools were established in various parts of the country as accompaniment to founding of churches where classes were held, and payment of teachers’



salaries and allowances became the responsibility of the church. In these schools, the pupils were taught to read the scripture, the catechism and commandments in Yoruba and to utter some words in English (177-178). The early church leadership in Nigeria used an education framework to impact lives and infuse western civilization. As early as 1859, CMS Grammar School was established on Lagos Island. (Junaid-Eko, 2003: 178). According to Junaid-Eko (2003):

Islam predated Christianity in Lagos for about a century, but access to Western education by Muslims was not possible. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) brought the young minds to attend their schools, but the Muslim parents did not wholly approve of the type of education brought by the evangelists. Dr O. Johnson took time off in 1855 to speak to some influential Muslims on the advantages of Western education and advised them to send their children to schools. Some Muslim parents did not totally ignore this appeal. They sent their children to Christian Missionary Schools. Christianity was then firmly established in Christian schools. In 1893, there were 412 Muslim children in the thirty-three government-assisted Christian mission schools in Lagos colony.

In several other parts of the country agriculture, small scale industries and provisions of white-collar jobs were introduced to the citizens by the church. In 1860, Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther established the first primary school in Northern Nigeria named Holy Trinity Primary School, Lokoja (Danfulani and Atowoju, 2012: 79). The school is situated in the premises of Anglican Church, Lokoja. Furthermore, in 1915, Etinan Institute, Etinan, Akwa Ibom, was established by Qua Iboe Mission with Mr. R.J. Taylor as the first principal. The school is co-educational employing as many as 73 youth coppers annually, thus, becoming one of the highest employers of corps members (Etinan-<http://akwaibomschools.com>). Besides evangelism, the Christian missionaries opened dispensaries, clinics, maternity homes, and medical centres to fight diseases and cater for the health of the people.



Many people became Christians in order to have access to these medical services (Osoba and Yusuf, 2003: 32).

Osoba and Yusuf (2003) also note that the Christian involvement in the creation of social order in Nigeria was very apparent. They emphasise that the 19th century was characterised in the Yoruba kingdom by social feud, pandemonium, and misdemeanour. Each tribe rose against the other, the kingdom knew no more political stability, and lives became unsafe because of the incessant raid and spasmodic kidnappings. At the start of the missionary enterprises in Nigeria, missionaries described Lagos as one of the darkest places on earth, full of the habitation of cruelty and the headquarters of the horrible human sacrifices and qualified it as “veritable den of satanic wickedness and diabolical cruelty, heathenism, barbarity and detestable enormities” perhaps because of the horror of slave trade and human sacrifices at Breadfruit Street then (172). The efforts of church leaders ameliorated these societal ills. Asaju (1995) credited Christianity as a faith radically different from others, because of its peaceful means of conversion and relationship with others which is based on love (187).

According to Adekoya, the early contributions of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) in building the primitive Yoruba society in education, healthcare, social, and political development cannot be over emphasised (55). Over the years, the church has indeed influenced the educational structure of Nigeria. Adekoya posits that the advent of Anglicanism and other branches of Christianity in Nigeria, particularly Lagos, turned the slavery and kidnapping customs of the pre-colonial state into that of civilised development centres. (56) He argued that the activities of the Lagos Anglican dioceses are visible in the areas of church political awareness, increased membership and parishes, job creation, economy, social services, development of infrastructural facilities and enviable leadership. However, his comments on desirable leadership focused mainly on the church’s political involvement (Adekoya 58). In contemporary times, some of these feats have continued as some denominations in Nigeria have established health care facilities, for instance, the Cathedral Church of Christ Marina Lagos and Our Saviour’s



Anglican Church, Tafawa Balewa Square have well-equipped and functioning Church Clinics that attend to aged members and children *for gratis*.

The Misdemeanor of Some Nigerian Church Leaders in the 21st Century in the Context of Ezekiel 34: 1-10

Most Nigerians are gracefully religious, simple minded, naive and unquestionably committed to faith and the directives of their Church leaders. Christian leaders over the years have contributed enormously to the development of the country, social security, support system and welfare of their followers. However, the recent misdemeanours among some church leaders have brought a lot of disrepute to the body of Christ, these include outright corruption, involvement in ritual killings, kidnapping, money laundry, false prophesy, heretical teachings, etc. In 2009, one of the church leaders in Amuwo Odofin, Lagos State asked his followers to drink the water used in washing his legs, in July 2010, a Pastor at Ewekoro, Ogun State was arrested and his Church demolished for killing and burying a woman later alleged to be his concubine under his alter in the Church, in 2011, a pastor in Oyo State asked all his members to eat grass like goats at a crusade and they did, in 2015 one asked his female members praying for fruits of the womb to put their hands on his genitals and they did. In December 2019, a pastor was arranged by Police Inspector General –Mohammad Abubakar Adamu, at Igboere, Lagos State for allegedly sending a six-man gang of suspected assassins to kill a female pastor over popularity (Punch, Newspaper, 4 December, 2019). In May 2020, a Pastor in Omuo-Oke, Ekiti State asked members of his church to pay N310,000 each to get flight to heaven (Sahara Reporters: Ekiti State Police invite Nigerian Pastor Who Asked Members to Pay N310,000 to get flight to Heaven, accessed on 2nd June, 2023). In June 2022, a General Overseer in Owerri, Imo State, asked his members to bribe his angels generously for them to receive miracles. In June 2023 the General Overseer of the Altar of Solution Assembly based in Oyingbo, Rivers State was sentenced to death by Justice S.O. Benson for multiple murders. The story is endless,



shameful and irritating, many people, particularly, the youths have left the church and openly rejected the faith because of the nefarious activities of some Church leaders.

Nevertheless, a considerable number of Nigerian church leaders (who are remnants for God in a dying World) are still spiritually alert, living sacrificially, committing their lives and personal resources to the development of the country and the church, helping and giving godly examples, care and counselling to the faithful and others outside the church. Their contributions are evident in the provision of welfare package to the less privilege members of the society, giving scholarships for education to destitute and talented children from primary schools to tertiary institutions (Colleges and Universities), health care facilities, small scale industries, giving social support to individuals and families, provision of essential infrastructures and many more to members of their congregation and non- Christians alike. The Redeem Christian Church for instance offers free medical services to both Christians and non-Christians in Abuja, Lagos, Bauchi State, Borno State and other places in Nigeria and overseas (Onyedika-Ugoeze, 2023, March 23: 5). Over the years, the Baptist Church, the Four Square Gospel Church and the Anglican Church in Nigeria have been involved in establishing schools, universities, hospices, building community roads, sinking boreholes for communities, giving scholarships and other social welfare assistances to their members and others in their host communities. Many other Churches too have carried out empowerment programs, projects and supported spiritually, socially and financially other activities to empower individuals and communities.

However, the changes in social, religious, political and economic paradigm in the 21st century have grossly affected the life and operations of many Church leaders too. The overall effect of their ineptitude, greed, love for personal gains and aggrandisement, corruption and godless living has horrific impact on the Nigerian society. As it were for the Jews under the evil shepherds in Israel (Ezek. 34:1-10), many Nigerians have equally had terrible experiences with some clerics (both young and old) who by their callings are God's shepherd for Nigerians.



Many people in the 21st century see Christian morality as being old fashioned and extremely dangerous. The church is at a cross road facing several crises in leadership, structure, tradition, doctrine, values and presentations. While it is true that from inception, the church has waded through many challenges – persecution, heretical teachings, to brutal extermination of Christianity in some of the early Christian threshold like Turkey and most of the Middle East by Islamic extremists. Nevertheless, the church has been considerably stable in most places, particularly Nigeria, in spite of all odds. However, the 21st century ushered in unprecedented evils against the church resulting from modernism, globalization, heresies, outlandish false teachings, idolatry, moral decadence, leadership aberrations that harm Christian witness and persecutions in most parts of northern Nigeria. In other words, Christianity is in serious spiritual and social dilemma.

One of the biggest challenges facing the church in the 21st century is corruption, moral decadence and spiritual bankruptcy of Christian leaders leading a dying and unattractive church. Dairo (2014) asserts that “leadership is nothing if not linked to collective purpose; and the effectiveness of leaders must be judged not by press clippings but by actual social change, measured by intent and by the satisfaction of human needs and expectations” (84). He argues that in many Churches in Nigeria, false teaching, preconceived ideas, prejudice, materialism and human-formed regulations have too often undermined the Holy Spirit’s specification about the choice of leaders. Hence, most church leaders in Nigeria fall short of the expected requirements and yet still pretend to glory in being led by the Spirit of God even on the verge of making gross spiritual and administrative errors (87). In the same vein, Oshun (2017) lamented the deplorable state of Church leaders’ behaviour in Nigeria saying that “Church Leadership” has brought disrepute into the body of Christ and to His name by getting involved in actions that are unthinkable, unmentionable and unprintable (5).

Igbari (2021), in his work, *Jesus’ Model of Leadership and the Integrity of Church Leaders in Nigeria* cited Sule’s position in an open letter to the Nigerian Church in the year 2009, in which he lamented that:



some Christians have been disillusioned with the Nigeria church because all is not well with the Nigerian church due to an imbalanced relationship between the “sheep and shepherd,” lack of accountability and responsibility, lack of unity in the church, teaching of compromised, adulterated and unwholesome doctrines and the lack of social justice (295).

Igbari (2021) declares that “when placed side by side, leaders in the Nigerian churches have not measured up to the model of Jesus Christ by all standards.” (295) He notes that “the way some leaders of the Church in Nigeria use their tongues is another cause of concern when considering speech and communications integrity. It has been observed that placing curses on followers who do not agree with these leaders has become rampant.” (294) He concludes that “the atrocities of church leaders that daily confront Christians in Nigeria is an indication that many church leaders have not had personal encounter with the leadership model of Jesus. Not only that, many of these leaders have not internalized the teachings of Jesus on how to lead God’s people but have fallen into integrity destroying lifestyles.

Oderinde (2014: 74) avers, “there are several dimensions of this seeming loss of integrity among church leaders today.” Oderinde (2014) argues that it ranges from misconducts relating to issues of abuses of position which has to do with the minister making use of his privileged position for his own end; counseling abuses which has to do with the inability of the minister of God to keep to counseling ethics; financial misconducts which relates to a minister’s inability to handle corporate money transparently, the unjust and ungodly ways some ministers employed in order to make money, sexual misconducts which relates to improper handling of their relationship with opposite sex and the improper occult means some have adopted in an attempt to get the power needed for ministry. Oderinde (2014: 74) opines that “the church could not perform its function to the society simply because most of the ministers have failed to uphold their integrity. Many have fallen and disappointed the society while many make no difference between what is called sacred and the secular.”



Participants in Edmund Akanya's research on "The Extent of Adoption of the Servant Leadership Model in the Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion: A Case Study of Three Diocese" carried out on his doctoral degree of Ministry Dissertation, in Asbury Theological Seminary noted that most of those in positions of leadership in the three chosen dioceses do not possess the requisite ability and skill to provide quality and exemplary leadership to their followers. It was the view of participants that materialism, unfaithfulness, and lack of accountability are at variance with servant leadership. Unfortunately, these traits characterize the visible activities of some of the leaders. The respondents claimed that some of these leaders are falling prey "to the get-rich-quick syndrome popular with the prosperity gospels, thereby adapting some sharp and unwholesome practices in dealing with church finances." These unwholesome practices of some Christian leaders are not different from what prevails within the larger society where our politicians are being daily accused of corruption, greed and avarice (88). These leaders and the led remain very shallow and ill-equipped to face spiritual challenges that are daily confronting them in the ministry rather exhibiting pomposity, ego and pride, lack of humility, fame-seeking, position conscious, selfishness, and competitiveness which are character traits inhibiting the practice of servant leadership model (Akanya 89).

Oladimeji (2019) observes that the authority of most church leaders and pastors have become so intimidating to many in the pews. When these pastors are challenged, one of the things they say is that they are the spiritual head of the church quoting bible passages like, "Touch not my anointed, and do my prophets no harm." He notes that today the record shows that some Nigerian pastors have used their pastoral offices to influence people into immoral affairs and sexual perversion. He writes:

The misappropriation of Scriptures for the benefit of the person or the persons quoting them is one of the hallmarks of the recent Nigerian religious equation. The lack of contentment among pastors has impacted many of their parishioners to the extent that greed has been encouraged as a sign of looking forward to financial breakthroughs... Greed has become the basis for some of the



reasons for the leaders in the church to resort to control and manipulation of God's people in Nigeria. Preachers today in Nigeria have promoted greed in different dimensions and forms. The titles of church special programs indicate they are based on greed, revenge, and fear. The constant competition among church leaders about the type of cars they drive and those who use first class on every flight and those who are able to buy private jets. They also have members who have been made to think that the material blessings they have are the yardstick for measuring the favour of God and their spiritual lives. Many pastors have continued to fan this flame of vanity among their members (Oladimeji, 2019: 88)

In Nigeria, leadership positions and leadership responsibilities mostly do not correspond, a situation which justifies William Faulkner's claim that "that which is destroying the Church is not the outward groping of those within it or the inward groping of those without, but the professionals who control it and who have removed the bells from its steeples". In short, there are many leadership challenges facing the Church in Nigeria today which need prompt attention. On one hand are the many lapses at the top echelon which are daily brought to the notice of all and sundry via print and news media. This consists of increased and nagging emphasis on materialism which has impinged negatively on the value system of the society and ethical crises characterized by sexual scandals and abuses, relational indiscipline, financial irregularities, etc. On the other hand, is an increasingly disproportionate relationship between the claim of spirituality and actual demonstration of godliness among professing believers, a situation which pointedly reflects inadequacies in the spiritual nurture and guidance offered by the leadership. There is also the problem of spiritual abuse in which members are spiritually abused using "mind-control, thought reform, coercion, manipulation, deception, legalism, authoritarianism, guilt trips, judgementalism, a holier-than-thou attitude, and a "we are right and everyone else is wrong" attitude, through the promotion of extra-biblical rules and standards in a legalistic fashion and equate them as



doctrine or at least as absolutes of the Bible, coming directly from God, with salvation and/or spirituality in jeopardy if they are not followed.”

God’s Judgement of the Shepherds of Israel: Textual and Literary Analysis of Ezekiel 34: 1-10

According to Block (1998: 273), “Ezekiel 34 is a self-contained literary unit bounded by the word-event formula in v. 1 and a modified version of the recognition formula in vv. 30–31, followed by a thematic conclusion and sealed with the divine signatory formula.” In other words, the whole chapter under consideration may be perceived as a single literary unit. Indeed, the unit contains important formulae that serve a pivotal role in highlighting it as divine speech and focusing the audience on the speaker (Block, 1998: 273). For instance, *כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל* “Thus says (or declares) the Sovereign Lord,” which is an example of citation formula, appears five times (vv. 2, 10, 11, 17, 20); the signatory formula, *נְאֻם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל*, “the declaration of the Lord Yahweh,” four times (vv. 8, 15, 30, 31); *שִׁמְעוּ אֶת-דְּבַר יְהוָה* “Hear the word of Yahweh,” is the summons to listen appears twice (in vv. 7, 9); the recognition formula, *וְיָדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה*, “And they will know that I am Yahweh,” twice (vv. 27, 30); the divine self-introduction formula, *אֲנִי יְהוָה*, “I am Yahweh,” once (v. 24) (Block, 1998: 273). There are shifts in the formulaic characteristics in analysing the textual structure as in the tone and content of Ezekiel 34 (Block, 1998: 274). As such, it can be said that after the preamble (v. 1), the oracle proper divides into three parts approximately equal in length: (a) the announcement of deliverance (vv. 2–10); (b) the nature of the deliverance (vv. 11–22); (c) the goal of the deliverance (vv. 23–31). (Block, 1998: 274).

Block (1998) recognises the first part to be more of independent woe oracle directed against the rulers of Israel. This segment divides naturally into two parts, which in style and tone represent a formal accusation (vv. 2–6) and an announcement of judgment (vv. 7–10), respectively, elements typical of woe oracles. However, its location forces the reader to interpret this segment within its present literary framework. The second panel focuses entirely on Yahweh and his salvific



activity on behalf of his flock (Block, 1998: 274). Block (1998: 274) argues that the text of Ezekiel displays strong semantic and formal links with Jer. 23:1–6, stating that:

The linkages in theme and structure, style, and diction are too numerous and too specific to be accidental, and their distribution throughout Ezek. 34 may support the unitary interpretation of the latter. Ezekiel seems to have had Jeremiah's oracle before him and presented his "Shepherd Address" as an exposition of his contemporary's prophecy. But his adherence to Jeremiah is not slavish.

It can be concluded that the primary concern of Ezekiel 34 is not centred on the dispositions of wicked shepherds, but the relationship of the Good Shepherd and his flock. It serves a paradigmatic function, announcing the re-establishment of Yahweh's kingship over his people and highlighting his role in Israel's restoration (Block, 1998: 274).

Accusation and Reprobation of the Shepherd of Israel (Ezek. 34: 1-2)

A careful perusal of pre-exilic historiography of Israel reveals that the dispositions of shepherds of Israel determined the nation's destiny. In this regard, the exilic debacles were occasioned by bad leadership that continually disregarded the Torah and evoked YAHWEH's anger towards his people. In the prophetic literature, the oracles of Ezekiel focused, among many other things, on the defects of pre-exilic leaders ("shepherds") of Israel, which ultimately led to the humiliating exile for the people. Exegetical studies of the Prophetic literature reveals Ezekiel's attitude toward the leadership of Israel. It shows a nexus between the attitudes of the various leadership groups and the welfare of the Jewish nation - those singled out for reproach in Ezekiel's critique of the past are marginalised in YAHWEH's plan for the future, while those who escaped blames are assigned higher positions of honour and responsibilities" (Duguid 1-2). Such was the harsh proclamation of judgement and a clear indication of YAHWEH's reprobation of the shepherds: "I will require their deeds upon their heads" (Ezek. 9:10).



In Ezekiel 34: 1-10, we find a heavily rhetorical language unveiling the reprobation of YAHWEH towards the shepherds of Israel. The shepherd-kings of the Davidic dynasty were indicted for being irresponsible shepherds, who by their ineptitude caused Israel to go to exile in Babylon (vv.3-6; Jer. 23:1; 50: 6). YAHWEH's response to the crisis of the flock in exile is twofold. YAHWEH's major attention is given to the rescue of the flock, which royal neglect has jeopardised. "YHWH will act as a proper and responsible shepherd to recover the flock" (Brueggemann, 1997: 260). Secondly, YAHWEH's disposition in the prophetic oracles of Ezekiel underscores the all-important place of shepherd-leaders and the need for genuine and humane empathy in leadership (Ezek. 34: 7-10 cf. 11-15). The relevance of this is that it aptly fits the current socio-religious climate of the Church in Nigeria.

דְּבַר יְהוָה, דְּבַר יְהוָה, and דְּבַר יְהוָה - The construct phrase דְּבַר יְהוָה - the word of the Lord - in this verse is of particular theological significance to the message passed in Ezekiel 34: 1-10. In Old Testament understanding, דְּבַר יְהוָה refers to a message from or about God. The use of דְּבַר יְהוָה offers clear evidence of an established theological conviction that "Israel's God is a God who speaks". The phrase דְּבַר יְהוָה authenticates the prophetic speeches that follow. This formula דְּבַר יְהוָה אֵלַי לְאָמַר punctuates the fact that God was ready, as part of his restoration package, to tackle the trouble which arises from the lack of good leadership in Israel (Jack 119).

The Selfishness and Negligence of the Shepherds of Israel (Ezek. 34:3-4)

אָתְּהַחֲלֹב תֹּאכְלֻם וְאֶת־הַחֶמֶץ תִּלְכְּשׁוּ הַבְּרִיאָה תִּזְבְּחוּ הַצֹּאן לֹא תִרְעֹוּ
אָתְּהַחֲלֹב is the first verb in this verse 3. תֹּאכְלֻם is the imperfect second person masculine plural of the verb אָכַל meaning "eat, consume or devour" which appears in both non-ritual and ritual contexts, where either humans, beasts, or inanimate objects are its subject. In verse 3, Ezekiel charges the rulers with three crimes of commission. First, they consume the fat of the flock. Conventionally, eating the fat of the sheep is not an exploitative act, but here it is made to look like a robbery. Second, the shepherds fleece the flock. This is natural in a pastoral economy, but



Ezekiel's figure assumes the forceful removal of wool, making it look like the sheep are left naked before the elements. Third, they butcher the fatlings (*habbērî'â*). The verb *zābah* often denotes the slaughter of a sacrificial animal, especially for the *zēbah*, "sacrificial" meal. But here the verb functions simply as a synonym for *tābah*, without any religious overtones. Shepherds do raise sheep for their mutton, but in this metaphorical context, such slaughter represents the most blatant violation of the Shepherd's role, presumably judicial murder (cf. 7:23; 9:9; etc.). The triad of accusations concludes with a reiteration of the general charge in v. 2. The rulers have taken excellent care of themselves, but they have not cared for the flock (Block, 1998: 278).

According to Walther, Verse 4 states the crimes of omission of the shepherds of Israel which reflect a stratum of Israelite leaders representing the antithesis of responsible shepherds. First, they have shown no concern for the physical health of the flock. They have not strengthened (*hizzēq*) the weak (*nahēlôt*), healed (*rippē'*) the sick (*hōlâ*), or bound up (*hābaš*) the injured (*nišberet*). Second, they have shown no concern for the sheep that have left the flock. They have neither gone after the strays nor sought the lost. Instead of caring (*rā'â*) for the flock, the shepherds have ruled over them with harshness (*hāzēqâ*) and brutality (*perek*) (Block, 1998: 279). The office of a shepherd is represented in this verse as a very onerous and responsible vocation, requiring tireless vigilance and readiness for sacrifice. Yet the shepherds of Israel have not only failed to show self-sacrifice in protecting and providing for those in need of their care, but have violently trodden down the stronger sheep, which would otherwise be the pride of the flock, i.e. they have atrociously overworked them and taken advantage of them for their own profit (Walther 390).

The Consequent Collapse of the State of Israel Resulting from Evil Leadership (Ezek. 34:5-6)

Block (1998) avers that, verses 5 and 6 describe the disastrous effects of the irresponsible conduct of the leaders. He opines that, "to have leaders like this is worse than being shepherdless." Scattered, the sheep roam



about the mountains and high hills, defenceless prey for all the wild animals (תִּיתָ הַשְּׂדֵה). The parallelism of the final two lines summarises the bitter fate of the nation: there is no one to seek the scattered sheep. The insertion of my flock (צֹאֲנִי) – an expression of ownership and endearment in verse 6 shows Yahweh’s and the prophet’s primary concern. The abused sheep are Yahweh’s flock, not the leaders’. Theirs was a delegated authority argues Block (1998), and they would answer to him for the manner in which they have exercised leadership. This clearly indicates that finally, after what seems to have been an endless series of judgmental pronouncements against his nation, a change in the divine disposition is evident. Jerusalem has fallen and her population is dispersed, but Yahweh, the divine Shepherd, has not forgotten his people (Block, 1998: 282).

The Pains Associated with the Collapse of the State of Israel Due to Evil Leadership (Ezekiel 34:5-6)

The verb נִתְפָּצְצָה is an imperfect 3rd person feminine plural derived from פָּצַח the root word for “to dash in pieces, to disperse, cast (abroad), scatter (abroad), and spread abroad.” The flock was dispersed and scattered abroad. The inseparable preposition adverb of negation מִבְּלִי a formation of מִן meaning “because of, by (reason of), and בְּלִי meaning “failure, nothing, without, because not, as long as, for lack of,” marks the object which is the verb **qal** participle masculine singular רֹעֶה from the root רָעָה “to tend or graze a flock, to rule, to associate with (as a friend), keep company with. The definite article noun masculine הַשְּׂדֵה means “the country, field, ground, land, wild” (Hinson, 1990: 102). A working translation of the verse is given thus: ‘and they were scattered abroad for lack of shepherds they became food to all wild beast, and they were scattered’. Verse 6 concludes the flow of thought which is rendered: ‘my flock wander on all the mountains and on high hills on the face of the earth my flock scatter and none seek for them and none search for them.’

The Punishment of God for the False Shepherds of Israel (Ezekiel 34:7-10)



The formula *לָכֵן רָעִים שָׁמְעוּ אֶת־דְּבַר יְהוָה* used in this text is a declaration of divine judgement on the leaders of the house of Israel. It starts with the adverb *לָכֵן* meaning “therefore” which in the prophetic books frequently introduces a divine declaration or command. The particle *לָכֵן* usually forms the transition in prophetic judgment speeches from the discussion to the declaration. ‘Therefore shepherds hear the word of Yahweh’, verse 8 opens with the oath formula *חַי־אֲנִי נְאֻם אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה*. The construct word *חַי־אֲנִי* derived from *חַי* is an adjective meaning “alive or living” and first person singular personal pronoun *אֲנִי* meaning “I, my, myself” used to express a true present or liveliness. “I am alive” declares the Sovereign Lord, surely because my flock became a prey and became food for every beast of the field because no shepherd cared for my flock, the shepherds fed themselves and my flock they did not feed’ (Kohn 2003). Verse 8 reiterates the crisis of the people and presents Yahweh’s complaint about the desperate condition of his flock; they have become prey (*בָּזֵי*) and food (*’oklâ*) for all the wild animals. Responsibilities for the flock placed on the shoulders of the shepherds have been neglected. Having been appointed by Yahweh to care for his flock, they have exploited the office for personal gain (Jeremiah 88).

Verse 9 - *לָכֵן הָרָעִים שָׁמְעוּ דְבַר־יְהוָה*: - This is a repetition of verse 7 which is translated ‘Therefore, the shepherds hear word of Yahweh.’ The two verses are a twofold appeal to hear the divine declaration (vv. 7, 9) which leads the reader to expect an announcement of judgment upon the irresponsible rulers (Jack 122).

Verse 10 begins with another prophetic formula - *כֹּה־עַמֹּר אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה כֹּה* is an adverb meaning “thus, now, here”, acting as a marker of a transition in a discourse or sentence, as a prompter of attention focusing on content that will follow. The emphatic particle *הִנְנִי* translated “behold” is an interjection and draws special attention to what the Lord, who is the subject, is about to declare (Hengstenberg, 1923: 216). It specifies that Yahweh will require his sheep from the hand of the wicked leaders. In this case Yahweh will hold the criminal shepherds accountable for the fate of the flock. He will sack them from feeding the sheep as declared in *וְהִשְׁבַּתִּים מִרְעוֹת צֹאן* - by sacking them they will no longer feed themselves



off the flock as indicated in the expression *וְלֹא־יִרְעוּ עִוֹד* particularly *וְלֹא־יִרְעוּ* marked by the negative particle *לֹא*. God will also deliver his flock as announced thus: *וְהַצַּלְתִּי צֹאֲנֵי מִפִּיהֶם וְלֹא־תִהְיֶינָה לָהֶם לְאֻכְלָהּ* – they will “be rescued or saved” (Hinson, 1990: 312)

A working translation of verse 10 will then read thus: “Thus says the Sovereign Lord behold I am against the shepherds and I will require my flock from their hand and I will stop them from tendering the flock and not feed again the shepherds themselves for I will rescue my flock from their mouths and no longer will they be food to them’. Since the shepherds, who had been appointed by Yahweh to care for his sheep, have not only neglected their duty but turned into ravenous wolves themselves, Yahweh is compelled to intervene and rescue (*hiṣṣîl*) his sheep from their jaws. For the rulers this is an announcement of judgment, but for the flock it is a message of hope (Block, 1998: 289).

Christian Bodies and the Churches in Nigeria in the Context of Ezekiel 34:1-10

Christianity in Nigeria no doubt has suffered many irreparable damages due to the activities of her leaders mostly in the 21st century. Chris Irekamba and Nkechi Onyedika-Ugoeze (2019, July, 7) ask:

Both social and traditional media are agog with disturbing stories of men of God engaging in illicit sexual affairs and occult practices. And there seems to be no end to it, as the menace keeps rearing its ugly head in different forms. This is aside other alarming activities as ritual killings, hypnotizing their members, false miracles, intimidating their members with false prophecies, robbery and 419, among other unprintable things discovered to be going on in some churches (2023, March 23: 97).

Why are these happening in the House of God? What are the bodies constituted to enhance collaboration, regulations and supervision of churches doing to curb these excesses? Is there anything the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), Organization of African Indigenous Churches (OIC), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), and the



Evangelical Church Wining All/ Fellowship of Churches of Christ in Nigeria can do to save the Church from these scandals?

These views show that there is a lacuna to be filled between leadership positions and leadership roles in Nigeria. Oladimeji (2019: 163) submits that “in order to bring about the necessary change from corruption to fidelity there is a major work to be done in leadership.”

As the assembly of God’s people, the Church recognises the need for effective and godly leadership; hence individuals are selected or elected to offer guidance and guardianship to the believers. This comes in form of ordained and lay ministries of the Church. Interestingly, leaders are increasingly affirming authority over the Church, even when they do not always agree about its appearance or how it should be exercised. Similarly, Christian communities, especially local Churches, are constantly faced with opportunities and challenges resulting from societal shifts and changes. In contemporary times, the dominant default method for responding to these changes has been to defer to and rely upon the expertise and professional leadership of the Church. This happens because modern Churches have generally accepted this position under the influence of cultural perspective on leadership, which views the pastor as the expert or professional leader of the Church. However, more recently, questions about this cultural position on Church leaders have come from different perspectives (Kinnison, 2010: 2). Cornel West opines that “the major challenge is the need to generate new leadership...we need leaders...who can situate themselves within a larger historical narrative of this country and world, who can grasp the complex dynamics of our peoplehood and imagine a future grounded in the best of our past yet attuned to the frightening obstacles that now perplex us” (21-25).

In “Feeding and Leading of Shepherds”, Crissman (2005) demonstrates a good grasp of background information of the context as helpful in pastoral hermeneutics. Taking his example from Ezekiel 34:1-31, he sees Ezekiel 34 as a complete exegetical unit with two main divisions, vv 1 -16 and vv 17 – 31. His illustration concentrates on the historical and political context of the last days of the Judean monarchy



when it was besieged and deported to Babylon over their covenant infidelity. He sees the text situated “within an indicative section of leadership irresponsibility, where the prophet employs the shepherd metaphor and sheep to address the audience. He further said that these shepherds (kings and rulers) failed in their responsibilities in leading, guiding, and protecting Israel. Instead, they devoted much energy to exploiting the sheep; they were selfish, harsh, and brutal. These kings were supposed to lead all of Israel with a “sense of compassion, love, care, responsibility and accountability” (23-25).

To Iain, the condemnation of the shepherds is for self-interest, oppression of the people and a lack of concern for the commonwealth of Israel (Duguid 266). Constable (2004) observes that God pronounced judgment on them for three reasons. First, they fed themselves rather than the people; they were selfish. They were more interested in providing for themselves than for the people whom God had placed in their care (cf. John 10:11-13; 21:15-17). They exploited their followers (267).

Specifically, these unfaithful shepherds ate the best parts of the sacrifices rather than offering them to God (cf. 1 Sam. 2:12-17). They used sheep’s wool to make clothing for themselves rather than providing these animals as sacrifices to God (Constable, 2004: 267). Second, they slaughtered them rather than feeding God’s sheep; they were oppressive. They had not restored those that needed restoring nor sought those that had wandered away and needed finding. They had dominated God’s flock rather than providing loving, self-sacrificial leadership. The primary responsibility of a leader is to care for the needs of those he leads, even if this requires sacrificing his desires (Constable, 2004: 267). Third, the rulers allowed the people to scatter over the earth instead of keeping them safely together; they were negligent. The Israelites scattered because they lacked leadership and became prey for the enemies of God’s flock. They wandered everywhere, but there was no one to seek them out (cf. Matt. 9:36; John 10:12-13) (Constable, 2004: 268).



Commenting on the role performed by a shepherd, Vancil (1992) observes, “The principal task of the shepherd is to see that the animal found enough food and water (cf. Psalm 23), and he was important that he guards the sheep since they were easy prey for wild animals (1 Samuel 17:34-35; Amos 3:12). (1187). Cachia (1997:27) agrees with Vancil (1992) when he states, “The shepherd was expected to look after the flock under his responsibility and provide for it. He was to render service and protection to his flock, which includes the concern for providing food and water, refuge and security - all these entailed leadership roles of the shepherd.” Leadership, therefore, encapsulates the essential functional role of the shepherd. However, Cachia (1997: 27) notes further that the shepherd not only caters for the flock; he also depends on the flock for living, deriving nourishment and sustenance for himself and his family. Hence, there exists an interdependence relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. This relationship, therefore, “created a vital and existential interdependence between the shepherd and the sheep, and interdependence which develop into a relationship of love and dedication of the shepherd and the sheep” (Cachia, 1997: 28). Thus, it is pertinent to note that this loving relationship demanded the shepherd to constantly lead the sheep to wherever he could find the excellent pasture daily and make sure they were safe back to the sheepfold. The sheep’s safety is paramount; and calls for uncompromising commitment, vigilance, and inordinate passion on the part of the shepherd to endanger his life for the sheep’s sake, be it during the night or daytime. This understanding of the daily routine of taking good care of his sheep was later taken over in the social and religious life of the people of Israel. In the final submission, Cachia (1997) notes that Old Testament presents God as the only absolute, genuine, and supreme shepherd of his people, Israel. The key Hebrew word used in all of the passages where God is depicted as a shepherd is (*ro’eh*). See Ps. 28:9; Isa. 40:10; Jer. 31:9b-10; Ezek.34:13-16; Hos. 4:16; Mic.7:14, and Zech.11:7, 9. The verb (*ra’ah*) takes God as its subject where God is succinctly compared as a shepherd (Cachia, 1997: 42). Laniak (2012: 11) points out that God’s relationship with Israel - a relationship analogous to the relationship between a



shepherd and his sheep - is a covenant relationship. God as the shepherd of Israel thus implies that God is the “ultimate provider, protector, and guide of his sheep.

Hence, the description of God as the shepherd of his people - Israel, in the Old Testament, is a divine obligation on God’s part to always serve as Israel’s guidance, provider, and leader who knows the needs of his people and adequately made provisions. The description also connotes the covenantal relationship fostered by Israel’s continual allegiance to God at all times. On this note, Cachia (1997: 45) submits that God performs six distinct, interrelated foundational roles in God Israel’s shepherding metaphor, and these are: leading, feeding, guarding-presence, gathering-searching, delivering-judging, tenderness-healing, and knowing-alliance.

The Roles of Christian Organisations in Promoting Godly Christian Leadership in Nigeria

The task of developing selfless Christian leadership in any context is a herculean task. However, it is not a gainsaying to assert that the Christian organisations have so much to do in this regard. First, Christian organisations have the job of promoting and exhibiting spiritual values and norms that are templates for church leaders. There have been attempts to seek, emulate, and imbibe the social, personal and domestic qualities of selfless leaders into the teeming youth populations within the organisations. This is chiefly done through seminars, conferences, and important religious meetings over the years.

Also, Christian organisations have taken it upon themselves to offer spiritual guidance and support to their leaders through prayers, spiritual retreats and intercessions. It is agreed that “the place of prayers cannot be underestimated as guidance comes from God. Faith and trust in God encourage leaders and push their resolves to be selfless and visionary in their endeavours” (Mala and Akanbi, 2012: 430).

On several occasions, those superintending in different Christian denominations have used various passages of the Bible to admonish local leaders and administrators under them on the need to be selfless



and ensure the spiritual and physical prosperity of their followers. In fact, we have cases of Christian organisations partnering with different governmental and non-governmental agencies to float conferences targeted at raising the next generation of leaders who are selfless and visionary both for the Church and the state in Lagos.

Conclusion

In the light of the prevailing situation in Nigeria in the 21st century, Church leaders with shepherd heart are greatly needed to shepherd Christ's flock, "to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict the divine principles of godly leadership" (Titus 1:9), for "many rebellious men, empty talkers, and deceivers ... who must be silenced" (Titus 1:10-11) had crept into the Church, "savage wolves ... not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29 cf. Jude 4-13; 2Pet 2:1). It can be argued that we are "in the last days" (2 Tim. 3:1), and men are now "lovers of self, lovers of money ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Tim 3:2-4). Against this background, this paper conducted a rhetorical analysis of the shepherd motif in Ezekiel 34:1-10 in relation to church leadership in Nigeria. Christian leaders must be more outspoken against wrong leadership, corruption, and abuse of powers among secular and spiritual leaders. In recent times, Leaders of the orthodox, mainline and New Generational Churches have openly and jointly condemned the selfishness of the contemporary leaders just as Yahweh did in Ezekiel 34. In fact, it may be said that this attitude of raising a prophetic cry against social injustice and inequality is entrenched among leaders of Christian organisations on Lagos Island. Various Christian organisations have also attempted to lend their voices against wrong leadership, corruption, and abuse of power both in the ecclesia and the state. This is often done in the spirit of love with the intent of developing the much-needed selfless character in the existing and emerging leaders in the nation and the church. In spite of this, it is believed that Christian organisations have to do more even as Nigeria approaches another election year, 2023.

There is need for the Church to promote moral recovery and transformative values among her rank and file. The intention of God



within the scope of the Scriptures is for the Church to be the salt and light of the world. Salt in terms of fighting against corruption and various abuses; light in terms of being a guide and template to the outside world. Therefore, it is crucial that the Church through her various spiritual programmes focuses on moral recovery through intentional values which is Biblical based (Okunoye, n.d.: 411). Okunoye (n.d.) further argues that the church must raise godly shepherd leaders by organising consistent and in-depth bible studies for would-be leaders and current leaders on subjects of justice, fair play, righteousness and moral disciple, hard work and extravagance, decision-making by consensus, accountability and openness, communal spirit, honesty and sincerity, love through sacrificial living and giving- all the portrait selfless leadership (411).

Recommendations

1. The different Christian denominations should encourage their Provinces, Conferences, Dioceses, local churches or parishes to organise seminars and workshops for their ministers and church leaders on leadership from the biblical perspective. Resource persons should be engaged, and they should be those who have a vast knowledge of leadership development and administrative skills. The workshops or seminars should focus on the challenges Christians face in leadership, whether secular or spiritual in the 21st century. The church must therefore do her path in providing an educational platform for the socio-religious transformation of leaders and would-be leaders in Nigeria.
2. The various Christian blocks (CAN, CSN, OIC, CCN PFN, ECWA/FCCN) should be more proactive in mediating and regulating the affairs of the different denominations in affiliation with them.
3. Adequate spiritual, pastoral formation and theological education should be given to those accepted into the ordained ministry.
4. The various Christian denominations in Nigeria should continually intercede for their leaders and also ensure that all



members of their pastoral force give considerable attention to their spiritual and secular developments. They should further ensure that the clerics attend periodic training workshops, seminars, retreat and the annual clergy school.

5. Church organizations, denominations or ministries should establish training centres and seminaries where church leaders are exposed to the essence of their duties as shepherds of God's flock.

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