

Prophecy and State Leadership in Nigeria: The Nathan – David Experience

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Abstract

Over the years, the Church has been regarded as the conscience of the society. In becoming the conscience of the society, there is an expectation. Within the Church's disposition, the prophetic arm is highly bequeathed with the onerous task of being the conscience of the society. However, it is the position of this paper that this responsibility is rather dwindling as the days go by. Meanwhile, there is an unimaginable growth of prophecy in the society today yet the impact of its conscience role in the society is quite dim and unnoticed. The leadership class in our society is having a field day in evil and immorality. In the face of this unfortunate situation, this paper is poised to recommend an aspect of religious machinery that is capable of sanitizing the society, by giving direction to our leaders. This is prophecy using the Nathan – David saga as a framework. Being a biblical and sociological study, the researcher will adopt the basic biblical tools such as historical and textual criticisms and of course some sociological criticisms.

Introduction

When the socio-political life of any people is shattered because of religious decline, what comes into the mind of vast majority is “where are the prophets of the time? When there seems to be a very tough ecological and environmental catastrophe and mayhem, being unleashed upon man the whereabouts of the prophets of the time will always be sought for. No doubt, prophecy and prophets are quite indispensable. Prophecy had always stood conspicuously in the religious and socio-political life of the Israelites. Supporting this Okwueze (2003:34) opines that it is a movement, which forms a very remarkable phenomenon in the moral life of Israel.

Prophecy becomes an office of the prophets. The sacerdotal order was originally the instrument by which the members of the Jewish theocracy were taught and governed in spirit. Teaching by act and teaching by word were alike their task. During the time of the Judges, the priesthood sank into a state of degeneracy and the people were no longer affected by the acted lessons of the enigmatic warnings and exhortations. Under these circumstances a new moral power was evoked – the Prophetic Order.

Samuel, himself a Levite of the family of Kohath and almost a priest was the instrument used at once for affecting a reform in the sacerdotal order and for giving the prophets a position of importance, which they had never before held. In this line of thought Okwueze (2003:34), argues that “invariably prophecy arose in the Old Testament Israel as a major response to the evils of that society especially during the advanced days of the monarchy (2003:34). According to him, the monarchy itself at a stage became a problem to morality. This followed largely from the inordinate ways most kings of Israel conducted Israel’s affairs. This is seen apparently in the relationship between the kings and their subjects, or more generally speaking in the relationship between the rich and the poor in Israel. This in essence sparked of prophecy.

It is important to notice that prophets first came to a prominence in Israel when kings had been appointed. The kings were chosen to lead Israel in the service of God, but very often they turned aside from doing his will and used their authority for their own pleasure and gain (Hinson; 1990:102). The prophets were men who spoke up in God's name at such times, to rebuke the kings and to point out the way, which God wanted them to go. They were also guides and counselors to the king, when he wished to know what God wanted him to do.

The people of Israel had become a nation. They had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt. They had been given the law. They were committed to a life of obedience to God and a religion, which constantly reminded them of their dependence on God's forgiveness and mercy. But they were constantly falling down on their calling with idol-worship, civil war, immorality, and complacency, the nation needed to be recalled again to the whole point of their existence. The prophets were men raised up by God to do just this- to call the people back to God and his way (Motyer; 1992:370).

The ordinary Hebrew word for prophet is "*nabi*" derived from a verb signifying "to bubble forth" like a fountain; hence the word means one who announces or pours forth the declarations of God. Apparently the Hebrew word "*nabi*" is related to the Akkadian "*nabu*" which means "to call, announce" there is some uncertainty, however, as to whether the Hebrew has an active meaning ("caller", announcer") or a passive meaning (one who is called). In either case the word points to the prophet's role as the messenger of God (Anderson; 1986:226).

The Hebrew Prophet was not merely, as the word commonly implies, a man enlightened by God to foretell events; he was the interpreter and supernaturally enlightened herald sent by Yahweh to communicate His will and designs to Israel. His mission consisted in preaching as well as in foretelling. He had to maintain and develop the knowledge of the Old Law among the Chosen People, lead them back when they strayed, and gradually prepare the way for the new kingdom of God, which the messiah

was to establish on earth. Prophecy, in general, signifies the supernatural message of the Prophet, and more especially, from custom, the predictive element of the prophetic message (www.newadvent.org/bible).

The English word comes from the Greek *prophetes* (προφητης), which signifies in classical Greek one who speaks for another, specially one speaks for a god and so interprets his will to man, hence its essential meaning is interpreter (Smith;2006:534). The use of the word in its modern sense as 'one who predicts' is post-classical.

The word *nabî'* expresses more especially a function. The two most usual synonyms *ro'éeh* and *hozéh* emphasize more clearly the special source of the prophetic [knowledge](#), the vision, that is, the [Divine revelation](#) or inspiration. Both have almost the same meaning; *hozéh* is employed, however, much more frequently in poetical language and almost always in connection with a [supernatural](#) vision, whereas *râ'ah*, of which *ro'éh* is the participle, is the usual word for to see in any manner.

The compiler of the first book of Kings informs us that before his time *ro'éh* was used where *nabî'* was then employed. *Hozéh* is found much more frequently from the days of Amos. There were other less specific or more unusual terms employed, the meaning of which is clear, such as, messenger of [God](#), man of [God](#), servant of [God](#), man of the spirit, or inspired man, etc. It is only rarely, and at a later period, that prophecy is called *nebû'ah*, a cognate of *nabî'*; more ordinarily we find *hazôn*, vision, or word of [God](#), [oracle](#) (ne um) of [Yahweh](#), etc (www.newadvent.org/bible).

Its etymology is uncertain. According to many recent critics, the root *nabî*, not employed in Hebrew, signified to speak enthusiastically, "to utter cries, and make more or less wild gestures", like the [pagan](#) mantics. Judging from a comparative examination of the cognate words in Hebrew and the other [Semitic](#) tongues, it is at least equally probable that the original meaning was merely: to speak, to utter words. The historic meaning of *nabî'* established by biblical usage is "interpreter and

mouthpiece of [God](#)". This is forcibly illustrated by the passage, where Moses, excusing himself from speaking to [Pharaoh](#) on account of his embarrassment of speech, was answered by [Yahweh](#): "Behold I have appointed thee the [God](#) of [Pharaoh](#): and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet. Thou shalt speak to him all that I command thee; and he shall speak to [Pharaoh](#), that he let the [children of Israel](#) go out of his land" ([Exodus 7:1-2](#)). Moses plays towards the King of [Egypt](#) the role of [God](#), inspiring what is to be uttered, and Aaron is the prophet, his mouthpiece, transmitting the inspired message he shall receive.

The thought that prophets are simply there to speak and venture in the future has become almost conventional and traditional. In this sense, one who has the ability to venture into the future gets the designation prophet. However, this is not incorrect in itself but is not essentially everything about prophets and prophecy.

There is another dimension of prophecy, which has Political influences and this is often overlooked. Moses received as commission to demand the release of Israel by Pharaoh (Exo. 6:11; 9: 13). Isaiah confronted King Ahaz and advised Hezekiah (Isa. 7:37). Jeremiah was commanded to appear before the king at different times (Jer. 22:1; 34: 2; 37:7) Daniel appeared before Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar (Dan. 2:19; 25; 5:17). Amos' message reached the king through one of his ministers (Amos 5:15-17). Nathan was to appear before David (2 Sam. 12). This we now turn to using Nathan-David saga as a case study.

The Historical Background of the Experience

David has become king of both Judah and Israel. He has in large measure, consolidated his kingdom. He has taken Jebus and made it his capital city, renaming it Jerusalem. He has built his palace and given thought to building a temple (a plan God significantly revises). He has subjected most of Israel's neighboring nations. He has done battle with the Ammonites and prevailed, but he has not yet completely defeated them. The Ammonites have retreated to the royal city of Rabbah, and as the

time for war (spring) approaches, David sends all Israel, led by Joab, to besiege the city and to bring about its surrender.

David has chosen not to endure the rigors of camping in the open field, outside the city. He has chosen rather to remain in Jerusalem. Sleeping late, David rises from his bed as others prepare to go to bed for the night. David strolls about the rooftop of his palace and happens to steal a look at a beautiful young woman bathing herself, perhaps ceremonially, in fulfillment of the law.

The story of the Ammonite-Armenian wars in 2 Sam. 10:1-10 and in 11:1 serves as the historical background to the David-Bathsheba-Uriah Narrative. In this background, the narrator begins with what the nation was going through at the time when David committed this sin. It was a period of war. David did not accompany his army. One afternoon after the rest period, he went to the palace roof and saw a woman bathing. He learns that she is Bathsheba, probably grand-daughter of his royal counselor Ahithophal and wife of one of his professional soldiers Uriah the Hittite. David committed adultery with her and she became pregnant.

At home in Jerusalem, instead of leading his troops in their military engagement, David fell into a tragically compromising situation.

I Chronicles omits this entire story as derogatory to David. The account not only shows David's sin to be adultery and murder, there is also an implied criticism of failure to go to battle with his army" (Wevers; 1984:153).

David, ever the man of action, sent to Joab requesting the presence of Uriah. Hertzberg (1964: 310) suggests that this was to remove doubts about paternity when the child was born. The Hittite came, David enquired about Joab and the army, and the progress of the battle. He told him to go home and wash his feet. This washing of feet according to Mckane (1963:229) refers perhaps to ritual ablution connected with release from the vows imposed on a soldier engaged in a campaign.

Meanwhile, Uriah had a high idea of the duties of a serving soldier and returned not to his own home but to the military quarters alleging that while the ark, Israel, and Judah were staying in tents and Joab and his army were encamped, it was not right for him to sleep with his wife. He stayed over a further night and the king entertained him. He left next day with a letter ordering Joab to put him in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so that he will be struck down and die. The intrigue duly succeeded, though at the cost of the lives of some of David's other soldiers, sent in with Uriah to lend the whole exercise credibility.

Bathsheba observed the customary mourning suitable in the circumstances, when the mourning was completed David sent for her and married her, and a son was born. Nevertheless, the thing David had done displeased the lord.

Nathan and the Parable

Though it lasted for a while, God still sent Nathan to David as a prophet to confront him with the evil that he the king had committed against Uriah and his family. The idea about marrying Bathsheba by David was to legitimize the evil. Nathan who has been a friend to David did not confront him in a very aggressive and raw manner. He has to come in through a parable in shepherd story. Such story was to drive the mission home knowing fully that David himself was a shepherd and knew the nitty-gritty of shepherding and having a pet lamb.

The author of the parable is God but the narrator in this passage is Nathan. The parable has three prophetic forms or divides. According to Anderson (1989:160), it consists of three main parts-the parable itself, which has a certain positive quality, the oracular threat and David's repentance. The information in these three sections is essential for this study. The story in 2 Sam. 11 is not fictitious. The event truly occurred. The narrator begins with what the nation was going through to introduce the time of the event or action and moved from there to narrate the parable.

The parable was a parabolic explanation revealing the evil act of what King David did to Uriah's wife that finally resulted in pregnancy. The narrator was wise and dynamic in his choice of words and in the method of delivering message. He did not present the parable as a king but as a rich man. He did not present the rest of the characters as subjects of the king but as a traveler and a poor man. Baba (2007:2) captured the intrigue in that parable when he opines that

one could see how a narrator used a parable to explain a true life violation of law, especially in the teaching of a guilty leader in judging himself, this is a perfect example of a narrator's act in narrative in the Old Testament that is much more available in virtually some of the ethnic groups in Nigeria.

The Prophet and his Challenging Power

Prophets in the Old Testament were men of diverse origins but they had some things in common. A prophet is a man called by God and equipped with the Holy Spirit for service. The act of prophecy is in two parts, a condemnation and commendation with a future hope. On one hand their work comprises forth-telling, which are forth-telling future related elements in form of telling people about the consequences in case they would not follow the forewarning and call for repentance. This second aspect of their ministry has comforting promises for anyone who confesses, repents and returns to the Lord. Such a person the Lord will not cast away forever. Sequel to this, the paper observes these salient three roles of prophets in Nathan and at such his prophetic voice was heard loud and clear to the point of recommending it to the contemporary prophets.

During the full-developed monarchy in Israel, during the time of David, kings were so powerful. In some culture up till

now kings have power of life and death in their mortal hands. The delay in Nathan visiting David from the time the evil was committed till when finally he went cannot be unconnected with the fear of what the king can do. However, in spite of such imminent danger and risk of losing his life and irrespective of King David's position and status, Nathan summoned courage and went to King David to deliver God's verdict and let him realize that he was the sinner.

Among many difficulties that face a servant is to challenge and or rebuke a superior leader or his master. On many occasions, there are tendencies to keep quiet when leaders are missing that mark but Nathan braved it, and was able to confront the King and told him his sins and the consequences. This is on the ground of the great convictions of all the genuine Old Testament Prophets that their allegiance was to no other except God who calls, sends and gives messages to them. Although, David was a king what he did was a violation of God's law, a disobedience to God and disobedience calls for rebuke.

Nathan spoke to King David with authority directly challenging and rebuking him not minding his status and position in the society as a King. Osei-Mensah (1990:18) observes that "when highly placed people in the society commit sin people keep quiet" he continued again "but when others who are not highly placed sin they are expelled and excluded from leadership forever" (1990:58). This was what Nathan opposed. He actually moved in the unconventional direction of rebuking the King and the highly placed people in the society when they sin.

Meanwhile, the methodology adopted by Nathan in discharging the prophetic role in the on going saga is also highly commendable and recommendable. He approached the King in a rather friendly manner. Apparently, Nathan and King David had been in relationship, which ordinarily would have prevented him from attending to his duties as a prophet to his friend King David. Clearing the cloud or doubt on whether the duo were in relationship, Hinson (1990:102) reveals that when David wanted to build a temple he first consulted with Nathan, and when

Nathan warned him that he should not build a temple, he obeyed (2 Sam. 7:1-7). They have been in relationship. Nathan was acting as a prophet, but he was also acting like a friend. Some who are very friendly usually think that being friendly means being non-condemning. A good friend does not let his friend continue on the path to his or her own destruction.

Nathan not being stopped or prevented by his long standing relationship with the King appeared to the King in a manner that implicated the King the more, rather than the Prophet directly indicting the King. Nathan brought a method that can stand the test of time in confronting the Kings and Leaders of our time. That was quite noble of him using the parable.

Contemporary Prophets and the Nigerian State Leadership

It is apparent in our society today that prophecy is thriving yet evil and vices are thriving especially among the leadership class. It becomes ironical that the proportion with which prophethood is growing is also the proportion at which evil grows in our country Nigeria. The question that comes to mind is simply “are there no genuine prophets who can confront the leaders and rebuke them of their evils as Nathan did to David? Even when such attempts were done, we find a very unkind and ill-mannered methodology being adopted that is rather aggressively confrontational.

There is no doubt that many people within the leadership class of our nation are simply doing what pleases them. The idea of whether what they are doing is right or wrong is no more considered. Prophets who are by implication sitting like Nathan are rather busy pursuing these men for prayers to enable them curry instant favour from them. Some Prophets today arrange for prayers for these corrupt leaders and kings not to rebuke them of their legion of evils but to ask God to release more blessings to them. This is highly orchestrated simply to earn a living from them. What an aberration!

“If biblical leadership will ever be attained in Nigeria, the Nigerian church leaders have a role to play as a voice of the Church” (Baba; 2007:5). Their role should center on challenging, rebuking erring leaders in the nation with wisdom irrespective of their position or status just as Prophet Nathan did in David-Bathsheba-Uriah narrative. The modern day Prophets should be prepared to have the challenging power like the prophets of the Old in consoling repentant erring leaders and not expelling them forever. This, the researcher feels among other things will bring a comprehensive solution to the problem of injustice, exploitation and other vices which go unchallenged in the life of the Nigerian leaders and in Nigerian society.

Conclusion

Prophecy is a very vital religious institution in the Old Testament era. More so, it is one of the Old Testament religious institutions, which went beyond the Old Testament into the New Testament and is continuing till this contemporary age. Message of prophecy had always been given by God and not man except for false prophets. Being a prophet was not essentially to earn a living.

Regrettably today in our society, we find Prophets who are just looking for their “daily bread”. Meanwhile, some Prophets are afraid of delivering their prophecy to the “big shots” in the society as a result, evil increase astronomically. It is therefore the position of this paper that Prophets should sit up and deliver their God-given messages no matter who is involved. However, that should be done in a polite manner just like Nathan did to King David.

The evil in our land may not abate if the Prophets keep quiet or comprise their God-given messages. There is a call to all the genuine Nigerian Prophets irrespective of their denominational affiliations to rise and discharge their duties effectively. With the Prophets in our society doing what they are called to do our Kings and leaders will have a course to rethink.

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