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The Prophet as a "Watchman" in Ezekiel 3:15-21 and its Implications for Contemporary Church Leaders in Nigeria

Abstract

Security is fundamental to social, economic and political stability of any nation. A powerful nation is known by her security architecture. Nations of the world vote huge amount of money annually for security of lives and property. This study examined the prophet as a Watchman who would be held accountable for the blood of his audience if he fails in his duty. Ezekiel 3: 15-21 was chosen as text of investigation to establish how Yahweh appointed Ezekiel as a watchman over for Judah in exile and the faithfulness of Ezekiel to his calling. As a corollary, the study explored how Church leaders in Nigeria have been chosen by God as Watchmen for the nation and the need for them to be faithful. African Biblical Hermeneutics was used.

Study revealed that the role of the Prophets in ancient Israel was that of a mouthpiece and a watchman. It was Judah's persistent defiance to the warnings from the prophets that led her into captivity under the Babylonians. The paper concludes that those charged with declaring God's word have the responsibility to be faithful because if they failed in their assignment they will be held accountable for the blood of their audience. Hence, the paper recommended that contemporary Church leaders in Nigeria are to be faithful to their calling.

Keywords: Prophet, Watchman, Ezekiel, Church leader, Nigeria and Judah.

Introduction

In ancient Israel, prophets played the role of Yahweh's mouthpiece, consultants to the Kings and the people, Reformers and agents of social change. Prophets were also the watchdogs of the society. Prophets were expected to represent God in the society. Prophets are preachers, who call people to repentance. In the Old Testament, prophets were burdened because Israel and Judah were persistently unfaithful to the covenant between them and Yahweh. The prophet will always appeal to the Israelites to turn a new leave to Yahweh and keep the covenant. The Prophet is a person that has been divinely called, sanctified, and inspired to declare the mind of Yahweh to the people. The prophet stands in the gap between Yahweh and the people. The Prophet has the capacity to see ahead of the people and warn them of the impending doom so that they can do the needful to avert

Prophets in Ancient Israel In the Old Testament, prophets were considered as important personalities. Their audience sees them as Yahweh's spokesmen. The presence of prophets in any function is seen as the presence of Yahweh (VanGemeren, 1990:16). According to some scholars, prophets played great roles in shaping the history and the religion of Israel. Thus, "prophets have been actively involved in the religious, social, political and economic lives of Israel, from monarchy to exile" (Akao, 2005:1). The ancient Israel regarded the prophets as watchmen and Yahweh's spokesmen. To an average Israelite, a prophet's duty is to hear from God and deliver the message to the people. In other words, it is the responsibility of the prophet to communicate the mind of Yahweh to the audience. The audience is expected to listen to the prophet and give appropriate response to the oracles from Yahweh (Awojobi, 2018:309).

A careful study of texts such as Exodus 7:1 and Deuteronomy 18:18 revealed that there are two elements in prophetic operations. One is passive while the other is active. The prophet receives oracles in dreams, visions or verbal communications and passes these to the audience, either orally or visibly in prophetic actions. (cf. Num 12:6-8; Isa. 6; Jer. 1:4-10; Ezek. 3:1-4, 17). Out of the two functional elements, the most important is the passive, because it controls or regulates the active element. A true prophet of Yahweh is that individual who receives oracle from him and delivers without distortion or alteration (Awojobi, 2015:42). It should however be pointed out that the one who receives divine message may not necessarily be a prophet. Examples of such men include Abimelech, Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar. According to Berkhof what makes one a prophet is divine call, the instruction received and the impetus to communicate divine oracles to his audience (Berkhof, 2000:358). As Watchmen the prophets were obliged to reveal the will of God to the people. This in most cases came in form of instruction, admonition and exhortation, promises or stern rebukes. The prophets as it were, were the ministerial monitors of the people and the interpreters of the law. In ancient Israel prophets were known to have protested against mere formalism, stressed moral duty, encourage spiritual services and promote truth and righteousness. They had the responsibility of calling the backsliding nations to Yahweh. It was their duty to intimate the people of the future promises from God. They give their audience the picture of what the future holds. There are indications from the biblical literature that the true prophets of Yahweh in Israel and Judah typifies the great coming prophet (Deut. 18:5; Acts 3:23-24), and that he was already functioning through them (1Pet. 1:11).

Yahweh at one time or the other in human history has spoken through men. To the Israelite their Prophets were seen as Yahweh's mouthpiece and watchdogs of the society. They were the mediator between Yahweh and the people. Prophets in ancient Israel were believed to have been called and commissioned by Yahweh to receive and deliver oracles to their contemporaries. The main task of a prophet in ancient Israel was to communicate the mind of Yahweh to his people and vice versa.

The Book of Ezekiel

Scholars are agreed that Ezekiel the son of Buzi who was one of the captives from Judah to Babylon wrote the book of Ezekiel (Fohrer, 1973:316). The name Ezekiel in Hebrew means Yahweh Strengthens. The name could also be interpreted as "salvation or deliverance" "help" (Ezek. 1:3; 24:24). The book represents collection of messages Ezekiel received and delivered on behalf of God. It is a testimony to the faithfulness of the prophet and the rhetorical force of his delivery. The Bible is silent on the town or village he came from. As no other biblical writer mentioned his name. However, Driver considers the book as a complete work of prophet Ezekiel (Driver, 1930:26). Torrey on his own suggests a pseudo-unknown author of Ezekiel who he claims wrote the book of Ezekiel around 230BCE (Torrey 1930-99 & Harrison, 1979:825). However, Torrey hypothesis did not stand the test of time in the face of the work of notable scholars like H.L. Ellison who maintained that prophet Ezekiel wrote the book (Ellison 1982:362-364). He was a priest and a prophet. As prophet of God to the people in captivity, he was Yahweh's mouth piece with the responsibility of enforcing the law of God (Baba, 2016:106). Ezekiel was chosen by Yahweh as His spokesman for the captives in Babylon in 597 BCE. Ezekiel was an eye witness to the greatest crisis in the history of Israel. He saw the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem, the loss of independence, and the exile of the people of Judah to Babylon, the destruction of the temple and the removal of the house of David from kingship (Ogunkumbe 2007:159). Ezekiel wrote the book in exile. There was turmoil, unrest, immorality and apostasy in Judah before the Babylonian captivity. Ezekiel ministered before the exiles (Ezek. 3:15). It was a turbulent period in the World history. Internationally the major players on the ancient Near East stage were switching roles and smaller nations were disappearing from the scene altogether. Ezekiel witnessed the demise of the neo-Assyrian empire and the rise of the Babylonians (Baba 2016:107).

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Is scrupulousness, dedication and commitment.

Implications of Ezekiel as a Watchman in 3:15-21 for the Contemporary Church Leaders in Nigeria.

The implications of Ezekiel 3:15-21 to the contemporary Church leaders are discussed as follows:

Identifying with the people

Prophets as humans do not operate in a vacuum. They are integral part of the society. Societal recognition, support and acceptance of a prophet are very important to his life and ministry otherwise he will lose credibility. Whenever the society accepts a prophet as a messenger of Yahweh, the oracles of that prophet will be respected and taken as a serious message from God (Awojobi, 2018:116-117). It is clear from study that Ezekiel's prophetic ministry was recognized and respected by the people. The prophet identified with the people in their plight (v.15), when he said: "I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished among them seven days". The prophet sat quietly among the people for seven days. This was the customary period of mourning for the dead (Gen. 50:10; 1 Sam. 31:13; Job 2:13). Ezekiel was mourning because of the situation of Judah. Ezekiel sitting with the people in Tel-Abib afforded him the privilege of encouraging them in the way of Yahweh. Ezekiel became concerned and burdened for the people who were devastated due to exile. Many Church leaders and Prophets in Nigeria today do not identify with the people in their time of challenge. Some of the contemporary leaders are the architect of the devastating situations of their members. Some are in the Christian ministry today for pecuniary benefits (Awojobi, 2018:126). Some leaders today are only concerned about themselves and their immediate family. Leaders must be exemplary in conduct, simple, selfless, disciplined and godly in their lifestyle. It is therefore expedient for Church leaders in Nigeria to take a cue from the life and ministry of prophet Ezekiel.

Divine Appointment

For leadership to stand the test of time and make positive impact the leader must be appointed by God. God said concerning Ezekiel that: "I have made you a watchman unto the house of Israel, hear my words and give them warning for me..." (v.17). The prophet's role was to be a spiritual watchman, warning the people of the people of the approaching danger. Ezekiel's role was to be a spiritual watchman, warning the people of the judgment to come. Ezekiel was appointed by Yahweh to declare the truth to the people. He was to point out the

Ezra 8:21-34; 2 Cor 8:16-24). Accountability is the heart of Christian life and ministry (Matt 20:28; Lk. 1:74-75). In other words, Christian service is not complete without accountability. Faithfulness is therefore required in stewardship for the day of accountability is sure (Rom. 14:12; Eccl.12:14).

It is clear from the foregoing that Yahweh does not leave a people or nation and any generation without a witness for him. This is evident by the appointment of Ezekiel as a Watchman for Yahweh over Judah who was in exile to Babylon. Ezekiel's primary assignment was to communicate the mind of Yahweh to the people in captivity. In the same vein, today's Prophets, Pastors, and all Church leaders in Nigeria irrespective of their titles and positions are the watchdogs of Yahweh. They have been set aside by Yahweh to watch over his heritage. They are expected to hear oracles from Yahweh and deliver same to the designated audience. They are persons who will be held accountable for the blood of their audience if they failed in their duty. It is therefore important, that they do their job with high level of commitment, dedication and seriousness so as not to be found wanting in the task entrusted to them. Prophets, Pastor and Church leaders in Nigeria should declare the oracles of God with boldness. As Yahweh's representatives and spokesmen they are to be holy, exemplary and ready to declare the mind of God not minding the feelings of the people. Like their counterpart in the Old Testament, the Prophets in Nigeria should be agents of change and defender of the poor and the helpless. Nigeria Prophets and Church leader must shun corruption and any form of associations that can tarnish their image and the God they represent. They should speak against vices like immorality, injustice, insecurity, nepotism, corruption, materialism, terrorism, oppression, favouritism and all forms of evils that have bedeviled our nation today.

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