



Research Paper

The Relevance of Old Testament Prophetism to African (Igbo) Society

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ABSTRACT

There has been resurgent interest in the prophetic books of the Old Testament in recent times. No doubt, the societal semblance of the prophets' time with the contemporary situation accounts for this. Prophecy as a old religious tradition is not exclusive to Ancient Israel but are found in almost all religious traditions of the world. Suffice it to state that the message of Old Testament prophets exert tremendous influence on most cultural milieu which includes the African (Igbo) society. Thus with the help of literary and hermeneutical method, this paper x-rayed the profound similitude of prophetic context and immense impact of the old Testament prophetic phenomenon viz-a -viz Igbo worldview and prophetic tradition. Furthermore, this research submitted that the message of the Old Testament Prophets are very succinct and relevant to the present- day Igbo experience.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Prophecy is a kind of religious medium-ship which tries to discern the mind of the ultimate reality of all beings. It is almost found in most primitive religious traditions.

In Israel, prophecy played invaluable roles in her development as a nation. The overall phenomenon of prophecy occupies a prime place in her religious expressions. Right from the era of Moses, prophecy took a - significant turn up to their captivity from the land. The roles and relevance of the Hebrew prophets can never be underscored hence the entire scriptures are referred to as the "book of prophecy".

However, one need to note that the ancient Igbo (African) society have "similar" religious traditions. Whatever a man does, be it at times of peace, war, crises or even festivities, the minds of the gods must be ascertained. Various religious specialists are consulted to maintain the ontological balance between the human and the sacred.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to study, the role of prophetism in Igbo (Africa) society through first of all : analyzing the origin, meaning and nature of prophetism in Ancient Israel, an overview of typical Igbo traditional society, worldview, prophetic phenomenon in Igbo society and the relevance of prophetism in Igbo society

ORIGIN, MEANING AND NATURE OF PROPHETISM IN ANCIENT ISRAEL.

Prophecy means "one who communicates divine revelation" (Kirkpatrick, 2006:8). He is the mouthpiece of Yahweh to utter forth His mind to the covenant people at various times of their national life.

The English word "prophecy" is said to be derived from the French root word, "Prophecie", and the Greek "Prophetes", meaning "one who speaks one behalf of someone", (cf Scott, 1969:3). Several Hebrew words were translated to mean "prophet". The popular ones are the Hebrew words such as nabi, roeh and Kosem. The word nabi occurs 250 times in the Old Testament (Cf Vawter, 1969:14), It comes from the Assyrian nabi meaning, "to bubble forth as from a fountain" "to utter". In I Samuel 9:9, the word "ro'eh" was first employed and later used seven different times in references to Samuel. Its popular meaning is "a seer". Kosem which means a "diviner" seems to be limited to "false prophets" hence it was mentioned in relation to Balaam. All through the Old Testament the prophet was regarded as the holy man, the seer, spokesman, diviner, predictor among all.

Prophecy as an oriental religious phenomenon is not limited to Israel alone. Recent studies reveal a flourishing prophetic movement in the Ancient Near East. Among the Ancient Mediterranean, common patterns of divination and esoteric arts are found. In Egypt, a similar prophetic phenomenon was also found.

The scriptures mention a non-Israelite seer by name v'Balaam" who was hired by the Moabite king "Barak" to curse Israelites (Numbers 22 - 25). The Moabite stone believed to have been inscribed by King Mesha which dates about 9th century BC contained which looks like "prophetic" statements and commission. From this rich "prophetic" background, scholars proffer a probable Canaanite origin of prophetic movement in Israel.

Later, prophetism which was a tradition instituted by Moses took several dimensions, from cultic prophets, to ecstatic prophets, court prophets, vulgar prophets, classical prophets and down to the era of apocalyptic literature.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE IGBO PEOPLE

The choice of the selection of the Igbo tribe to represent the overall nature of Africa is quite obvious in the sense that the Igbo are said to be of pure Negro Stock. It should be noted that earlier and pioneering studies have been done on the Igbo society. The magnitudes of these research materials are quite many. Prominent of earlier Igbo researches are the works, G.T. Basden, A. G. Leonard, A. E. Afikpo, V. C Uchendu, E. Isichie and lately T. U. Nwala. Their works no doubt have extended the frontiers of Igbo studies and served as intellectual "appetizers" for later researchers. The Igbos are one of the three largest ethnic groups found in Nigeria. Much have been said and extensively written of the supposed origin of the Igbo people. Suffice it to state that time and space will not accommodate the popular contentions of the Igbo origin. It is quite very plausible to believe in the theory that the Igbos being part of the Kwa group of languages must have migrated from the area of Niger-Benue confluence to their present abode (cf Greenberg 1959:79-100) many millennia ago. The Igbo tribe is geographically found in 6° and East, longitude and 4 and 7 North latitude (Nwala, 1985:15). They have common boundaries with Igala of Kogi State and the Idoma of Benue State in the North, the Edo and Urohbo in the West, the Ogoja in the East, the Efik and the Ibibio in the South East and the Ijaw in the South (Chigbo, 2008:115). Other occupations found in traditional Igbo society are hand craft, weaving, smiting, trading, among others. The Igbos are reputed for their enviable village democracy. With the exceptions of border towns, the Igbos are regarded as having segmentary, acephalous and communal government. The Igbo society is known for her industry, hospitality, straightforwardness and ingenuity.

Until the even of the colonial influence and Christianization, the Igbos conceived reality in three distinct natures, firstly, the word of the living, the world in between which is the abode of the spirit and the ancestors and the realm of "Chuku" (the Supreme being). In the Igbo traditional society, religion plays a very prominent part. The divinities, deities welded enormous influence and control over the people. Prominent Igbo deities are "Ala", "Ibini-Ukpabi", "Amadioha", "Ahiajoku", "Igwekala", "Agwu", "Ekwensu" etc. The elders ("Ndichie") play very important roles also as the judicial personal of the society. The different age grades (Otu ebiri), workers' guilds act as the traditional police of the society. The women in their own regards are important. The "Umuada" (Daughters) are traditional custodians of feminine conduct, morality and fidelity. More so, the women meetings and market associations see to the maintenance of law and order in their various departments.

In Igbo land, children especially "male" children are very important. One not having a child (especially) a male heir is regarded as a taboo. The implication is that his lineage has abruptly come to an end. In border towns, the Igbos are regarded as having segmentary, acephalous and communal government. The Igbo society is known for her industry, hospitality, straightforwardness and ingenuity.

In border towns, the Igbos are regarded as having segmentary, acephalous and communal government. The Igbo society is known for her industry, hospitality, straightforwardness and ingenuity. Yet some cultural continuities and discontinuities abound in the Igbo society.

IGBO PHILOSOPHY AND WORLDVIEW

Igbo philosophy refers here to the traditional philosophy which is handed down from one generation to another. To Nwala (1985:8), Igbo philosophy can be conveniently called "Omenala" (What obtains in the land). This compressed understanding is obviously too narrow to accommodate the very broad features of Igbo traditional philosophy.

From a more liberal perspective, Igbo philosophy and worldview captivates in its entirety the Igbo perception of reality, his world, his culture, his god(s), social structures and including people unknown to him. A key into the Igbo mind must be through the religious worldview. Suffice it to~ note that the Igbos are intricately religious. No better understanding of the Igbo thought pattern can suffice save appreciating her religious beliefs and practices. The understanding of Igbo philosophy will engender a proper study of the prophetic" phenomenon in Igbo society.

PROPHETIC” PHENOMENON IN IGBO SOCIETY

If prophecy is said to be the interpretation of the mind of the god (s), then one can assert without doubt that prophecy as a religious media exist in Igbo society. In all an Igbo man does or says, he carries along his gods with him. Before he wakes, eats, baths, works, marries or even sleeps; he must make conscious efforts to decipher the minds of the gods through religious specialists, dreams, omens, premonitions and other religious experiences. The religious specialist/ expert who is often consulted to find what the gods says is the “dibia”, (doctor). Various types of “dibias” exist. They are: the “dibia agwu”, “dibia aja”, “dibia ohu”, “dibia ogala mmuo”, “dibia nsi”, “dibia miri and “dibia ogwu”. The “dibia Agwu” works under the influence and direction of Agwu, a shrewd and witty deity. It is believed that the oracle has power of letting its owner get into hidden mysteries and develop faculties for diving the past present and future (cf Nwala, 1985:69). The “dibia agwu” is both a diviner and medical doctor. Furthermore, the “dibia ogala mmuo” is believed to commune with the spirits and dead. He is essentially a necromancer. Such necromancers are said to visit the grave yard, perform certain rites which are meant to call up the deceased from his ‘sleep’ or elicit message from them for the benefit of the living (Cf Iwuagwu, 1998:157). The “dibia nsi” is a poisoner while the “dibia miri” is the rain maker. Chigbo (2008:121) lists two more specialists, they are the “dibia afa” (diviner) and the “dibia ogwu” (herbalist). The “dibia afa” consults the inhabitants of the abode of the dead for an insight into his client’s condition. Whatever answers he gets, he communicates to his client. “Afa” simply means divination, a possible corruption of the Yoruba “Ifa”. The “dibia agwu” is a herbalist. He makes use of the roots and herbs to cure the patients’ ailments. Other religious specialist which try into the minds of the divine and “speak forth” their messages are the “Onye isi agbara” (head/keeper of the oracle) “ezeala (priest of Ala, the Earth , goddess), “Ndi Okenye” (eldes) etc.

Among the Igbo, things do not just happen (“Ife anaghi eme na nkiti”). There must be religious reasons for any calamity, unfortunate circumstances, death, sickness, barrenness etc. Therefore, at such events the minds of the deities must be sought through the relevant spiritual medium. In case of sickness is a clear example of the religious underpinnings of however, the “dibia aja” concentrates on both divination and performing propitiatory sacrifices to maintain the ontological balance between the spirit and human world. Another religious specialist is the “dibia ohu” (seer). He can be a seer and a palmist as well. “Dibia-ohu” is reputed to prod the mind of the divine to find answers to various life’s problems. unfortunate events. To Chigbo, (2008:119) a sick person is not only sick because he has bacteria infections. He could also be sick because he violated the sanctity of the earth, the sacredness of the family and marriage by taking another man’s wife to bed. One could also be sick because one stole or embezzled what belongs to others or the community. One could be sick because one is evil towards fellow creatures. In Igbo worldview, the traditional doctrine of retribution exists. Calamities are explained in terms of deed — consequence act. Such misfortunate is credited to have been the vengeance of the Supreme Being, deities or the ancestors. These are the “prophetic” phenomenon in Igbo society.

THE RELEVANCE OF HEBREW PROPHETISM TO IGBO SOCIETY

The relevance of the prophets to Igbo society are too numerous to mention. To this regards much of the works of Scott (1969) will be utilized.

The relevance of Hebrew prophetic writings are quite signal in various dimensions. The messages of the prophets are important because of the timeless message they declare to every generation. Scott put it forth;

They are the contemporaries of every generation because the truth they declare is permanently valid. What they say has the timeless quality and compelling power of authentic spiritual utterance

The words of the Hebrew prophets so much suit our own “imperfect society”. It needs to recall the crises the Igbos are facing currently are very much akin to the situation of the Hebrew nation as of then.

The prophetic writings help us to understand the true nature of the Igbo man. The Igbos are currently suffering from the crises of loss of personal identify occasioned by material quest and marmonism. Therefore, the Hebrew prophets through their very erudite literature understand our human nature and human predicaments. They feel the urgent meaning of history as the sphere of man’s moral decisions (Scott, 1969:216).

The Hebrew prophets help the Igbo to understand the true nature and meaning of what is to be religious. True religion must entail ethical requirements of collective responsibility before one’s creator and towards other people and groups . These ethical requirements are fast becoming the role of the Hebrew prophets to recapture that which was lost.

The Hebrew prophetic writings help to clarifying Igbo worship and theology. More especially concerning the object of theology. Hence the prophets serve as “Purifiers of all religions”.

According to Scott (1969:227), the prophets in their smaller world has a great reason as we (Igbo people) to quail before the waves of societal, upheavals, the rampant power of evil and the baffling, endless problem of human suffering. This is a serious social problem. The prophets help the Igbos in their democratic struggle as a nation. Suffice it to note that ever since the aftermath of the Civil War in 1970, the Igbo are still complaining of gross marginalization in virtually all aspect of Nigerian governmental life. To this end,

the prophetic literature to a great extent fans the embers of self- determination, team- spirit, hope and freedom in an ordinary Igboman.

The prophets to a large degree help to denounce the cancerous growth of social inequality among “Ndi Igbo”. This inequalities are, the widening social contrast between the rich and the poor, the persistent caste — system which has refused to die in our social life and the unfortunate growth of selfish individualism which led to the extinction of the Igbo societal maxim “onye aghala nwanne ya” (be your brother’s keeper). These developments which are quite regrettable are eating deep into Igbo moral and social fabric.

Lastly, the Hebrew prophets through their teachings on fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man serve to promote social and economic justice within the Igbo society and other tribal neighbours.

II. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The roles of prophetism in Igbo society are quite enormous. Prophecy which originated within the era of Moses down to the apocalyptic era has a tremendous effect on human relationships. It is also discovered that among the Igbos, various ways of seeking and interpreting the mind of god(s) exists. The relevance of the prophets to Igbo land are of social, religious, ethical and theological significances.

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