

## Full Length Research

# Priesthood in the Old Testament: A Panacea for Good Governance in Nigeria

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This research work examined the effectiveness of priesthood in the Old Testament: as a panacea for good governance in Nigeria. Generally speaking, people believe that the term priest denoted religious functionaries whose activities are concerned with the right performance of the ritual acts required by the divine power and Supernatural Being. Even some scholars enumerated that priest is an authorised minister of God who, on behalf of a community officiated at the altar and in other rites, acting as a mediator. In other word, a chosen officer or prince with the capacity to draw near to God and he also responsible for offering the divinely appointed sacrifices to God, for executing the different procedures and ceremonies relating to the worship of God, and for being a representative between God and man. Contrary to some scholars' believe that priestly functions were limited to sacred and sacrificial activities. This research argued that priests could influence or bring positive changes to Nigerian politics. Narration and analysis of data were the two methodological approaches employed to interpret the materials. The findings revealed that our nation (Nigeria) is blessed with priests like the Old Testament who could also play a leading role in electing God fearing leaders like the ethical prophets in the Old Testament and discourage them from performing irresponsible acts such as; embezzlement, kidnapping, money ritual etc. This work concluded and recommended that negligence of priests in political affairs of our country (Nigeria) is a major cause of chaos in our governance. Since our leaders are mostly members of religious bodies, then, the adherent of various religions should advise them to work towards the tenet of each religion. Believing that no religious tenet preaches thuggery, political killing etc. These approaches proved to be effective as they allowed for consultation and evaluation of a great number of existing arguments.

**Keywords:** Priesthood, Old Testament, Panacea, Good Governance, Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

The word priest is derived from Greek word *presbyteros* (πρεσβυτερος), meaning the elder, as distinguished from *neoteros* (the younger). In the hierarchical sense, it is equivalent to the Latin "*sacerdos*", the Greek "*ierevs*" and the Hebrew *Kohen* (כהן). The term priesthood in the Old Testament means a male person called to the immediate service of the Lord authorized to hold public worship, especially to offer sacrifice. In many instances, the priest is the religious mediator between God and man the appointed teacher of religions truths, when these include esoteric doctrine

(Abe, 2004). In the Old Testament, the entire nation of Israel was described as a priestly people. Yet, this priestly people existed as a consecrated priesthood, set apart and dedicated to sacred tasks such as offering sacrifices on behalf of all the people. These priests and Levites took charge of the holy objects in the temple, and they alone were permitted to enter the holiest place, that is, Holy of Holiness on the Day of Atonement. In this sense, two groups constituted Old Testament priesthood; the priestly people and those with a more specialized priesthood. This second type of priesthood

was primarily cultic and derived from a state of holiness; its functions include prophesy and government's view regarded this structure as hierarchy of cultic officials. This is conformity with the structure of high priest ( כהן גדול ), priest and Levite instituted by Moses during the wilderness wanderings and which was virtually unchanged throughout the history of Israel (Ejiofor, 2008).

Generally speaking, the term priesthood is a specialised office denoting the representation of Yahweh ( יהוה ) in the act of soliciting for the people of God. Priest denotes a religious guide to the Israelites. Their primary assignment was to administer sacrifice in the sanctuary of God. This research examines the institution of priesthood in the Old Testament; as a panacea for good governance in Nigeria. Efforts are made to discuss the meaning, origin and nature of priests in the Old Testament, effectiveness of priesthood in the Old Testament and the work concluded with priesthood and governance.

### Meaning, Origin and Nature of Priests in the Old Testament

Priest is a person, usually a man who has been trained to perform religious duties in the Christian church especially the Roman Catholic Church or a person with particular duties in some other religions. It was only after the sinaitical legislation that the priesthood became a special class in the community (Harvey, 2008). From the tribe of Levi, Yahweh chosen the house of Aaron to discharge permanently and exclusively all the religious functions. Aaron himself and later the first born of his family was to stand as the head of this priesthood as high priest, while the other Levites were to act not as priests but as assistants and servants. This single consecration included all the entire descendants of Aaron, priesthood was fixed in the house of Aaron by Yahweh and this was hereditary.

After the Babylonian Exile, strict genealogical proof of priestly descent was even more rigidly demanded, and any failure to furnish the same meant exclusion from the priesthood. The priests were forbidden to marry harlot or a divorced woman (Harvey, 2008). Levities cleanness was also indispensable for the priesthood. Whoever performed priestly functions in Leviticus with uncleanness would be expelled like one who entered the sanctuary after partaking of wine or other intoxicating drinks. It was also forbidden for them to touch corpse, except immediately after death. In case of mourning, no outward signs of sorrow might be shown when entering into their priestly office. The priests had first to take a bath of purification, be sprinkled with oil, and put on the vestment. The priest vestment consisted of breeches, tunic, and mitre. The breeches covered

from the reins to the thighs. The tunic was a kind of coat, woven in a special manner from one piece; it had narrow sleeves, extended from the throat to the ankles, and was brought together at the throat with bands. The girdle was three or four fingers in breadth and thirty-two was mostly realised in priesthood. Priesthood and covenant are closely related in biblical thought. The representative sanctify of this priesthood is expressed in three hierarchy fold. The lowest grade consists of the Levites, who were set apart for the service of the sanctuary. They represented the people of Israel, who belong by right to God. Sons of Aaron were consecrated for the specific office of priests. They alone represented the nation in the sacrificial ministrations of the altar.

Moreover, priests served as the mouthpiece of the Israelites, who would go through the gate of the tabernacle with his sacrifice and reached the bronze altar to approach God. Beyond that, it was responsibility of the priests to go on his people's behalf and carry out spiritual tasks in the holy place. The priest was to serve God and more closely than the congregation. Their duties fell under three main heading service, teaching, sacrifice and prayer. The common Hebrew term *Kohen* for priest in biblical literature was found also with the same meaning in Phoenician inscription. It also appears in Aramic from *Kohen* in eight times in the book of Ezra. In conclusion, priests in the Old Testament were divining chosen people by Yahweh for the guidance and execution of God's law and performance of sacrifices.

### Priesthood in the Ancient Israel

The history of ancient Israel reveals that there was no official priesthood during the patriarchal era, despite the fact that sacrifice was the central act of their private and public worship. Rather, it was the heads of family and community that performed the priestly duties (Gen 22:31-54). Since they were nomads, they had no particular shrine or sanctuary, neither was there any permanent place of worship for them. They offered their sacrifices in various places as they so journeyed along. It was after the sinaitical event of golden calf that priesthood became a special class in the communities. Ancient tradition shows that, it was Moses, who above all promulgated in priestly fashion from the oracular tent, the decrees of God and the divine legislative. The only two priestly clans which came into notice during the period of the judges were the families of Moses and Shiloh. However, God also entrusted Moses with the responsibility of priesthood. The form of Aaron rose in the old tradition and could not be otherwise disposed of (Robert, 2015). It is conceivable that the house of Eli originated from Moses' family, while Zadokites were derived from Aarons. Thus, more probable that the house of Eli went back to Aaron, through one of their

ancestor, phone has, and lost first place in the genealogy when the legitimacy and higher dignity of the "sons of Zadok" were established as being of great antiquity. Abiathar, fled to David and became his priest. The ark, on its returns was placed in the house of Abinadab in Kirjathjirim and his son, Eleaser, was ordained as its guardian. The ark having been placed in Jerusalem by David, The priestly service Abithar and Zadok appear regularly as priests.

On the other occasion, King Jehoshaphat appointed priests as judges in Jerusalem. However, southern priesthood supported the dynasty of David and defended the religion of Yahweh against the Phoenician Baal worshippers. Furthermore, many priests most have returned in the first year after the Exile, but the priests seem to have sunk to a low spiritual and moral level and were among those who intermarried with the heathen. Twenty-one of them with Levites and head of the people, signed the covenant of Nehemiah. Since then, the incomes of the priests and the order of the temple service were regulated. The priest and his house steadily gained importance and the scribes, as the interpreters of the law acquired the real spiritual leadership of the people (Keith and George, 2016). Priesthood in the ancient Israel was through inheritance, although sometimes those not of priestly families were consecrated. For instance, Samuel was not from priestly family but he was consecrated following prophet Eli, even those from priestly family were obliged to pass through a solemn ordination ceremony, consisting of, an act of purification on atonement. The priest was washed and a sin-offering was brought for him. An act of consecration consisting of anointing oil, application of the blood of the ram to the lobe of the right ear, the right thumb, and right –toe, part of the rest being sprinkled around the altar, and part of it left standing in a vessel upon the altar. The last consecration is the sprinkle of the blood and oil, the remainder of the blood and oil, being mixed and sprinkled on the person and dress of the priest. The entire procedure represents the transference to the priest of the authority of presenting the sacrifice to God and of receiving in its place the priestly portion.

The ancient Jewish priesthood which functioned at the temple in Jerusalem offered animal sacrifices at various time throughout the year for a variety of reasons. It was claimed that priests were anointed and chosen by God, these references are believed to be a later redaction of the Pentateuch. The priest put on the sanctuary costume in the exercise of their duties. The costume of the high priest who was the head of the priestly order was a greater symbolic significance. For instance, the gold and precious stone on the costume represented God's glory, and it represented the whole nation by the breastplate with the names of the twelve

on it. Therefore, the costume in general symbolise the integrity and authority attached to the priestly offices (Keith and George, 2016). The institutionalisation of the office was God's gracious provision for the people at a distance from Him, who needed someone to appear in the divine presence on their behalf. The divine explanation of this implies the representation of Israel in the dress of the high priest, that is, he shall bear their names before Yahweh upon his two shoulders for a memorial.

### **Sacred and Secular Roles of Priests in the Old Testament**

If Yahweh is holy, His religion Yahwism must necessarily be holy as well. Moreover, since the *berith* (covenant) that made them a possession of Yahweh was made with the whole nation, the existence of an official priesthood did not exclude the rest of the people from their spiritual relationship with him. Priesthood had a representative character, his embodied duty as well as honour and privileges. Priesthood was also associated with strong moral and spiritual principles. It was here, the holy nation of God was imperfect and unholy. Hence, the sanctity and purity which was necessary for the service of Yahweh from Israel was executed by the priests. In Ancient Israel, priests carried out their activities in the context of the royal court or the central sanctuary and they performed the functions considered necessary by the establishment. Because of their central social location, they enjoyed a certain amount of prestige and were considered authoritative by Israel's leaders. Priests were responsible for providing sacrifice whenever the religious, political or social occasion required them. They also represented God in the state's affairs and in general, they helped to preserved public morality and preserving the existing social order (Joseph 2005, pp. 2, 44). Priests were the custodians of medical, traditional knowledge and stories about the journey of Israel from Abraham to the promise land and they also played an important part in the safeguarding the health of the community (Lev.13vs15). They retained their traditional role as administrator of justice, carrying out trial by ordeal of a woman accused of adultery, purification of a *Nazirite*, who had been defiled, and determining valuation in connection with vow. A seal impression from Jericho which has been dated in the fifth century B.C. provides fresh evidence that the fiscal administration of Judah after the exile was concentrated in the hands of the temple authorities. It is the priests who were responsible for blowing the trumpets which summoned the people for war or for the keeping of a feast. They alone could bless in the name of God.

In addition, priesthood was the official institution

that mediated and maintained a state of equilibrium between the sacred and the profane aspects of human society. They also exercised stabilising influence on social structures and on cultic organisation.

### **Overview Assessment of Importance of Priests in the Old Testament**

Generally speaking, priests in the Old Testament, as intermediaries between God and man were primarily involved in sacrifice at the altar and worship in the shrine. Priest is an equivalent of African deities in African Traditional Religion. Yoruba people believed that deities (sons and daughters of God) came to this world with their portfolio of specific assignment of which they are commissioned. In a mere saying (ejaculation), priests are small gods on earth, on whom people have their means of communication and express their mine to their creator. Also, priests are divinely minister of God whom their duties are to execute law and order at the sanctuary of God (tabernacle). No wander Joseph (2008) said;

“Where are we, if we are to fully realize what a priest is on the

earth, we would die: not of fright, but of love. It is the priest who continues the work of redemption on earth, what use would be a house filled with gold were there be no one to open the door? The priest holds the treasures of heaven: it is he who opens the door: He is the steward of the good Lord: the administrator his goods”.

Finally, the priest's purpose is to bring reconciliation, restoration and cordial relationship between God and man. From the foregoing, it can be deduce that priests played vital roles in Ancient Israel politically, socially and religiously. The official duties of the priests were related partly to their main occupations, and their functions were connected to the public worship.

### **Overview description of Nigeria Government**

Nigeria is a federal republic modelled after the United State with executive power exercised by the president and with influence from the Westminster system model in the composition and management of the upper bicameral legislature. However, the president of Nigeria is both head of state and head of government. Legislative power is vested in both the government and the two chambers of the legislature, the House of Representatives and the senate. The two chambers make up the National Assembly. The highest judiciary arm of Assembly serves as a check on the executors' arm of Government. The law of Nigeria is based on the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary and

also on the British common law because of the long history of British colonial influence. The legal system is therefore similar to the common law systems used in England and other common wealth countries. The constitutional framework for the system is provided by the constitution of Nigeria.

The executive branch is divided into federal ministries, headed by a minister appointed by the President, who must include at least one member of each of 36 states in his cabinet. The president's appointments are confirmed by the Senate of Nigeria. In some causes federal minister is responsible for more than one ministry (e.g. Minister of Works and Housing) and a minister may be assisted by one or more ministers of state. Each ministry also has a permanent secretary, who is a senior civil servant. General elections held in February 1999 marked the end of 15years of military. The general elections were held for the second consecutive time in April 2003, in the both election, represent Olusegun Obasanjo and his party, people's democracy party (PDP) were victorious. Despite the consolidation of democratic rule following years of military dictatorship, some feared that in the absence of a clear successor, the incumbent president might seek to amend the constitution so that they could run for a third term (Mircea, 2006, p.20). The change was opposed by vice president Atiku Abubaker and some leaders of the PDP. However, these leaders who objected were removed from their party posts. The 2005 census was contentions event because of ethnic and religious division in Nigeria that taken in May, 2006, but the head count was marked by a lack of resources and a number of violent clashes, and many Nigerian were believed to have been left uncounted. In May, the Nigeria legislature ended the consideration of a third term presidential proposal when it became clear that there was insufficient support for the amendment of the constitution in that respect. Nigeria agreed in June, 2006, to turn over the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon after a two-year transition period. In July, the Vice President denied taking bribes from U.S. Congressman, but in September the president called for the Nigerian senator to remove the Vice president from office for fraud, based on an investigation by the, Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC). The senate agreed to investigate the charges, and the PDP suspended the vice president, blocking him from seeking the party's presidential nomination. Abubakar counter accused Obasanjo of corruption. The EFCC was also investigating most of Nigeria's state governors, but the commission itself was tainted by charge that it was used for political retaliation by Obasanjo and his allies. Through this procedure, several state governors were also impeached as an attempt by Obasanjo to tighten his control prior to the 2007 presidential election. In February, the EFCC declared Abubakar and more than

130 other candidates for the April election unfit due to corruption, and the elective commission barred those candidates from running. Abubakar fought the move in court, but the ruling was not over turned until days before the presidential election.

The state election were marred by widespread and blatant vote fraud and intimidation, but the election commission certified nearly all the results, handing gubernatorial victories to the DPD in 27 states. In the presidential election, Umaru Yar' Adua, the relatively governor of Kastina State, who was handpicked by Obasanjo to be the PDP candidate, was declared the winner with 70% of vote. But fraud and intimidation were so blatant that Eli observers called the election a "charade" and the new president was forced to admit the flawed. Nonetheless, Yar' Adua's inauguration in May marked the first transition of power between two elected civilian presidents in Nigeria's post-colonial history (Mircea, 2006). In February 2010, Goodluck, Jonathan began serving as acting president in the absence of Yar'dua, resulting from his bad health. In May 2010, the Nigerian government learned of Yar'dua's death. This lack of communication left the new acting president Jonathan with no knowledge of his predecessor's plans. Yar'dua's Hausa-Fulani background gave him a political base in the Northern regions of Nigeria, while Goodluck was a target for militaristic overthrow or regional uprisings in the area. However, Goodluck Jonathan called for new elections and stood for re-election in April 2011. He won the election but currently, Buhari took over from him as the president of Nigeria.

### Priesthood in Nigerian Contexts

Any consideration of the relationship of priesthood to the political governance of a state most encompasses a diversity of cultures. In this context, the term politics is one of the most popular but abused word as today, especially in African. So the very mention of politics to a majority of Africans connotes negativity. Hence, it is considered as a "dirty game" by many, which connotes dishonesty, conceit and underhandedness. Politics is derived from the Greek word "politike", which means the theory and science of society as well as state. Building on this, most scholars define politics as the science of how people organised their societies and how society should be organised. According to Ejiofor (2008):

Politics is a process of controlling the authority to distribute the value of society as supreme arbiter, and the process and institutions for seeing who gets what, how and when from the assets of the society .

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria spells out very clearly the procedure for political activities. In the constitution, rigorous pursuit of "unity

and faith, peace and progress" is highly emphasised. Another ideal spelt out in this constitution is to "abolish all corrupt practices and abuse of power". Hence, leaders as well as the governed are urged to frown at tribalism, sectionalism, greed, fraud, laziness, embezzlement of public funds and other vices in order to have the desired good life for all Nigerians. These ideals spelt out in the constitution are laudable, which if followed, leaves no doubt to the fact that the nation would now peace and progress. But are they observed today? To state the obvious, the practice of politics in Nigeria is far from the ideals sketched above, because there is gross indiscipline and corruption perpetrated by political officers and those highly placed in public offices.

It is a common practice to hear politicians paying lip service to development. They talk glibly about the birth of a new nation and about rebranding. According to Igboin (2009), said that "Religion and Rebranding in Nigeria: Towards an alternative consciousness, the trade mark of the ruling class has not change, and the rebranding efforts seems incapable of stemming the tide because it is the policy of do what I say and not what I do". Hence, our nation continues to burn, leaving big scars on our image as people. This corruption went on killing and related crimes characterized successive regimes, leaving an unenviable picture on the political scenario. So, the whole events, that is political events put together is like a bad dream or horror film. With the above point, no doubt priest have significant roles in the political life of the country to play. This assertion is declaration that "politics divorced from religion has absolutely no meaning and is an absolute dirty ever to be shunned. In this situation, priests are often used to meet the political needs and aspirations of the ruling class, who see religion as a means of preserving an order that places them at the apex. Good examples are Ethiopia, where Muslim voice have been suppressed by Christians politicians for centuries, and South African, where Christianity was used to legitimise oppression of blacks by a handful whites.

Every successful claimant to political power must demonstrate respect for established patterns of religious policy by honouring them and participating in them. For example, the newly installed nobles in Ancient Greece had to make their oblations to the gods. Similarly, some European royalties such as the British monarch are crowned in Cathedrals. Newly elected president of the United State have prayers of their inaugurations. A newly elected chairman of the presidium in the Soviet Union also confess adherence to the truth of Marxism. These gestures signal a subordination of political authority to transcendent authority and failure to perform them threaten to abbreviated the regime. Such behaviour also mitigates the possibility that religious leadership will use pity and polity as organising bases against the political order

(Peter, 2004). Therefore, there are laudable ideals preached by the politicians, however their implementation has never be enforced. The presence of priesthood in the political affairs of this country, especially at the time of election, is highly needed to ensure good governance in Nigeria.

### **Priesthood: A Panacea for Good Governance in Nigeria**

The treated context represents the fundamental background upon which the present political crisis in Nigeria is best understood. It gives an insight into understanding why thousands of Nigerian youth are willing tools in the arsenal of the Boko-Haram, an Islamic fundamentalist sect behind the violent attacks in Maiduguri, Bauchi, Abuja and environs. This context also gives explanation for the resurgent hostilities in the Niger Delta in spite of the multiple billion of Naira earmarked to bribe the so-called Niger Delta militants (Oke, 2010). However, regardless of who emerges among the various aspirants to the office of the president and other elective posts, one thing that is certain is that there is no solution to the Nigerian crises based on the enumerated programmed of privatization of public enterprises, commercialization of education, increases in utility tariffs, of electoral board, that is screening before election is not a solution to political instability in Nigeria. Because good governance is an indeterminate term used in development literature to described how public institutions conduct public affair and manage public resources in order to guarantee the realisation of human right.

Nigeria, though unlike ancient Israel, is a multi-religious country; however these religion (African Traditional Religion, Islamic and Christianity), priests and worshippers approached one quarter, which is the supreme God, known as Yahweh in Israel. These priests can be secularly functional like Ancient Israelite's priests, who were well recognised in the political affairs of the state. Prophet Samuel, for instance played a political role in choosing the right king for the people of Israel. Though, priests are not necessarily to become politician or have any political affiliation, but they can stand as guidance and mentors to the political leaders and the governed. Nigeria is blessed with so many priests of God like E. A. Adeboye, T.B. Joshua, Bishop Oyedepo, Samson Oluwamodede, W.F. Kumuyi, Oladeji Hezekiah and others across this country; they are not in position to offer animal sacrifice again. Nevertheless, they offer their sacrifice to God when they render their prayers to Him.

Priests are not to be neglected in the political affairs of this country, they ought to be in position to change the ungodly thinking characterising our political

setting with the tool of their priestly faith. When Saul was chosen as the first king of Israel and when in he disobeyed the instruction God gave to him through His priest (Samuel), he faced the consequences; a mistake which David (second king of Israel) learned from. Priests are obliged to speak against forces, ideologies and powers which destroy life and prevent personhood. The priests must constantly announce divine disapproval of actions capable distorting the divine image in people, in the name of politics. Nigeria is an enigma, wrapped in puzzle where many things are capable of helping. Tribalism, regionalism, ethnicity, indeed prejudices of any kind have negative impacts on the national economy. Harvey (2008) states that; "When a nation is torn by tribalism, it becomes economically weak".

Our political leaders have carried on the way they did because, those who should have told them the truth (political godfathers) preferred to tell them only what they feel the leaders wanted to hear in order to either gain cheap population. Our country (Nigeria) is in this unpleasant state because of the act of choosing wrong leaders into our political offices. Hence, the urgent need to allow our credible, trustworthy, and honest priests otherwise called men of God to govern us by putting into power the right man of God's heart is needed.

### **CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATIONS**

The work concluded that priests are the representative of God on earth and their general duties should not be restricted only to offering of sacrifices, as contained in Yahwism, but should include secular responsibilities that involved political, economic and social development of their nations. Against this background, it recommended that any priest that stands aloof, dissociating himself from the political, social and economic conditions of his society is not worthy the name. Priests of different religions are obliged to speak against forces, ideologies, embezzlement, political thuggery, kidnapping, money ritual, human sacrifice and socio-political vices battling Nigeria. Nigerian priests like those in the Old Testament must constantly announce divine disapproval of the actions of those distorting the divine image in people in the name of politics.

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