

THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CONTRIBUTIONS OF PROHET ELISHA TO ANCIENT ISRAEL IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Modern trends and experiences have shown that the spiritually gifted and anointed ones seem to forget their main missions and commissions from God that gives them the grace and the spiritual power. Nowadays, spiritual empowerment seems to be means to one's enjoyment and personal gains contrary to what the ancient prophets in Israel used to do for the Lord that called them and the people they were sent to. Therefore, this paper examined the ministry of Prophet Elisha, his social and spiritual contributions to the ancient Israel and how he brought fortunes to the bitterness of his nation through the spiritual power given him by God. Using the tradition-historical methods, it delved into two sacred personages in the classical revival in the history of indigenous church in Nigeria and challenged the modern prophets and spiritual personages to learn few lessons from their steps. It addressed the plights and problems of the people generally in the society as they are economically bitten and politically ravaged without much hope from anywhere. It also looked at the socio-religious arena in the society and calls on religious leaders from Christian sect to live up to expectation by using their God-given grace to salvage the situations, without which the hope of the hopeless would be more disastrous. In conclusion, it calls on Africans and African leaders to look more to God to save the social, political and religious situations rather than putting their trust in man.

Introduction

The spiritual and anointed ones are sent by God to render certain spiritual and social services for the benefits of the entire mankind. The gifts and the talents given are neither for personal aggrandizements nor self-pleasure. These spiritual personages are sent once in a gap of many years even up to a distance of one hundred years. They may appear in political, social, cultural and religious arena in the society in order to bring improvements to mankind. One mission that such people have is to make changes in the society, improve the lives of people, charter new things, channel new course of life, start what could be called "new divine agenda" for others and leave indelible paths for others to follow. The impacts of these spiritual gurus in the social and spiritual development as well as political achievements of their countries could not be easily under rated.

Elisha was one of such sacred personages in ancient Israel who did some social works that could not be erased from the Israelite history. He came from an influential background that could make a young man of his calibre to be proud of himself and resolve to arrogance and self-pride to the negligence of the divine call upon his life. If he were to be one of the modern young men in the contemporary world, he might be insensitive to the pains, plights and problems of the people around him. Elisha was a sensitive man to the current experience of the Israelite nation during his time.

As a mentee under the tutelage of Elijah, he understudied what it is meant to encounter the super-sensible influence and endowment. He knew what it meant to suffer social injustice like Naboth did in the hand of Ahab and Jezebel. He observed the religious syncretism that was perpetrated by the power that is instead of being the custodians of true Yahwism (Schmidt, 1992).

The threats of *Baal* worship to the worship of Yahweh in ancient Israel were confronted by Prophet Elijah before he was translated to heaven (Rad, 1989). Elisha knew these trends could spell national doom to the pure Yahwism and the national identity of Israelite nation if not confronted with rigorous persistence and religious outcries for purity of the religion (Rad, 1989). As a result, he requested for the ability to do more than his predecessor. But to Elisha, power endowment was not an affluence and insensitivity to plight of the individuals, cities and the whole nation at large. Elisha saw power endowment as a call to higher responsibility and sensitivity to the plights of the people in the society and using the power to build, help, bringing solutions and change the status of the people.

Our main concern in this paper is on the spiritual icon Elisha and his contributions to ancient Israel in the African context. The paper focuses on Prophet Elisha in order to press home some vital points and challenges that border about modern preachers in African societies to use their empowerment for the improvement of life of the people in the society.

Elisha: A Prophet in Ancient Israel

Elisha is considered to be one of the 9th century prophets in ancient Israel, who ministered along with Elijah towards the end of the latter ministry. We have various versions of his name in Hebrew Old Testament as *elisa*; while the Greek Old Testament, Septuagint, renders it as *Eleisaie*; in Josephus, it is written as *Elissaios*, and the New Testament rendition of the name is *Elisaio*s. Biblical scholars agreed that the name means “God is salvation”, perhaps as a way to show the trends of his ministry, which would be full of salvific activities. Much was not known about his background than his father’s name was Shaphat. We are not told about his age, ancestry or his birthplace. Certainly, he was a young man when he was called to the prophetic fold. Elisha, the son of Shaphat, undoubtedly came from a fairly wealthy family in the ancient Israel. He was a young man, energetic and hardworking. He was found working with twelve yoke of oxen, which showed that he was not a lazy young man. Working with twelve yoke of oxen in the ancient Israel showed that he had an expanse of farm land and from a rich background. He was in the agricultural venture before he was called to the prophetic ministry.

Elisha came to the prophetic fold when Elijah laid the complaints of his loneliness and tiresomeness before God at Horeb (1 Kg. 19: 19-21). Elijah was commissioned to anoint Elisha in his position or as a helper in the prophetic struggle against syncretic Yahwism, which was grossly introduced by Jezebel and politically supported by Ahab. The impact of *Baal* worship in Israel at this time had nearly overthrown the true worship of Yahweh in Israel. It was Elijah alone that we saw in the struggle against four hundred and fifty prophets (1 Kg. 18: 20-24). Surely, the time Elisha was called to the prophetic fold was a crucial time in the history of Israel and a great challenge to the young prophet in making. He has a great task to confront and the religiously confused nation to bring back to the right track. The call of God came to him as a surprise but he did not reject it.

God calls and commissions whoever He wants to the prophetic ministry and it is not a household dynasty. The call of Elisha shows that the call of God could come to anyone at any time and at any point. More, age is not a barrier before God whenever He wants to call to the ministry. The example of Jeremiah also showed that God did not consider age when He wanted to call His own to the ministry (Jer. 1:4-8). Also, John the Baptist was called as the forerunner of the Saviour Jesus Christ in the New Testament was called at his young age (Guthrie, 1970). Elisha was called to the prophetic fold when he was a young man. Probably, God wanted his ministry to last longer than that of his predecessor, Elijah. As the providence and the mystery of his ministry unfolded, he

was to perform double portions of the miracles that Elijah his master had performed. Definitely, he would need more years to function if he would do this. If his ministry was dated, it spanned through the reigns of Ahab, Ahaziah, Jeroham, Jehu, Jehoahaz and Jehoash. Putting all these years together, Elisha's ministry could last for over fifty years.

The Call and Anointing of Elisha

Elisha was called to the prophetic ministry by God through Elijah. The call was dramatic in nature and not oracular like that of Samuel who heard the voice of God in a night vision or revelation (1 Sam. 2). He was a young man working on the field of his farm land when Elijah passed by and cast his mantle on him. The dramatic casting of the mantle was immediately understood by Elisha to be a means of calling him to the prophetic guild of prophets under Elijah but in special sense. He might not know what lay ahead of him when Elijah cast his mantle on him but just a calling to the prophetic ministry. He pleaded to first go and bid his parents final farewell before following Elijah. We could say that the call to prophetic ministry had assumed a new dimension at this time beyond audible voice. It could be said that the vocation of the prophets may be understood in terms of the ears and mouth. God spoke to their ears and they in turn speak the word received to the people (Winward, 1983:19-26). The call of Elisha (cf. 1 Kg. 19: 19-21) was not so much hearing, revelation, ecstasy, and an anointing (cf. 1 Kg. 19:16) as an ordination by investiture with Elijah's prophetic mantle. According to God's instruction, Elijah sought for Elisha and cast his mantle on him. People did not call themselves to the Leviticus Priesthood and prophetic office in the Old Testament. This made the offices to be sacred and peculiar. This should be a lesson to the people occupying the priestly office in the African societies. The priestly and prophetic offices are sacred positions that God gives to the people occupying them for the delivery of sacred services to mankind. Those who are called should remember that they are sent by God to render services to the humans.

According to 2 Kings Chapter 3 verses 11, it was certain that Elisha remained a mentee under Elijah for quite some years until he received the double portion of the spirit of Elijah. He was trained by Elijah according to prophetic order in ancient Israel. Training young prospective prophets could not be substituted nor underrated as a result of the challenges of *Baal* worship and influence of foreign gods in the worship of pure Yahwism. The relevance of training could be to conform to the order of the Law and without resorting into religious syncretism. Hearing from God could also be strange to young prophets and confusing as we find it in the experience of young prophet Samuel (cf. 1 Sam. 2). The need for spiritual empowerment was another feature that transpired between Elijah and Elisha. He was endowed with the double portion of Elijah's spirit as he requested. Elisha perceived the tasks ahead of him as herculean type and saw the need for double spiritual strength. The condition was met as laid down by Elijah and the immediate experience that followed, as recognized by other sons of the prophets confirmed that the double spirit of Elijah rested on Elisha. Immediately Elisha was anointed, he started using the spiritual empowerment for the healing and social benefits of his nation.

The ancient people generally relied on divine interventions in the areas they were incapacitated. This could be as a result of the level of civilization and inventions that existed then. When the people in antiquity perceived and saw anything regarded above their human performance, it was counted as miracle (Hendrickx, 1987). Anywhere they could not do anything humanly possible to their problems they resolve to super sensible means. The sacred personages were regarded as carriers of super sensible power and potential to bring about such incorporeal interventions. These people surrounded the temple and lived in the temple and/or on sacred places

(Alabi, 2013). People consulted them for solutions to the social plights and economic difficulties. Israelites recognized these personages among them and consulted them in the times of crises. Examples are: Moses in the wilderness (Ex. 14:1-31); Jephthah in the time of the Judges (Jud. 11); Samuel at Mizpeh (1 Sam. 7); Micah and Ahab (1 Kg. 22) and so on. Elisha was not left out in this enterprise in the ancient Israel and he used the spiritual authority that God gave him to solve the social, economic and political problems that bedevilled his people.

Elisha and the Educational Institution for the Sons of the Prophets

Elisha was once a student, mentee and protégée under an icon in Israel, Prophet Elijah. He was schooled and tutored under Prophet Elijah among the prophetic confraternities. It was obvious that there were such schools in Bethel, Jericho, Jordan, Gilgal, Samaria and other places (2 Kg. 2: 2-7, 25; 4: 38; cf. 1 Sam. 10:3-5). Biblical scholars believe and/or agree that Elisha also sustained the age long tradition of training the sons of the prophets under his tutelage for continuity sake. This is indicated according to 2 Kings Chapter six. Elisha did not abandon this ancient tradition of training young prophets having been taught by Elijah. There was guild of prophets under him and his instructions future sustainability of both the nation and her religion. He cared for their feeding and accommodation as the leader over them. When they were attacked by eating poison, he used his supernatural gift and wisdom to heal them through antidote of other vegetables (2 Kg. 4:38-44; 6:1-7). Right doctrine of Yahwism and teaching according to the Law were impacted to them.

Education is a lasting legacy that any parents and nations that worth their salt should give to their children and youth. Many African children are yet to get education in its contemporary standard, innovative and competing rates as their counterparts in the western world. Elisha served as a prophetic parent by surrogate to the sons of the prophets in the educational sector in Israel. The intimacy and closeness he maintained with them definitely had great influence on them. Unfortunately, the current experiences of parents and children relationship show that parents are far away from their children in the name of searching for survival means. One of the effects created by this gap is the fact that children are not learning the cultural, domestic and educational vocabularies they should from their parents. Rather, the children are now used to e-English and junk vocabularies. The customary languages and vocabularies that old men used to guide the behaviour of their children and ethical exhibitions are now failing and dwindling in the African societies. Elisha was a customary prophet, built by the man who understood the religious liturgy, cultural practices and social heritage of the society.

Elisha was well groomed and trained by his master, Elijah. He would want to impart the same to the sons of the prophets under. The standard of theological education in Israel that Elijah left for Elisha to sustain should be a great lesson to the African teachers. Our children deserve nothing less than the best in terms of education. According to Bolawole, the very purpose of higher education is defeated when the quality and high-level standards cannot be assured and maintained across board. One major problem confronting the education especially in Nigeria is the lack of adequate facilities in the nation's tertiary institutions. As the number of candidates seeking admissions into the universities is increasing the facilities are not increasing. Adequate facilities that will make the lecturers carry out their duties should be provided in order to prevent incessant industrial actions, which are detrimental to the progress of the educational sector in African nations. The leaders in government in African nations should be alive to their responsibilities by providing qualitative education for the African children and youths under conducive atmospheres.

In the religious parlance, young prophet Samuel would have taken the voice of Eli for God's voice if he had no superior to mentor him (1 Sam. 3). The importance of mentoring young

prophets cannot be underestimated in the contemporary African societies. Corroborating this position, Akin-John (2013:53) opines that the church began to experience character shortcomings and lack of integrity among the ministers when she underrated and de-emphasized training and mentorship. It is a responsibility of the leadership of churches to watch those who are directly under them and properly mentor them. Many young prophets have fallen into theological errors today due to lack of training and they have misled many to a lot of ecclesiastical pitfalls. For instance, a comparison between Apostle Joseph Ayo Babalola of Christ Apostolic Church and Prophet Emmanuel Omoniyi Omotunde of African Apostolic Church showed the importance of mentoring. Babalola had mentors in persons of Pa Shadare Esinsinade, David Odubango and Joseph Adeniran Medaiyese and the likes (Olowe, 2007: 105-108) while Omotunde did not have mentors over him. The negative effects of this gap reflected in the ministry of Emmanuel Omotunde while alive and after his death. Training young ministers of the gospel will get rid of the fake prophets in the society and sanitize the society of doctrinal errors. It is high time that young ministers are encouraged to undergo theological training for proper delivery of the messages. Ministers undergoing in-house training should be encouraged to go further in pursuit of theological training.

Elisha and the Healing of Water at Jericho

Water has a central place in the existence of man. In many Mesopotamian worlds, water was considered as a living element capable of granting life and sustaining it. In the Sumerian epic of creation, it was *Nammu* (the Sea mother or goddess) who gave birth to the heaven and earth. In the Canaanite religion, there was water cult, which was interwoven and attached to the cult of *Baal*. Also, in the Babylonian Epic of creation, it was *Apsu and Tiamat* that mixed their waters together in order to produce the entire creation (Alabi, 2012). In a nutshell, water was regarded as an element that could be underrated in the creation of the heaven and the earth. In the ancient myths, water was counted as a gift from the gods, especially in the Canaanite religion. According to the myth, Baal was believed to be the storm god of the Canaanites and god of fertility who gave water and productivity to their agricultural produce (Alabi, 2012: 179). Water played major role in the ancient myths of creation and fertility.

God made provision for water before He created man. In the Judeo-Christian traditions of the creation of man, it was a combination of water and clay that God used to create man (cf. Gen. 1:6-9; 2:1-7). Since creation water is a fundamental life element. It is also believed that there can be no life if there is no water (<http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/water/life.html>). If water was a source of life, its scarcity was definitely as displeasure of God to mankind in the Jewish concept. Water continues to be the setting and even the medium of creation and God shows His care for the creation through water. Many prophets saw water as God-personified entity especially prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 2:13) and symbolized His blessing, care, gift and mercy to His people (cf. Isa. 35; 41:17-18; 44:3; Joel 2:23).

The first social benefit that Elisha brought to his people was the healing of the poisonous water that was causing sickness and death at Jericho. Water was a special element in human society, especially in the ancient world. Men of Jericho came to Elisha with the water problem confronting them. Elisha used the spiritual power given to him to solve this problem once and for all (2 Kg. 2:19-22). Provision of potable water is the cry of many villagers and people in many urban cities and rural areas today in Africa. There are many branches of major Christian denominations in many villages and in urban societies that cannot boast of potable waters. Many still patronize polluted streams, rivers, lakes and ponds in the villages and towns due to lack of

potable water. The leaders of these denominations have done some in some places, but more should be done so that the adherents would be proud of them. Yet, lack of potable water is a challenge to many people whose hope had been dashed by the government and its agencies that are expected to provide this. Bore-holes and well treated well-waters could be dug for the villagers by these major denominations in order to solve this water problem.

Elisha and the Caring for the Underprivileged, the Widows and Orphans

The societies in many cases have not been fair to the underprivileged ones, especially the widows and the orphan children who are left without help from their relations. In some African cultural practices, if the widows do not give birth to male children, they would not have access to the legacy of the deceased husbands. At times, the relatives of the deceased husbands would come and take over the property of the husbands and leave the widows to suffer alone with the children. For instance, an undergraduate female student shared her experience with the writer sometimes ago. She lost her father while in 200 level in a private university in the year 2008. Unfortunately, the relatives of the father came and took over the property both in Lagos and Benin, Nigeria and abandoned the children to their fate. Such could be the experience of the widow in 2 Kings Chapter 4: 1-7. Evidently, the widow was without care and no family member bothered to show any concern for this woman whose husband died with a debt for the surviving wife to pay. The creditor threw away the covenant cord of brotherhood and oneness that governed Israelite society and wanted to force the young children whose father had died into slavery, only in the name of the law (Lev. 25:39-41, 48). As the instinct of motherhood in her would not allow this to happen, she cried to Elisha the man of God for solutions. Why Elisha? It was because he used his supernatural capability to solve the problems of his people. People that are recognized with such power today are blocked from the populace who immensely contributed to their success and wealth but Elisha was not like that in his society.

Elisha cared for the widows during his ministry and the record of one is preserved for us to read. This widow had only two sons who survived her husband. But before the husband died, he had incurred certain debt and the creditor was coming to take the two sons away because she could not pay the debt. Due to divine interventions, Elisha gave the instruction that led to the payment of the debt. There are many underprivileged, orphans and widows in African societies. They are neglected to their fate with little or no care and concerns at all. Many of these widows see the houses of God as refuge and the men of God as those who can help them. To be candid, many of these widows are financially stranded and helpless. By virtue of position, men of God are closer to these people more than government officials. There is a need for them to receive the help from above as expected through the people they consider to be the intermediaries between them and God. Widows are integral part of any assemblies of churches as experience and statistics have shown. There are social units or organizations that could be established for the purpose of caring for widows and the orphans. These social welfare units should be saddled with the responsibility of how to empower some of the widows and assist in the vocational and educational training of the children. They would be better catered for when the church cares for them.

Elisha and Infertility in Ancient Israel: African Context

Infertility was viewed as a curse from gods in antiquity, so also was the religious conceptions of infertility in ancient Israel. It was believed that Yahweh gave children and whosoever did not have children was debarred from God (Gen. 16:1; 30:1-2). It was also believed that infertility would lead to being cut off in Israel. Children were important to the ancient Israelite

community for propagation of one's name, posterity and possession of inheritance of the land. Inability to give birth to children was critically viewed as a heinous sorrow in ancient Israel (Gen. 15: 2-3; 30:1ff; 1 Sam 1:1-18). The ancient Israelite community saw infertility as God's annoyance with the sufferers (2 Sam. 6: 20-23).

At least, we read about a rich woman who was loving and caring and who showed these traits by accommodating Elisha, but she had no child. Elisha prophesied that in a year's time she would be with a child. This sounded unbelievable to her but it was fulfilled and the woman gave birth to a baby boy (2 Kg. 4:8ff). When the problems of people are prolonged, they easily give in to despair. But through the instrumentality of Elisha the barrenness of this rich woman was changed. This woman became fruitful through the prophetic ministry of Elisha. Despite the modern science and technology barrenness is one of the problems that confront many families in Africa in the modern societies. And people look for children from one hospital to another today and even from traditional-medical houses. According to Adegboyega, many hopeless barren women of long standing years were made fruitful during the revival of Babalola. Many longstanding years of pregnancy were wonderfully delivered through the miracles wrought by God through Joseph Ayo Babalola (1978:25). People look up to the church for fertility and those who are gifted in faith, healings and miracles should use these gifts to provide solutions to this problem. Faith home clinics and maternities should be encouraged to conform to the modern health services. Baby factories that litter our society with their attendant social vices of ruining the life of our young ladies would not have surfaced up if the church had lived up to expectation.

Elisha and Health Services in African Context

Leprosy was a dreaded disease in antiquity and also in ancient Israel. It could be likened to modern day HIV/AIDS and Ebola virus. At least two chapters are devoted to the issues of leprosy in the book of Leviticus (Lev. 13-14). Provisions were made for the cleansing of any leprous man. Leprosy could only be cured by divine interventions and miracles. Leprous men were to be isolated because it was believed to be contagious. God used Elisha to heal people during his life time. The case of Naman, a Syrian, a leprous man was a typical example of who was healed by washing himself in the River Jordan. The man was from Syria, a chief army of his nation. Naman was in such leprous condition in Syria. He came to Israel as a leper but returned as a cleansed, healed and restored man through the ministry of Elisha. The prophetic power given to Elisha was used to cure this man from his leprosy. Naman a Syrian, who did not know God of Israel thought of giving gifts to his representative for the healing received (2 Kg. 5:14-17).

Elisha was not a greedy prophet, who could be carried away by gifts. He rejected the gift of Naman. He understood one fact that gift could blindfold him and at the same time divert the faith that Naman ought to have in God of Israel to himself. He probably wanted Naman to see God as the Healer and himself just as an instrument, so that his faith would be in Yahweh. One truth that should be derived from this saga is the fact that spiritual gifts are not for commercialization or personal enrichment as many preachers are doing today. There is no evil in receiving gifts from those who are ministered to but it should not be the basis of their healing. Faith healers in African societies could serve their societies better when they divert their focus from greed and personal enrichment to real service among the humans. There are many faith healers in the societies today who would first of all bargain for the gifts or honorarium they would be given before they honour any invitation extended to them to come and preach and pray for the people. Gehazi was a typical example during the time of Elisha and till date. Covetousness led him to run after Naman contrary to the instructions given by his master. This eventually led to a curse in his life and he became

leprous. Nevertheless, Elisha used the power God gave him to heal natural element-water, poisonous food eaten by the guild of prophets and human-Naman (cf. 2 Kg. 2:19-21; 4:34-41; 5).

Miraculous Healings through Water

Water is one of the cardinal elements that man and nature cannot do without. It controls the regulatory system of the body and agricultural life cannot do without it. Water has been either a source of life or death to people from ages. Ancient people viewed water as a life giving entity and as a result, sacralised it. The crossing of River Jordan by the Israelites under the leadership of Joshua was the first indication that the water has contact with the supernatural power. Henceforth, it was not viewed as ordinary any longer. The water of Jericho became a source of sickness and death to them during Elisha's time. When he was contacted, he healed the water (2 Kg. 2:17-19). Not only that, he healed Naman through the instrument of water (2 Kg. 5).

Adamo (2005) has noted the use of hydrotherapy in African land and its efficacy. Many African faith healers have used this for many therapeutic reasons. For instance, Joseph Ayo Babalola was a renowned revivalist in the early 1930s to late 1959 in African territory who used water for various healing (Alokan, 1991). During the theophany he had, he claimed he was given water by God as his instrument of healing of all forms of sickness and disease (Alokan, 2010). According to Medaiyese the sanctified waters popularly called, *Omi Iye*, water of life, through prayers were used by God to heal many people during the Babalola revival (2013). He consecrated some rivers and streams in the towns he went to for his revival. Typical among these waters are River Ariran in Ikeji-Arakeji, and *Omi Ayo* in Ilesa all in Osun State, River *Kosehunti*, notable miracle water in Erio Ekiti, *Omi Oni* in Efon-Alaaye, Babalola Miracle water in Ido-Ile (formerly Ido Ajinare) all in Ekiti State, Nigeria (Alabi, 2013). All these waters were sanctified for healings, deliverance and miracles which people are still testifying to their spiritual potencies and efficacies till date. Notable among these waters is *Omi Oluwanifise*, meaning, "the Lord has need of you" or "the Lord has need of it" in Oluwanifise village, via Erio Ekiti. It is notable for its leprous cleansing, healings of lunatics and epilepsy curative powers.

Conclusion

Elisha had proper understanding of his people and their current experience. The social, food, family, political, economic and agricultural problems of the people under him as their spiritual leader were not ignored. Rather, he used the power God gave him to solve them. Elisha served his people and nation with his spiritual prowess and empowerment. There is a need for both religious and political leadership that is people oriented now in the society. The crop of leaders in the position we have should critically examine their political motives when canvassing for the votes of the people. The lands need leaders who are men of vision, sacrifice, integrity, sincerity, righteousness, commitment and passion to improve the living of standards of the populace. It is enough of the leaders who are richer than their countries and those who will continue in power with little change and improvement of the lives under them. Social amenities that will ameliorate the conditions of the people under them must be put in place. The natural and resources of the lands must be used to solve the problems of the people and not to enrich themselves. The era of opulent leaders in the midst of abject poverty of the populace should be eradicated in the African society.

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