

# **NIGERIAN JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN STUDIES**

VOL. 10 2014 & VOL. 11 2015

ISSN 0331-8966

**JEREMIAH AS A MODEL OF HOMILETICAL COURAGE  
FOR NIGERIAN PREACHERS**

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**Abstract**

The Old Testament prophets were preachers who had colour, courage and dynamic qualities but of them all, Jeremiah possessed the most universal appeal. He was a faithful, obedient and courageous preacher though he was severely persecuted, beaten, rejected and imprisoned. His life and ministry was a remarkable one and stand as a challenge to the contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers. This paper therefore examines and appraises the life and ministry of prophet Jeremiah by reflecting on some of his distinguished personal characteristics using historical-critical method. This is with a view of making him a model for the contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers. It is recommended that the contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers should reprimand superstitious religiosity, legalism, formalism and incorporation of worldliness into Christianity.

**Introduction**

All the prophets of Israel and Judah stand as inspiring personalities, but of them all, Jeremiah is the one who possesses the most universal appeal. His life and ministry was a remarkable one. Each student of the man sees in him some different trait or character. To some he is called the rebel prophet, a moral analyst, the reluctant prophet, etc while to many he is the prophet of the decline and fall of the Southern kingdom (Wood, 1959). Jeremiah's long and varied ministry, no doubt accounts for the variation of descriptive titles.

It was Jeremiah's lot to prophesy at a time when all things in Judah were rushing down to the final and mournful catastrophe; when political excitement was at its height; when the worst passions swayed the various parties and the most fatal counsel prevailed. It was the task of prophet Jeremiah to stand in the way over which his nation was rushing head long to destruction; to make an heroic effort to arrest it, and to turn it back; and to fail and be compelled to step to one side and see his own people whom he loved with the tenderness of a woman, plunge over the precipice into the wide, weltering ruin. In other words, Jeremiah ministered amidst a generation of people who preferred rushing madly into exile to yielding to the call of God to newness of life (Yates, 1942). Indeed, prophet Jeremiah was the most paradigm of the Old Testament prophets. It is no exaggeration to say that in order to understand what the Old Testament means by the term "prophet," it is necessary to study the man called prophet Jeremiah. Besides, to know what it means to be a sincere spokesman for God, it is important to have deep knowledge of Jeremiah's personality and ministerial career. There is much to shame us here, much to inspire us, and much from which we can learn.

### **The Birth and Early Life of prophet Jeremiah**

Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, a Levitical Priest, was likely born between 650 and 645B.C. during the regime of Mannaseh (Mauchline, 1978). He was from the small village of Anathoth, about the three miles northeast of Jerusalem in the territory of Benjamin. Born into the family of priest, he would have been trained in the true worship of Jehovah and in the traditions of his people as it was required of all Jewish parents (Deuteronomy 6:6-17). Therefore, the prophet's knowledge of Torah, Mosaic faith and historical books played a great part in shaping his life. Indeed, it was through Jeremiah's childhood training for holy service in the priesthood that God began grooming him for his future role.

The prophet's name "Jeremiah" seems to connote faithful worshipper of Yahweh. This is a response to paganism and syncretism that permeated Judah's religious life by the time Jeremiah

was born. The parents by the name given to their new born son might have been confessing their loyalty to Yahweh as the exalted and only God irrespective of Manasseh's threat (LeoGreen, 1971).

Moreover, despite the fact that Jeremiah was a son of a priest, we have no evidence that he ever functioned as a priest. However, there is a great tendency that he had great affinity to Jerusalem, a city of about an hour's trek to his home town, Anathoth. This experience might have exposed him to traders' evil doings, mostly the extortion of common men for personal gain. Also, Jeremiah's trips to Jerusalem might have brought him in contact with the preaching of the preceding prophets like Hosea whose teaching reflects much in Jeremiah's (Francisco, 1961). Jeremiah's exposure to the unpleasant encounters of the prophets, the sons of prophets, and what it called for to be a faithful prophet of God might have influenced his quick response of unfitness to the call to be a prophet.

### **The Call and Commission of Jeremiah**

The date of Jeremiah's call according to Cooper (1971) coincided with the "thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah" (Jer. 1:2), which was 627 B.C. Jeremiah's call was initiated by God. He did not clamour for the office of a prophet but the word of the Lord came to him (Jer. 1:4). In fact, God had already set Jeremiah apart for the office of a prophet before he was even born, in order to take God's words to all Israel and to the nations (Jer. 1:5). Jeremiah's response to the call was that of hesitation: "Ah Lord God, I do not know how to speak..." (Jer. 1:6). Jeremiah's response was characterized by the timid reluctance that is an all too-common accompaniment of youthful immaturity. Truly, a response to the call of God demands that each called person sobers himself/herself before the Almighty. Jeremiah's humble response led to the divine assurance and deep revelation about God's plan for his life even before he was born (Jer. 1: 7-10). The call to the ministry demanded of him acceptance of human inability without God's sustenance.

### **The Prevalent Situations at the time of Jeremiah's Prophecy**

It hardly needs to be stressed that the imperatives of the divine call to any life do not take place in an historical vacuum, and supremely is this case when God calls a spokesman to perform a special task. The call of each Old Testament prophets or deliverer, for example, occurred in a particular historical context that was usually precipitated by a national crisis of some sort. For Moses, it was the Egyptian crisis, for Gideon, it was Midianite crisis, and for Jeremiah, it was the sickness unto death that was destined to bring southern kingdom of Judah to her final end (Youngblood, 1990).

The last one hundred years of pre-Jeremiah in the history of Judah was marked by political, moral, economic and religious decay (Erdman, 1866). Manasseh's long reign in Judah (697-642B.C) according to Hunter (1993) was characterized by intentional return to idolatry. He elevated sacrifice, even human sacrifice and all sorts of detestable practices. In fact, human blood, especially the blood of faithful people, was like waste water to Manasseh. After the death of Manasseh, Amon his son succeeded him as the king of Judah. Amon imitated only the wickedness of his father. After three years, his servants murdered him.

In 640 B.C. thirteen years before Jeremiah started prophesying, Josiah came to the throne as king in Judah (2 Kings 21:24; 2 Chr. 33:25). However, the period that began with Josiah's reign was of very great change in Judah's fortunes as many reforms, religious and political were carried out. It was around this time that Jeremiah began to prophesy and his prophesy spanned through the reigns of kings Josiah to Gedaliah until the carrying away of Jerusalem to captivity in Babylon. Although, scholars' opinions differ as regard whether Jeremiah was active as a prophet or not during the reign of Josiah. This is due to the fact that very little material in the book of Jeremiah can be linked with any certainty to the reign of Josiah (Hunter, 1978). After the death of Josiah, three of his sons: Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Zedekiah and one of his grandsons, Jehoiachin ascended to the throne at different times but they did not walk in the way of their father, Josiah. Thus, after the death of Josiah,

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Judah sank into religious and political” decadence for none of the descendants of this pious king feared the Lord. They ruled with iron hands and imposed hard labour on the people, oppressed them to acquire wealth and perverted justice. Religious wise, the people of Judah during the reigns of the kings after Josiah relapsed even more deeply into idolatry. Josiah’s reformation which lingered for some years was later turned to superstitious religiosity. The people syncretised the Canaanites’ nature religions and incorporated baalism of foreign nations. The populace according to Yates (1942) was insincere and double-minded in respect of their religious conviction. Their religion can be characterized as a series of unfaithfulness, adultery and ritualism. Judah during the time of Jeremiah replaced right relationship with God with religious formalism. They demonstrated this by introducing pagan methods into temple worship. Sacrifice was elevated than sacrificial life and right relationship with God and fellow human beings (LeoGreen, 1971). The people remained mean and superficial spiritually. They showed religious zeal in the worship of Yahweh with some allegiance for other gods. The people of Judah were obstinate to the word of God. The leadership refuted true prophecy, neglected trusting God and clinged on to lies, self ability and mere sacrifice (2 Chronicles 36: 11-14).

Socially, during the time of Jeremiah’s prophecy there was social bankruptcy in Judah and its environs. The political and religious leaders were corrupt to the highest level. The rich were less concerned about the melancholy and despondent experiences of the poor. They extorted the wretched and almost everybody, from the least to the greatest, was greedy for gain (Yates, 1942). The religious leaders were not excluded. Some of the political, and also religious leaders acquired wealth and built big mansions out of unrighteous gain (Jer. 22: 13). Class discrimination was prominent contrary to the ordinance of God. The rich Jews used their fellow Jews as slaves without giving them good relief package. Judah was filled with hatred, envy, disloyalty, deceit, robbery, slander, bribery, lies and all other conceivable corruptions. The wicked mostly prospered

The most shameful was the practice of holy prostitution in the temple of God. The holy prostitution was the idea of sexual involvement in temple worship as a means to entice fertility god so that there would be bountiful harvest (Cawley and Millard, 1970). Judah incorporated this idea from the Canaanites and by that messed up their moral life. The prophets (beside Jeremiah) and priests who ought to emphasise moral awareness to the people, to their shame, joined the populace instead of warning them.

Economically, Judah during the time of Jeremiah's prophecy was so poor that Jeremiah had to cry out and asked why the wicked prospered. Only few individuals were opportune to have enough to carry on with life. The populace was even confused as to why they experienced poor harvest. Out of ignorance they concluded that their withdrawal from Baal worship brought about their economic misfortune. Coincidentally, there<sup>^</sup> was bad harvest at the time, and the people attributed it to the result of their broken allegiance to the queen of heavens. In fact, the bad economy led the people to openly attest their trust in idol (Jer. 44:16-18).

Basically, the political, religious, social and economic lives in Judah as at the time of Jeremiah's prophecy were messed up by both great and small. It is crystal clear that Jeremiah ministered amidst many political leaders whose main aim was not to serve but to be served. Nevertheless, he declared the will of God to the people who had made up their minds to follow deception and was willing to hear what suited their hearings. The above experiences and circumstances that surrounded the time of Jeremiah's prophecy are still prevailing in Nigeria today, therefore, the need for Jeremiah-like preachers who will declare the whole counsel of God without minding stepping on toes.

### **Jeremiah as a Model of Homiletical Courage for Nigerian Preachers**

The contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers have some valuable lessons to learn from the life and ministry of prophet Jeremiah considering the similarities of the prevailing religious,

political, social and economic circumstances of Jeremiah's time and the present "Nigerian society. And indeed, the amount of information recorded concerning Jeremiah's life makes it impossible to describe the man fully in a paper such as this. In short, more is known of Jeremiah's life than that of any other Old Testament writing prophets, because throughout the book of Jeremiah, the writer gives us numerous clues concerning himself and his times. Below are the distinctive characteristics of prophet Jeremiah that are worthy of emulation by the contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers.

### **Courageous and faithful**

We find in Jeremiah, great courage to do what was right. His words are stinging words, probing the very root of what was wrong with Judah without minding stepping on the toes of the kings, prophets, priests and the entire populace (Jer. 22:1-18; 14:13-16; 23:1-21; 27:1ff). And in spite of the various oppositions he met, he was not discouraged in preaching the word of the Lord. He was faithful, loyal and committed to his commission. He would not glibly speak the will of God as other prophets who spoke glibly of God's will without going through the arduous discipline of discovering what it really was (Jer. 23: 18-28cf 28:1 Iff; 42:7). Prophet Jeremiah would never speak what people wanted to hear but what God wanted him to say. As a result, he did not command the respect of many people of his generation but his courage and faithfulness is entirely unbreakable.

Contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers should learn from prophet Jeremiah by teaching and preaching the undiluted word of God irrespective of the circumstances facing them. Just like Jeremiah, the preachers are to pronounce the judgement of the Lord upon the unrepentant sinners and His mercy to those who repent. It is however sad that most of the contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers preach what the people want to hear even when it goes against the will of God. They are doing this in order to get people's acceptance, to avoid persecution and for other self interests such as money, promotion and so on. Besides, some preachers who find

themselves in the midst of popular but wrong preachers have lost courage to preach the will of God to their society. So, because they could not beat them they joined them. What a great compromise on the part of Christian preachers today! Courage and faithfulness is a necessity for Christian preachers to fulfill their God's given mandates.

### **Obedience**

Jeremiah demonstrated and lived a life of total obedience to God. He was always prompt to discharge the oracle of God even when his human nature pressurised him not to (Jer. 20:9). He was an example of selfless faithful prophet/preacher whose pivotal concern was only to please his God. No wonder why Mathew reports that some folk thought that Jesus was Jeremiah come to life again (Mathew 16: 14). Besides, Jeremiah maintained a godly mature preacher's integrity by obeying the government of his day in accordance to his convictions. One would have expected the prophet to turn rascal especially at the face of severe persecution, instead, he adhered to the king's command when he was restricted to a certain place. Also, Jeremiah renounced marriage in obedience to God (Jer. 16: 1-4). Jeremiah's life of total obedience to God who called him is a great challenge today to contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers. Most preachers today, because of selfish interests would rather obey the voice of one powerful rich individual(s) in the church/society than obeying the voice of God. Obedience to God's voice irrespective of the consequences is a true mark of a true preacher. However, a true Christian is expected to be obedient to God's command and the law of the land when such law does not contravene the will of God. As never before, our homes, churches, cities and nations need decisive leaders who will obey the word of God.

### **Prayerful**

The secret of Jeremiah's spiritual stability was in his personal communication with God (Wood, 1959). Jeremiah's regular

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correspondence with heaven gave him inner strength, spiritual resources and calm confidence in a state of confusion, crisis and calamity. As part of his prophetic ministry, Jeremiah did not take the issue of prayer very lightly bearing in mind the fact that a prayerless preacher is a powerless preacher while a prayerful preacher is a powerful preacher. In fact, most of what is known as Jeremiah's confessions are prayers to God. He believed that nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer. Thus, he spent much time alone with God in prayer, praying for his ministry and interceding on behalf of his people (Jer. 9:1; 13:17; 46: 6-22). His prayer life showed him as a sincere confessor "par excellence". He prayed to a point that God asked him not to pray again for his people because He (God) would not hear (Jer.

7:16; 11:4ff; 15:1).

It is pathetic to note that most contemporary Christian preachers fail to realise that prayer is an indispensable part of their ministry. They want instant miracles but lagged behind when it comes to the ministry of prayer. And until the preachers learn how to pray effectively, nothing desirable would happen because prayer is the preacher's instrument of change against obstacles. Indeed, the power of prayer will keep the preachers intact spiritually and make the will of God clearer in their lives. The contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers should therefore learn to rely on the power of prayer as they faithfully carry on the ministry.

### **Spiritual Alertness/Sensitivity**

Prophet Jeremiah was a man who was spiritually alert right from the episode of his call into the ministry. His spiritual alertness made him to discern God's voice and to hear Him whenever He speaks. He was sensitive to the political, social, economic and religious aspects of his people's life and ministered to them all (Owen, 1981). Jeremiah's spiritual alertness made it easy for him to comprehend and to give clear meaning to the revelations of God. He was "far ahead of his generation in insight" (Yates, 1942). In fact, when priests and prophets who ought to have known better were

encouraging a mood which bore no relationship to what was going on in the society, Jeremiah, a man who was spiritually sensitive stood to condemn their views (Jer. 6:13-15cf 4:9-10). Jeremiah refused to join their follies and so, he distinguished himself as the prophet of God.

It is no longer news today that most of the contemporary Nigeria Christian preachers that are expected to guide the people and lead them in the way of the Lord are themselves indulging in various evil and corrupt practices. Such preachers who have joined the populace to do evil can hardly be -expected to guard the conscience of the community for which they are responsible. Amidst all forms of social vices, religious crises, economic and political instability, the preachers could not avoid being spiritually alert in order that they might fulfill God's purpose among their people. This is possible only when a preacher lives a spirit-controlled life, that is, "when our human spirit is mastered and controlled by the Holy Spirit" (Sanders, 1985).

### **Sincerity/Honesty**

Prophet Jeremiah was a sincere/honest man before God and man. In him we find the true picture of a sincere man of God in that he burst out the frankness of his emotional feeling and restlessness in his mind unto God in what is called "concession of Jeremiah" (Vangermeren, 1990). Jeremiah would not camouflage to be what he was not. As a sincere man of God, Jeremiah would not say all is well when nothing is well. Jeremiah unlike many contemporary Christian preachers was not a pretender. Thus, his life was characterised by straight-forwardness, fairness and transparent honesty (Tuck, 1981). He would rather live without anything than to take advantage of others through insincerity. Just because of what to eat or and what they want to be, most contemporary Christian preachers have thrown sincerity as a virtue into the dustbin. Hypocritical act is now a common feature among the ministers of God. In this regard, the life of prophet Jeremiah, a sincere, honest and transparent man of God stands to challenge the nowadays preachers who twist and adulterate the word of God for selfish gains.

### ***Self- Understanding***

Jeremiah's struggles against his call in the first chapter of his book offers us precious material by which we can describe him as a man who fully understood who he was. When God called him to a prophetic ministry, his response was that of a man who having full knowledge of himself and the task he was to carry out forthrightly pleaded his inability (Jer. 1:6). He however, emptied himself before God and God gave young Jeremiah three wonderful assurances (Jer. 1 : 4-5). This stands as a model for the contemporary ministers of God. When it comes to serving the Lord, there is a sense in which nobody is adequate but when God calls, he equips and makes one adequate for the task. Jeremiah knew his limitations, so he depended on the unlimited power of God. Just like Jeremiah, every true minister of God must receive a divine call, recognise his/her limitations and trust God for enablement. Today, in Nigeria, there are so many "self appointed" preachers who are only in the ministry because they could not get any other job. Besides, there are so many who are indeed called but their lives as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto the Lord. The love for God and man makes it impossible for the preacher to keep calm seeing souls perishing or the righteous suffering and the poor oppressed. The love for God and man is demanded from every minister of God in order to attend to the social, political, religious and economic instabilities facing the nation. The ministers of God in Nigeria should as much as possible attend to all areas of people's lives that are being crumbled by some of the contemporary political and religious leaders.

Contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers should learn to reprimand superstitious religiosity, legalism, formalism and incorporation of workfliness into Christianity. They are to proclaim practical Christianity, encouraging people to fight against social discrimination, corruption, immorality, injustice, racism, greedy for gain, slander, bribery, lies, exploration and pretence.

Also, contemporary Christian preachers should be sensitive spiritually and physically to people's situation and not just preaching to them. In the same vein, preachers should have broad knowledge of

national and church history as a means to understand the past, negative and positive experiences of the people. This will enhance correction of past mistakes, building a creative present and preparation for meaningful future.

Since no condition is permanent, Christian ministers should learn to endure every situation or circumstances in which they find themselves at one time or the other in the course of discharging their ministerial assignments. When the going is rough, preachers of the Gospel need endurance, which is one of the keys to success. Besides, Christian preachers in this contemporary time should demonstrate untainted sincerity and transparent honesty if their preaching will have any positive impact on their society. Similarly, ministers of God should learn to control their emotions and accept their worth as uncontrolled passion leads to sin and unacceptable self-worth leads to self-glorification.

The preaching of die word of God is an imperative injunction for all Christian ministers. Thus, God's word must not be preached cheaply as did by the false prophets in the days of Jeremiah who declared, "thus says the Lord" even when God has not spoken. The preacher should wait for a long time to receive God's word before saying, "thus says the Lord". So, ministers of God must devote themselves to careful study of the word of God and having understood its central truth and its relevance to the present hearers, he/she should declare the whole counsel of God. They are expected to teach the holiness of God, the nature of sin, the inevitable judgment of God and the unmerited forgiveness that is through Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah.

In conclusion, the life and ministry of prophet Jeremiah is worth studying by the contemporary Nigerian Christian preachers to see a model of a faithful, honest, obedient, sensitive and prayerful preacher who was an epitome of humility and sincerity. Though a man of sorrow; severely persecuted and ostracised but he endured to the end of his life. His life and ministry stand as a great challenge to the contemporary Christian preachers. This is for the fact that the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the source and base of the Christian

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ministry reflected much of Jeremiah's life and ministry. Indeed, if Jeremiah's pattern of life and ministry is being emulated, the contemporary Christian preachers in Nigeria will be able to stand as true and worthy ambassadors of Christ rightly dividing the word of truth and need not to be ashamed.

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