



JEREMIAH 7:1-15 READ IN THE CONTEXT OF HYPOCRITICAL LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines Jeremiah 7:1-15, the “Temple Sermon,” within the contemporary Nigerian context, focusing on the parallels between ancient Israel's religious hypocrisy and modern leadership failings. It analyzes how Jeremiah's message of genuine repentance and social justice challenges the superficial religiosity and corruption often found in Nigerian leadership. The major aim of the study is analyse Jeremiah 7:1-15 and apply its exegetical deductions in order to curb the aftermath of hypocritical leadership in Nigeria. The research methodology used in this study is the historical-critical method of biblical exegesis. The research explores the implications of prioritizing ritual over ethical conduct and the consequences of leaders who exploit religion for personal gain while neglecting the needs of the people. It is contended that Nigerian political culture involves corruption. It argues that Nigeria's leadership crisis mirrors Judah's 7th-century BCE conditions, which include ritualistic religion without justice, false trust in sacred institutions, and oppression of the vulnerable. It is observed that Nigeria's political and religious leadership is clouded by hypocrisy. Gerrymandering and related vices are the order of the day in Nigeria's nature of leadership. Humanity is traded with exploitation and marginalization. True religion is exchanged for fake rituals and sacrifices, often intoned and emphasized by ordained religious priests in Nigerian religious practice. It is recommended that a contextual study of Jeremiah 7:1-15 would promote ethical leadership rooted in prophetic critique and a commitment to justice, transparency, and accountability in Nigeria's leadership.

Keywords: Jeremiah 7:1-15, Leadership, Hypocrisy, Exegesis, Nigeria

Introduction

Hypocritical leadership is a contemporary experience in virtually every sector in Nigeria. Despite its abundant natural resources and diverse population, Nigeria is grappling with significant challenges related to corruption, poverty, and inequality. Religious institutions hold considerable influence in Nigerian society, and many leaders often publicly display their faith (Mbembe, 2001). However, there is a perceived disconnect between these public displays of religiosity and the ethical conduct of many leaders, mirroring the situation in ancient Judah during Jeremiah's time. The study is further contextualized in the late seventh century BC, when the nation was stuck between Egypt and Babylon, where society was rotting with corruption. The people were using religion as a shield to hide their behaviour from God (Brueggemann, 1998). Jeremiah 7:1-15 provides a powerful critique of religious hypocrisy and social injustice, offering a lens through which to examine similar issues in contemporary Nigeria. The historical setting of Jeremiah's

message is that the people believed physical proximity to sacred space overrides ethical obedience (Lundbom, 1999).

The core problem is the prevalence of hypocritical leadership in Nigeria, where outward religious observance often masks corruption, injustice, and a lack of genuine concern for the welfare of the people (Achebe, 1983). This disconnect erodes public trust, hinders development, and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and inequality (Ake, 1996). The religious leaders were using the temple as a safe house for their unethical lives. The people believed that as long as they showed up to the temple, they were safe. There is a reliance on empty ritual while tolerating idolatry, economic injustice, and immorality. There is a false sense of security in religious structures instead of God himself (Brueggemann, 1998). The church is becoming talismans of cultural identity rather than conduits of holy living. This study seeks to address this problem by re-examining Jeremiah's prophetic message and exploring how it can inform a more authentic and ethical approach to leadership in Nigeria, emphasizing accountability, transparency, social justice, and genuine faith.

The research methodology adopted in this study is historical critical method of biblical exegesis. The historical-critical method (HCM), also known as historical criticism or higher criticism, is a branch of criticism that investigates the origins of ancient texts to understand the "world behind the text. The historical-critical method is a scholarly approach to biblical texts that seeks to understand them within their original historical contexts through analysis of authorship, date, sources, and cultural settings. It uses textual criticism to compare manuscripts and to determine as well as establish original wordings (Bruce, 2005). This method is apt for this study because the text (Jeremiah 7:1-15) under investigation is an ancient text that needs its world to be explored for better understanding of its original context.

Hebrew Text of Jeremiah 7:1-15

1 הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר הִנֵּה אֶל־יְרֵמְיָהוּ מֵאֵת יְהוָה לֵאמֹר:

2 עָמַד בְּשַׁעַר בַּיִת יְהוָה וקראת שם את־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וְאָמַרְתָּ שְׁמָעוּ דְּבַר־יְהוָה כָּל־יְהוּדָה הַבָּאִים בְּשַׁעְרֵי הָאֵלֶּה לְהַשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לַיהוָה:

3 כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵיטִיבוּ דַרְכֵיכֶם וּמַעַלְלֵיכֶם וְאִשְׁכַּנְתֶּם אֶתְכֶם בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה:

4 אֲל־תִּבְטְחוּ לָכֶם אֶל־דְּבַר־יְשָׁקָר לֵאמֹר הֵיכַל יְהוָה הֵיכַל יְהוָה הַזֶּה הִנֵּה הִמָּה:

5 כִּי אִם־הֵיטִיב תִּטְיִבוּ אֶת־דַּרְכֵיכֶם וְאֶת־מַעַלְלֵיכֶם אִם־עָשׂוֹ תַעֲשׂוּ מִשְׁפָּט בֵּין אִישׁ וּבֵין רֵעֵהוּ:

6 גַּר יְתוֹם וְאֶלְמָנָה לֹא תַעֲשִׂקוּ וְגַם נָקִי אֲל־תִּשְׁפָּכוּ בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרִים לֹא תִלְכוּ לְרַע לָכֶם:

7 וְשִׁכַּנְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם לְמִן־עוֹלָם וְעַד־עוֹלָם:

8 הִנֵּה אֲתֶם בֹּטְחִים לָכֶם עַל־דְּבַר־יְשָׁקָר לְבַלְתִּי הוֹעִיל:

9 הִגִּנְבוּ רִצְחַת וְנֹאֵף וְהַשְׁבַּע לְשָׁקָר וּמָטָר לִבְעַל וְהָלַךְ אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִדְעָתֶם:

10 וּבָאתֶם וַעֲמַדְתֶּם לִפְנֵי בַּיִת הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר נִקְרָא־שְׁמִי עָלָיו וְאָמַרְתֶּם נִצַּלְנוּ לְמַעַן עֲשׂוֹת אֵת כָּל־הַתּוֹעֲבוֹת הָאֵלֶּה:



11 המערת פראים הנה הבית הנה אשר-נקרא-שמי עליו בעיניכם גם אנכי הנה ראיתי נאם-יהוה:

12 כי לכו-נא אל-מקומי אשר בשילו אשר שבנתי שמי שם בראשונה וראו את אשר-עשיתי לו מפני רעת עמי ישראל:

13 ועתה יען עשותכם את-כל-המעשים האלה נאם-יהוה ואדבר אליכם השכם ודבר ולא שמעםם ואקרא אתכם ולא עניתם:

14 ועשיתי לביתי אשר נקרא-שמי עליו אשר אתם בטחים בו ולמקום אשר-נתתי לכם ולאבותיכם כאשר עשיתי לשלו:

15 והשלכתי אתכם מעל פני כאשר השלכתי את-כל-אחיכם את כל-גורע אפרים:

English Translation of Jeremiah 7:1-15

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:

2 Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD.

3 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place.

4 Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD."

5 For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another,

6 if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt,

7 then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

8 Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail.

9 Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known,

10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"-- only to go on doing all these abominations?

11 Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD.

12 Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel.

13 And now, because you have done all these things, says the LORD, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer,

14 therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh.

15 And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Socio-Cultural Context of Jeremiah 7:1-15

Jeremiah 7:1-15 is a prophetic oracle delivered c. 609 BCE at Jerusalem's temple gate, condemning Judah's trust in ritual while ignoring justice. Jeremiah delivered the "Temple Sermon" at the gate of the temple (Jer 7:2), challenging the people's trust in the temple while practicing injustice (Lundbom, 1999). The sermon occurred during a national festival when the temple was crowded. Jeremiah 7 most plausibly falls early in Jehoiakim's reign (c. 608–605 BC). This was a turbulent period for Judah, with the decline of Assyria and the rise of Babylon and Egypt vying for power. Judah was caught in the middle of this political instability. Judah was a vassal state under Egypt after Assyria's fall. Jehoiakim was a puppet king imposed by Pharaoh Necho II (Brueggemann, 1998). There was the belief that God would protect Jerusalem and the temple no matter what. The temple in Jerusalem was seen as inviolable ("temple theology"), leading to false security. King Josiah's reforms had centralized worship in the Jerusalem temple (2 Kings 23), but idolatry resurged immediately after his death. Judah slipped back into her old idolatrous ways but still had the habit of going through the motions of worship at the temple.

Political and Religious context of the text indicate that the people of Judah were living in denial, thinking God wouldn't judge them because the Temple was present. False prophets reinforced this by saying things like, "God will do nothing, no disaster will come upon us". (Dearman, 2002). It is upon this ground that Jeremiah began his ministry as the dominant world power, the Assyrians, descended into civil war. As the Assyrians began to lose their power, Babylon and Egypt sought to occupy the power vacuum that the Assyrians would leave. Jeremiah's sermon indicts social injustice, idolatry, and empty ritual. He rebukes abuses such as the oppression of sojourners, orphans, and widows, shedding innocent blood, and following other gods—classic covenant violations. In addition, Stulman (2005) avers that there was widespread oppression of vulnerable groups (aliens, orphans, widows) and shedding of innocent blood (e.g., judicial murders). The people of Judah trusted in deceptive words and thought that going through the rituals of religion would protect them. They thought the temple was like the ultimate lucky rabbit's foot. The people were immoral, dishonest, violent, and idolatrous, yet they thought they were safe because they offered sacrifices in the temple.

Close Reading of Jeremiah 7:1-15

Divine Command to amend Wrong Doings (vv 1-4)

The Hebrew word *הַדְבָר* which is translated "word" is used in the text to designate prophetic voice. This word has other meanings including "matter" and "thing". The word can be used in the context of "an issue" or "a case" at hand but that is not its implication in the context of its usage in the study text. However, this word is not just a speech, it a solemn word directed to people for specific purpose(s). It is a matter that needs urgent attention in order to prevent subsequent danger. Therefore, the use of the word *הַדְבָר* should neither be relegated nor neglected in this text.

Another important Hebrew word used in the beginning part of this text is *יְהוָה* *YHWH* which usually translated "LORD" in English versions of the Old Testament. *YHWH* is often translated "LORD" in English but pronounced "Adonai" in accordance with Hebrew grammar. The word is used in every OT text to differentiate it from the Hebrew word *אֲדֹנָי* *'ādôn* which means "lord" or "master" usually used for men who wield honour in the family and society in ancient Israel. Whereas *'ādôn*

is used for human beings only, *YHWH* is restricted and reserved for the Supreme Being only. The word *YHWH* is carefully used in the study text to designate the Supremacy of the Being who has the word which the prophet must say. God tells Jeremiah to stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim His word to all the people of Judah who enter to worship. The Hebrew sentence *אֲמַדְּוּ דַרְכֵיכֶם וּדְעוּתֵיכֶם* translated "amend your ways and your deeds" implies ethical transformation, not ritual (Holladay, 1986). The Lord calls the people to amend their ways and their deeds so that He may dwell with them in that place. The deceptive words in verse 4 are used to refer to the slogan "temple of the Lord" which indicates reduction of faith to a magical incantation. The people are warned not to trust in the deceptive words, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD" (Thompson, 1980).

The passage emphasizes that outward behaviour, practices, ethics, and rituals are meaningless if their lives are filled with injustice, idolatry, and hypocrisy. According to Henry (1996), the orders given to the prophet to preach the sermon is not only a general commission, but particular directions and instructions for every message he delivered. The physical setting for the sermon is stated but the time was omitted. It would affront the priests, and expose the prophet to their rage, to have such a message as this delivered within their precincts; but the prophet must not fear the face of man, he cannot be faithful to his God if he does.

Benefits of Amendment of Wrong Doings (vv 5-7)

Jeremiah tells them what amendment was necessary for them to escape destruction. Fretheim (2002) posits that the Hebrew phrase *אֲמַדְּוּ דַרְכֵיכֶם* indicates emphasis on authenticity over performative repentance. It must be a thorough, universal, continued, persevering reformation. If they thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbour, do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood, then God will cause them to dwell in that place. Clements (1988) asserts that to dwell in this place" as used in the text implies conditional promise, land security depends on social justice.

Furthermore, the Israelites, thinking too much like their neighbors, had come to think the same way about their God and his temple, converting it to a protective talisman (Matthews, Chavalas and Walton, 2000). They must keep close to the worship of the true God only, neither walking after other gods. Upon these conditions, God will establish and fix them in the land forever, and they shall possess it as their fathers did before them.

The Danger of Persisting in Corruption (vv 8-15)

The people are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. Hypocrisy and abominations remain their incessant practices. They steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and follow other gods, and then come and stand before God in His house and say, "We are safe!"

The temple is taken as a Den of Robbers. The Hebrew phrase *מְעִרַת פְּרִיזִים* translated "den of robbers" is a hideout for criminals; Jesus later quotes this against the temple (in Mk 11:17). God asks if His house has become a den of robbers to them and declares that He has seen it. Shiloh is used as a reference point to indicate warning to the people of Israel (McKane, 1986). The use of Shiloh is used to indicate former sanctuary destroyed by Philistines (c. 1050 BCE), hence a warning to the people of Israel. God tells them to go to Shiloh, where He first made His name dwell, and see what He did to it because of the wickedness of His people Israel (Sharp, 2003). Imminent judgment is another impending disaster waiting the people. Because they have done all

these things and have not listened to God's repeated warnings, He will do to the temple as He did to Shiloh and will cast them out of His sight. The hypocrisy of combining ritual worship with persistent sin is exposed.

Moreover, The prophetic voice contends strongly that the people put their trust in falsehood. The use of the Hebrew word *בטח* denotes the extent to which the people of Judah thinks that they are safe through observance of religious rituals. *בטח* which is translated “trust” in the English version also implies to feel safe. The people by implication were careless with the prophetic voice regarding their misdeed as a result of their tentative safety in the incessant offerings and sacrifices. However, that is not divine requirements from them. The Hebrew interrogation *הֲגָנֹב* translated “will you steal?” followed by other crimes in the chain of the interrogative sentence shows that the people are guilty are series of wicked act, hence no amount of sacrifices and repeated offerings would offer them safety as they erroneously surmise. Other crimes in addition to stealing according to the study text include murder, adultery, false oath, burning of incense to Baal, walking after other gods and robbery. The people cannot the culprits of these thefts and still endure the presence of the LORD. In the similar vein, Henry and Scott (1997) purports that no observances, professions, or supposed revelations, will profit, if men do not amend their ways and their doings. None can claim an interest in free salvation, who allow themselves in the practice of known sin, or live in the neglect of known duty. They thought that the temple they profaned would be their protection. Spence-Jones (2004) contends that it is not a simple act of transgression, but complex and supremely self-conscious. As on this occasion the Jews were manifoldly sinful in their breach of faith with God and their fellow-countrymen; in the dishonour they showed to God by lightly regarding the most solemn oath and ordinance; and in the hypocrisy by which the whole proceeding was characterized; so the false saint is a sinner of the deepest dye.

Verse 15 in which the Hebrew word *שָׁלַךְ* is used shows that *YHWH* is prepared to reduce the people to nothing for neglecting him (*YHWH*). *שָׁלַךְ* which is translated “cast out” in English versions of the OT is also used as “bring down”. The word is carefully selected in order to illustrate that the people of Judah will be brought down by the LORD for the abominations committed by them against LORD. They must not be spared for anything since they were blatant in disobeying the LORD. Jamieson, Fausset, Fausset, Brown and Brown (1997) opine that the use of your brethren implies children of Abraham, as much as they are. The whole seed of Ephraim is also used to imply that they (generation of Ephraim) were superior to Judah in numbers and power. They (Ephraim) were *ten* tribes but Judah is two tribes. “Ephraim,” as the leading tribe, stands for the whole ten tribes, yet they were casted by the LORD when deviated from the ways of the LORD, how much more Judah.

Exegetical Findings

1. The Supreme LORD stressed on ethical transformation of Israel’s leadership not on rituals.
2. The temple of the LORD is reduced to magical incantation.
3. The major essence of the amendment was for the people to avert divine indignation.
4. The Temple of God is taken as hideout for criminals, hence a den of robbers.
5. The recalcitrance of the people would maKe them to be reduced to nothing by the LORD.

Overview of Hypocritical Leadership

Hypocritical leadership refers to the practice where leaders profess adherence to ethical and moral standards but fail to practice what they preach. This disconnect can undermine trust and integrity, leading to disillusionment among followers. In many contexts, hypocritical leadership can be linked to a larger culture of corruption, where leaders are more interested in personal gain than the welfare of their constituents. Scholars argue that effective leadership should align words and actions, modeling the values and ethics they espouse.

Hypocritical Leadership in Nigeria

In Nigeria, hypocritical leadership manifests through a combination of political corruption, neglect of social justice, and the exploitation of religious sentiments for personal gain. Leaders frequently make promises aimed at rooting out corruption and poverty, yet many indulge in corrupt practices themselves. The Nigerian populace often finds itself disillusioned by political leaders who neglect the basic needs of the citizens while enjoying lavish lifestyles (Ojukwu, 2019). Leadership often lacks accountability, and public resources are mismanaged, which only deepens societal issues like poverty and inequality (Nwankwo, 2021). The religious dimension is pronounced, as many leaders invoke religious rhetoric while engaging in unethical behaviour.

Examples of hypocritical leadership abound in Nigerian leadership. In the political sector, political leaders, particularly many past Nigerian leaders, such as former President Goodluck Jonathan, faced allegations of corruption and mismanagement while often touting their commitment to transparency and good governance (Sani, 2020).

In the religious sphere, some prominent pastors and religious figures have amassed wealth through their ministries while failing to address systemic injustice and poverty within their communities (Ibrahim, 2022). In the economic sphere, business executives often promise ethical practices and corporate social responsibility while engaging in exploitative labor practices and environmental negligence (Adebayo, 2021).

Application of the Findings of the Exegesis in Nigerian Leadership

The exegesis of Jeremiah 7:1-15 reveals several pertinent applications for Nigerian leadership. It highlights the importance of genuine repentance, ethical governance, and accountability. Leaders are called to action based on integrity rather than superficial religious observance. The text critiques the false sense of security that comes from mere ritual without corresponding ethical behavior, which echoes in the context of Nigerian leadership where some leaders rely on their religious status while failing to act righteously (Ologun, 2020).

The findings of the exegesis indicate that the Supreme LORD stressed on ethical transformation of Israel's leadership, not rituals. This calls for a shift in focus from outward displays of religiosity (attending religious services, donating to religious causes) to demonstrable ethical conduct in public office. Leaders perform religious rituals (e.g., public prayers, pilgrimages) while looting public funds. For instance, governors attend "Thanksgiving services" after budget approval, then embezzle allocations. Nigerian leaders should be evaluated on their commitment to transparency, accountability, and social justice, not just their religious affiliations or activities. Jeremiah condemns empty rituals without justice (v.5-6). Therefore, Nigerian leaders should prioritize anti-corruption reforms over religious performances.

The temple of the LORD is reduced to magical incantation is an exegetical deduction of this study. Deceptive words are rejected according to the prophetic oracle. Leaders of various spheres in Nigeria should replace religious slogans with policy competence. This exegetical

discovery further highlights the danger of leaders using religious slogans or symbols to manipulate public opinion or create a false sense of security. Nigerian leaders should avoid exploiting religious sentiments for political gain and instead focus on addressing the real needs of the people through effective policies and good governance.

It is discovered from the exegesis that the major essence of the amendment was for the people to avert divine indignation. This underscores the importance of repentance and genuine change in behavior to avoid negative consequences. Nigerian leaders should acknowledge their failures, take responsibility for their actions, and commit to reforming corrupt practices and unjust systems. In Nigeria, national crises (terrorism, poverty) serve as potential divine judgment. Shiloh's destruction (v.14) warns of institutional collapse to the Israelites. Therefore, Nigerian leaders ought to repent and restitute stolen wealth to avert national ruin.

The finding of the exegesis shows that the Temple of God is taken as hideout for criminals; hence, it is a den of robbers. This speaks to the problem of corruption and impunity, where leaders use their positions for personal enrichment and shield themselves from accountability. Nigerian leaders should prioritize justice and ensure that those who engage in corruption are held accountable, regardless of their status or connections. In Nigeria, sacred spaces are used to launder corruption, for instance, storing palliatives in churches/mosques in 2020, year of Covid-19. This calls for necessary action including audit religious institutions that receive state funds for specific project.

Moreover, the exegesis reveals that the recalcitrance of the people would make them to be reduced to nothing by the LORD. This serves as a warning about the consequences of persistent disobedience and disregard for God's laws. Nigerian leaders should heed the call for ethical transformation and social justice, recognizing that failure to do so will ultimately lead to societal decay and loss of divine favour. In Nigeria, there is persistent corruption despite warnings. The Israelites got exile threat for unrepentant Judah (v.15). On this note, Nigerian citizens should prioritize accountability or face state failure.

Recommendations

1. Both political and religious leaders are encouraged to cultivate integrity, ensuring their actions align with their stated beliefs and commitments.
2. Every sector in Nigeria should establish robust systems for accountability that hold leaders accountable for their decisions and actions.
3. The government should create platforms for community engagement where citizens can voice their concerns and hold leaders accountable.
4. The legal and educational sphere should promote education that emphasizes civic responsibility and the moral obligations of leadership to foster a more informed electorate.
5. Religious leaders should use their platforms to advocate for justice and social reform, focusing on ethical issues rather than ritualistic practices.

Conclusion

This study underscores the pressing issue of hypocritical leadership in Nigeria, paralleling the prophetic message of Jeremiah 7:1-15. It emphasizes the necessity for genuine repentance and ethical conduct among leaders. The lessons from Jeremiah challenge Nigerian leaders to rise above the superficial and deeply engage in practices that reflect justice, accountability, and integrity. The



call for a transformative approach to leadership is urgent, as it is foundational for building trust and fostering a society that truly embodies the values of righteousness and social equity.

Jeremiah 7:1-15 exposes Nigeria's hypocritical leadership as a covenantal betrayal. The text's warning is urgent, indicating that without justice for the poor, Nigeria risks becoming a modern Shiloh – a nation ruined by its elite's rapacity. Hope lies only in heeding Jeremiah's call. The better future is found in the change of better idiosyncrasy.

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