

Religion, Leadership and Society: Focus on Nigeria



EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Ade P. Dopamu

EDITORS

R.D. Abubakre, E. Ade Odumuyiwa, Oyeronke Olajubu,
Rotimi Omotoye, Danoye Oguntola-Laguda

Revd. Dr. C.O. Ogunkunle

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A publication of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions

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CONTENTS

Editors and Contributors	vii
Preface	xi

SECTION A: CHRISTIANITY

Influence of Religious Leadership in the Society: A Case Study of Prophet Isaiah — C.O. Ogunkunle	16
The Relationship Between the Civil and Religious Leaders in the Old Testament with Reference to Nigeria — Ariri-Chidomere	25
Charisma And Leadership Crisis: An Examination of the Christ Apostolic Church in Nigeria — Rotimi Omotoye	37
New Testament Divorce Texts — A.M. Okorie	46
Conceptual Overview of Ethics and Christian Leadership in The 21st Century — B.O. Igboin	53
A Critical View of the Influence of Christian Leadership in Nigeria Today — Pius Oyeniran Abioje	64
An Appraisal of the Ministry of Moses and Its Implications for Religious Leaders Today — Philemon O. Amanzee	75
Women and Leadership in the Church — L.B. Akande	83
Leadership in the Church: A Case Study of Emmanuel Oyewole Akingbala of the Baptist Church (1908-2000) — Taye Adamolekun	90
Women and the Church: An Appraisal — Oluwatosin A. Akintan	99
Reaching Out for Power: Nigerian Women and Church Leadership — Olatundun A. Oderinde	109
Church Leadership in Nigeria: Combining Spiritual and Organizational Techniques — A. Olalekan Dairo	119

SECTION C: AFRICAN RELIGION (AFREL)

- Acceptance or Tolerance: The Challenge from African Religion
for Leaders and Society — T. F. Jemiriye 251
- Scientific Construction of Ifa in Yoruba Healing System
— Aderemi S. Ajala and Obafemi C. Jegede 259
- The Leadership Role of Indigenous Medicine Men in the Yoruba
Traditional Community: A Religio-Social Analysis
— E. O. Babalola 275
- Assigning Constitutional Roles to Traditional Rulers in Nigeria:
Implications for Religion — A.A. Akanni 281

SECTION D: RELIGIOUS INTERACTION

- An Exposition of Manipulation of Religions in the Society
— V. O. Adefarasin 293
- Religious Leadership: A Challenge to the Nigerian Society
— Nwora Sam Nwigwe 299
- An Evaluation of the Roles of Religious Leaders and Followership
in Nigeria — E. Ade Odumuyiwa 309
- ✓ Leadership Qualities Needed in the Contemporary Nigerian Society
— A.G. Alamu 318
- Religious Ethics and Leadership: Challenges for Contemporary
Nigerian Society — S. Awoniyi 326
- Religion, Leadership and Struggle for Power in Nigeria: A Case Study
of the 2003 Presidential Elections in Nigeria
— Danoye Oguntola-Laguda 335

SECTION E: APPENDICES

- APPENDIX I: Keynote Address — Ismail A.B. Balogun 348
- Appendix II: A Welcome Address to the 24th Annual Conference of the
Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions (NASR) held at the
University of Ilorin, From Oct. 6-11, 2003
— E. Ade Odumuyiwa 354

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SECTION B: ISLAM

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..... 251	en Leadership in Christianity: The Philosophical Influence of the Biblical Texts — Stephen O. Taiwo	125
..... 259	of Christian Religious Leaders in Nigeria — M.A. Bamgbose	135
..... 275	Socio-Economic Importance of Pilgrimage to <i>Oke Maria</i> by Catholics: Otan-Aiyegbaju As A Case Study — Paul Ademola Fasina	142
..... 281	SECTION B: ISLAM	
..... 293	rian Muslim Leaders and Nation-Building: A Case Study of Sultan Sir Sidiq Abubakar III (1903-1988) — Lateef F. Oladimeji	149
..... 299	Importance of Divine Calls in the Qur'an to Mankind: Lessons for the Contemporary Nigerian Society — N. I. Raji	160
..... 309	Dynamics of Religious Leadership: A Case Study of Muslims in Nigeria — A.S. Agboola	168
..... 318	Introducing Islamic Leadership Qualities to the Nigerian Political Leaders through the Al-Qur'an — I.A.A. Seriki and M.A. Lawal	176
..... 326	Nigerian Muslim Women and the Importance of Being Assertive — M. A. Abdu-Raheem	185
..... 335	Islamic Panacea to Corruption in Public Office in Nigeria — L.M. Adetona	199
..... 348	Leadership in Islam — M.A. Muhibbu-Din	205
..... 354	Islamic Preachers in Nigerian Electronic Media: Osun State Broadcasting Corporation As A Case Study — M.O. Adeniyi	216
	Political Leadership Problems in Nigeria: A Panacea from Islamic Perspective — Abdul-Fatah'Kola Makinde	222
	Imam Ibn Al-Khattab: A Model for Contemporary Political Leaders in Nigeria — R.I. Adebayo	233
	ward Inculcating Islamic Political Ideals in Nigerian Democratic Leadership — B.R. Raheem	243

Appendix III: Welcome Address on the Occasion of the Formal Opening of the 24th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Association For the Study Of Religions (NASR) Holding at the University of Ilorin New Science Lecture Theatre Oct. 7, 2003 — Shamsudeen O.O. Amali	356
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INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP IN THE SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY OF PROPHET ISAIAH

C.O. Ogunkunle

Introduction

There is no doubt that leadership has an extraordinary power to challenge, inspire, encourage and influence people. In fact, it has been noted that leadership "can make the difference between success and failure in anything you do for yourself or any group you belong to."¹ In the light of the above assertion, religious leadership becomes so crucial in every society as it has a way of shaping and molding lives of people within such society. Speaking of religious leadership, J. Oswald Sander notes that a religious leader has "confidence in God, seeks to find God's will, follows God's methods, delights to obey God, motivated by love for God and man"²

The focus of this paper is to examine the leadership influence of Prophet Isaiah on the political leaders of his day. He was a key religious leader who made an indelible influence in the religious and political lives of his nation. Prophet Isaiah surpassed any other prophets in both Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel. He made a great religious influence on kings Ahaz and Hezekiah at the time the nation of Judah was passing through various crises. It is believed by this writer that our understanding of the religious influence of Prophet Isaiah in his society will stimulate our contemporary leaders as they attempt to make positive influence in our nation.

The research is carried out through a historical approach. The historical method is used whereby various scholarly literature on the religious influence of Isaiah on Ahaz and Hezekiah are examined. It is expected that our findings from the study of Isaiah will serve as eye opener to some vital leadership qualities and that our contemporary religious leaders in their leadership roles will adopt the principles.

Prophet Isaiah and National Crisis in Judah

Isaiah whose name means "Yahweh is salvation," was the son of Amoz.³ His ministry extended over more than forty years during the reigns of four kings of Judah namely, Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.⁴ Isaiah was called to be a prophet "in the year that king Uzziah died" (Is. 6:1). His last appearance, which can be dated, was on the occasion of Sennacherib's threat to Jerusalem, when he was appealed to by Hezekiah (Is. 36:37).

Prophet Isaiah, who was happily married to a prophetess (Is. 8:3), had two sons, both of whom bear symbolic names: Shear-Jashub – "remnant will return" (Is. 7:3) and Maher-Shalad hash-baz – "Hasten booty, speed spoil" (Is. 8:1-4). Isaiah

was a man of the city who resided in Jerusalem (Is. 7:1-3; 37:2). He had access to the royal court as seen in his interaction with the kings of Judah, especially Ahaz and Hezekiah. Levi Dawson notes that:

Unlike the earlier prophets he was a man of the city. He may have been of the blood royal and he was certainly a courtier and a member of the privileged circles in Jerusalem. He did not look back to the wilderness and the early covenanted days like Amos and Hosea. He was concerned more to speak of the relationship between the dynasty of David and Jahveh.⁵

Isaiah was a poet-seer and at the same time, a man of action. He was fearless and frank in the presence of kings. Describing some of his actions, C.R. North states that:

He (Isaiah) could pour withering scorn on the pretensions of a state official (22:15-25); he was scathing in his denunciation of gluttony, land greed, and social injustice (5:8-23); he told the society the beauties of his time exactly what Yahweh thought of them, without mincing words (3:16-26); and his compassion for the unprivileged never made him pander to the mob (22:1-3).⁶

Prophets Isaiah and Micah played a major role in the history of Judah in the late eighth century B.C. They addressed themselves to the national emergency. The Prophet Isaiah in particular, had a unique ministry to the nation of Judah, which was faced with serious crisis as from the late eighth century B.C. These years in Judah's history were a time of struggle both politically and spiritually. On the one hand was the external aggression upon the land, which threatened her national character. On the other hand was the internal spiritual emergency in the nation that threatened the national religion to its foundation.⁷ The Northern kingdom of Israel, at that time, was deteriorating politically, spiritually and militarily and finally fell to the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C. The Southern kingdom of Judah looked as though it too would collapse and fall to the Assyrians, but it withstood the attack. But then, there was internal sickness in the land. There were "socio-economic ills for which the official religion had no effective rebuke and which were only aggravated by Assyrian exactions."⁸ In this political struggle and spiritual decline, Isaiah rose to deliver a message to the people of Judah. His message was that they should trust God who had promised them a glorious kingdom through Moses and David. Prophet Isaiah urged the nation through her leaders especially, Ahaz and Hezekiah, not to rely on Egypt or any other foreign power to protect them for the LORD was the only protection they would need.⁹

The Influence of Prophet Isaiah on King Ahaz

Ahaz, the son of Jotham reigned in Judah between 735-715 B.C.¹⁰ He was twenty years old when he began to reign and he reigned for sixteen years (II Kgs. 16: 2; II Chron. A 8:1). Ahaz was remembered for his idolatrous practices as pagan practices seemed to have flourished at his time (Is. 2: 8). He even burned his own

son as an offering (II Kgs. 16: 3; II Chron. 28: 3). His reign was remembered by later generations as the worst period of apostasy that Judah had ever known. Unfortunately, Ahaz found himself in a life-threatening situation during the crisis of 735-733 B.C., when the Aramean-Israelite coalition moved on Jerusalem to compel Judah's cooperation with Assyria. In other words, Rezin of Aram and Pekah of Remalial were determined to annex Judah in the event of Ahaz's refusal to join them (IsX. 7: 6). Incidentally, Ahaz's refusal to join the anti-Assyrian coalition made him and his nation, Judah, escape the calamity that led to the fall of the Northern kingdom. But then, Judah under the leadership of Ahaz was still not a free nation, as he had to appeal and submit himself to king Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria. He even took silver and gold from the temple in Jerusalem and sent them to the king of Assyria as gifts (II Kg. 16:7-9).

Prophet Isaiah's influence on Ahaz started when he realized that king Ahaz had appealed to Assyria for help. He went to Ahaz with his son, "Shear-Jashub" which symbolically means "only remnant will return" to confront him. (Isaiah 7:1-9). Isaiah assured Ahaz that the coalition of Rezin and Pekah would not last. He referred to the two enemies as "smoking firebrands" which were almost burnt out (Isaiah 7: 4). He urged Ahaz to trust in the Lord and keep calm. But then Ahaz did not believe the prophet, rather he paid tribute to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria and surrendered his independence.

Isaiah told Ahaz to ask for a sign when he knew that he did not want to believe. However, Ahaz declined to ask for the sign on the pretext of piety when in the real sense he had made up his mind on what he was going to do, that is, trusting the Assyrians rather than God. John N. Oswalt, while describing Ahaz whose mind had already been made up says: Ahaz's mind is made up, his options shut off. He has already concluded that his only hope is alliance with Assyria. He may even have persuaded himself that this was God's way out of the crisis. But at any rate, his problem was to avoid a blunt statement that nothing Isaiah could say or do would make him believe that God could deliver them from Syria and Ephraim without Assyria's help, but still prevent Isaiah from doing or saying something, which would make his chosen course look like he did not believe God.¹¹

Prophet Isaiah in exasperation gave a sign that a "girl" would give birth to a son and she would call his name Immanuel (Isaiah 7: 4).¹² The prophet stated further that before the boy would reach the age of maturity, the alliance would have been broken and Syria and Ephraim would be defeated but punishment would still come upon Judah (Isaiah 7: 16-17).

Despite the fact that Isaiah was convinced that Ahaz had betrayed his office yet he did not lose hope. He was convinced that God was in control of events and that His purpose to set up His kingly rule of peace over the nations was sure (cf. Is. 2:2-4; 11:6-).¹³ However, he did not make further attempt to influence the national policy under Ahaz until the time when Judah was asked to join a revolt against

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Assyria. Again, Prophet Isaiah opposed the scheme arguing that the Lord had founded Zion and was its sufficient defense (Isaiah 14). He still believed that God would in His own good time give the signal for the overthrow of Assyria (Isaiah 18:3-6). But until then that the people should wait and trust in God. The motto of Isaiah throughout his lifetime was "trust in the promise of God" (Isaiah 7: 9; 14: 32; 28:12,16-17). For him, trusting in the nations would lead to destruction and desolation (Isaiah-8:6-8; 3:1-17), while trusting in God would lead to deliverance and abundance (Is. 35:1-10).

The Influence of Prophet Isaiah on King Hezekiah

The story of Hezekiah is recorded in three different books of the Old Testament (II Kings 18-20, II Chronicles 29-32 and Isaiah 36-39). A careful study of the three books shows that II Kings stresses the political reforms of Hezekiah. The Chronicler concentrates on religious reforms while Isaiah gives emphasis to the divine intervention of the king.

Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz and Abijah was the best king of Judah after David (II Kings 18:1-3; II Chro 29:1). He was one of the few kings who did right in the sight of the Lord (II Kings 18: 3), and was an astute statesman, great orator, revivalist, architect, poet, philosopher, composer of liturgical songs (Is. 38: 9-19), compiler and contributor to the Psalms of David, and wisdom literature of Solomon (Prov. 25:1; II Chr. 31:21). Hezekiah was a sound administrator with people-oriented but God-focused programmes including agriculture and special water supply through the rock (II Chron. 30: 24; 31: 4-41).

Hezekiah, a godly king of Judah ascended the throne at the age of 25 years and he reigned for 29 years (II Kings 18: 1; II Chr. 29: 1). He was the only king of Judah who trusted God completely and followed strictly David's pattern of high-class religious and political reforms for Judah and Israel (II Kings 18: 3, 5-7).¹⁴ Hezekiah crushed the spirit of apostasy of Judah by reopening and restoring temple purities for the best worship of Yahweh (II Chr. 29: 4-11). He was the first king to face and overcome the toughest crisis caused by his pagan predecessor, Ahaz (II Kings 18: 4).

The religious reformation of Hezekiah could be said to have had its origin at the time of Ahaz when the prophetic words of Amos and Hosea were fulfilled in the destruction of the Northern kingdom. The fall of the Northern kingdom was used powerfully by prophets Isaiah and Micah to point out the importance of returning to the worship of Yahweh. Hezekiah removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the Asherah (II Kings 18: 4). He destroyed the bronze snake "Nehustan" which had been preserved in the temple.¹⁵

Hezekiah reopened, refurbished and reorganized the temple and its worship (II Chr. 29: 2-3). He had high regard for Yahweh's priesthood as one of the divinely instituted instrument of pure worship. Hezekiah, unlike Ahaz, restored the dignity of the priests and Levites and encouraged them to be totally focused and devoted to the

study of the law and sustenance of pure worship. (II Chr. 29: 4-11; 17). He assigned the priests and Levites to 24 divisions for orderly worship like David so as to offer burnt offerings fellowship offerings and to give thanks and sing praises at the gates of the Lord dwelling (II Chr. 31: 8).

Hezekiah reintroduced the great Passover feast of unleavened bread (II Chron, 30:13, 15). This epoch-making celebration was a long-lasting legacy in which people of the Northern kingdom participated. He cleansed the land, including Ephraim and Manasseh of idolatry (II Chro 31: 1).

Politically, Hezekiah had great concern for the nation of Judah in general and the city of Jerusalem in particular. He strengthened the defenses of Jerusalem. He cut through the solid rock in order to bring the water of the Gihon spring to the city (II Kings 20: 20; II Chr. 32: 20). The death of Sargon in 750 B.C. led to the ascension of Sennacherib after which he then developed a new situation. Sennacherib, like his predecessors, was very arrogant. He threatened Judah and the people of Jerusalem under the leadership of Hezekiah (II Kings 18: 17-36). Hezekiah determined to seek for divine intervention from his enemies as he sent his men to Prophet Isaiah (II Kings 19: 1-4).

Prophet Isaiah encouraged king Hezekiah in his difficult situation. The prophet sent the messengers of the king back, that he should not be afraid of the threat message from Sennacherib (II Kings. 19: 6).¹⁶ The prophet assured him that Sennacherib would soon meet his death. Somehow, Sennacherib knew that King Hezekiah had been influenced by Prophet Isaiah, who told him that he would deliver him from the Assyrians.

Therefore, he sent another letter of threat to Hezekiah (II Kings 19: 9-13). Again, Hezekiah who had his focus and trust in God took the letter to the temple for prayer (II Kings 19: 14-19). And of course, the prophet was there to give him another message of assurance II Kings 19: 20). The prophet at the end of his message said "The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this" (II Kings 19: 31) to indicate that the whole action had been initiated by God and he would bring every thing to its perfect conclusion.¹⁷

The influence of Prophet Isaiah on Hezekiah made him a courageous leader who rebelled against the king of Assyria (II Kings 18: 7). It was Hezekiah who recovered the cities seized by the Philistine in the days of Ahaz (II Kings 18: 8). It was during his reign that the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, who were camped around Jerusalem (II Kings 19: 35-37).

Another remarkable influence of Isaiah on Hezekiah is the healing, which the king received from his terminal sickness. God sent the prophet to the king that he should set his house in order for he would die (II Kings 20: 1). Thus the prophet functions as a royal adviser to ensure a proper and orderly succession.¹⁸

Religious Leaders and the Nigerian Situation

There is no doubt that religious leaders have significant roles to play in Nigeria, which has over 426 ethnic groups.¹⁹ Politically, our nation is still struggling with her nascent democracy. Our political leaders have numerous problems to contend

with. Unfortunately, those at the helm of government have not helped the situation with the several inconsistent policies, which tend to make life difficult for down trodden people in the nation.

A current example of such policy is the one on importation, which has prohibited the importation of several items among which are: sorghum, millet, wheat flour, vegetable oil, used tyres, etc.²⁰ Also, Audu Ogbeh, the People's Democratic Party Chairman while defending the importation policy of the Federal Government agreed that "the Government of Olusegun Obasanjo was interested in education, job creation, and reducing waste through banning the importation of some foreign goods."²¹ He warned further that for the nation to survive, Nigerians must check their taste for foreign goods. Therefore, Audu Ogbeh canvassed for total war against reckless importation so that the future of the younger generations of Nigerian could be assured.²²

But ironically, the same federal government of Nigeria who is all out to ban the importation of some items has gone so deep into the importation of fuel. Incidentally, Nigeria is one of the leading countries that produces crude oil. Thus, the Government has no moral justification for importing fuel for our local consumption. The best way to help this nation is to repair all our refineries and construct new ones. Sayo Akinlola notes that:

Since Nigeria does not need to buy crude oil from abroad to get the refined products, government should ensure that existing refineries are in good shape, while new ones are allowed to come into operation through private investors, particularly, the major oil marketers.²³

It is highly probable that the reason why the above recommendation cannot work is the fact that the government and some highly placed individuals in the society are deeply interested in the lucrative oil business. Otherwise, the present government had good intention originally. The *Punch* editorial notes that:

Government in 1999 expressed its determination to privatize the nation's four refineries and free the nation from the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC)'s monopoly position. But in a baffling twist, the government turned around to set up the Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA), which has only engaged in official price-fixing.²⁴

Expressing the failure of the government to help the nation, the *Punch* editorial also notes that:

It is a shame that this administration has in four years failed to put the nation's four refineries in good order, or to create an environment for building new ones in order to guarantee adequate supply, reduce capital flight and splash production costs. As a major producer of crude oil, it is unfortunate that the government still prefers a corrupt and embarrassing regime to fuel importation. Government's tragic obsession with price-fixing instead of rectifying supply deficiencies is bound to remain counterproductive.²⁵

Our contemporary situation in Nigeria is very similar to that which Prophet Isaiah addressed in Israel at the time of King Ahaz and Hezekiah. Prophet Isaiah spoke against the foreign policy of King Ahaz who was bent on trusting on foreign nations like Assyria rather than Yahweh. Therefore, religious leaders in Nigeria must emulate Prophet Isaiah by speaking out against the double standard of government on foreign policy. They must cry out against every policy that tend to make life difficult for the ordinary people in the nation. It is difficult to reconcile the position of the Government who is all out to ban several items but at the same time encouraging the importation of fuel.

It should be noted that the Presidential Assistant on Bureau on Public Enterprises (BPE), Sunday Onuoha is bold enough to admit the presence of men with satanic intention in Government. He identified them as those who embezzle public funds and whose stock trade is corruption.²⁶ Therefore, it is high time our religious leaders make their influence felt upon our political leaders. They are in the position to re-examine government policies in the light of the Scriptures and make suggestions with the aim of guiding and influencing our political leaders positively. Religious leaders should encourage political leaders to put their trust in God and make use of natural minerals which God has endowed our nation.

Conclusion

Our study has shown three things: the first is that Prophet Isaiah was a religious leader who made a great influence on King Ahaz and Hezekiah as they determined the social-political matters in the nation of Judah.²⁷ This is a challenge to all our religious leaders in Nigeria. They should speak out on issues affecting the nation. Religious leaders are in the best position to speak the mind of God to those in leadership. They are to encourage them when they do the right thing and they are to rebuke and correct them whenever they go astray. In other words, our religious leaders should emulate Prophet Isaiah's fearlessness and frankness in the presence of kings and political leaders. Each religious leader should use his divine position to guide our leaders at the national, state, and local government levels. It is the only way our nation can move forward.

The second thing our study has shown is that Prophet Isaiah was a man of vision. Under the divine inspiration he announced things that were coming and the events that would occur in the future. Nigeria also is in dire need of religious leaders who will give definite instruction to our political leaders and direction to our country. The final thing is that Prophet Isaiah was faithful, courageous, forthright, honest and consistent. This implies that our religious leaders must have these qualities as they seek to influence leaders and people of the Nigerian society. Any deficiency in these qualities will not bring a desired result on our society.

Notes and References

1. George, Janvier and Bitrus Thaba, *Understanding Leadership: An African Christian Model* (Kaduna: Baraka Press, 1997), p. 1.
2. J. Oswald Sander, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), p. 21.
3. The name "Amoz" should not be confused with the prophet Amos. cf. C.R. North, "Isaiah," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by G.A. Buttrick et. al., 5 Volumes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984, p. 732.
4. For detailed information on the historical background of these four kings, see John N. Oswald, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 4-17.
5. Levi Dawson, *The History of Israel* (London: John Murray Publishers, 1984), p. 83.
6. North "Isaiah" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 2: 733.
7. See John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Third Edition, (Philadelphia: Press, 1981), p. 288.
8. *Ibid.*
9. John A. Martin "Isaiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, by Dallas Faculty, *Old Testament*, edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1985), pp. 1029-1030.
10. Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 276.
11. Oswald, pp. 205-6.
12. For various issues connected with Isaiah 7: 14, see Oswald, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 11-39*, pp. 200-213.
13. Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 291.
14. Several other kings followed David partially. Three of them are Solomon (I Kings 11:4,6); Jeroboam (I Kings 14:8); and Ahab (I Kings 18:3, 11).
15. The term *nehustan*, which means "the brass thing," is a clever combination of the similar words translated "snake" and "bronze." The words occur only in II Kings 18:4 cf. T.R. Hobbs, II Kings, *World Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985) pp. 251-252.
16. This type of statement of reassurance is found throughout the Old Testament as in the story Abraham (Genesis 15: 1) and at the time of Joshua (Joshua 8: 1; 10; 11:1).
17. See Hobbs, II Kings pp. 281-282.
18. For a detailed study on the healing of Hezekiah see C. O. Ogunkunle, "Prophet Isaiah and the Healing of King Hezekiah in the African Context," A Commissioned Paper Presented at the 16th Annual Conference Of the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies NABIS) held at Babcock University, Ilishan Remo, Ogun State, on July 15-18, 2003, pp. 9-13.
19. Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), p. 421.
20. See the Current Public Notice on Import Prohibition List (Trade) issued by the Nigeria Customs Service.

21. See "Unilorin: The Wheel of Change," *UNILORIN Bulletin*, Friday, September 26, 2003.
22. *Ibid.*, Sayo Akinlola, "Fuel price Hike and Native Economy Analysis," *Nigerian Tribune*, Monday, July 7, 2003, p. 24.
23. See The Editorial "On Appropriate Fuel Pricing," *The Punch*, Tuesday, July 1, 2003, p. 16.
24. See The Editorial "Fuel Price Posers," *The Punch*, Monday, October 6, 2003, p. 17.
26. See Bashir Umar, "Interview with Sunday Onuoha, Olusegun Obasanjo's Special Assistant on Privatization," *Daily Sun*, Tuesday, February 3, 2004, p. 37.
27. For a similar observation see D.T. Ejenebo, "Religious Leaders as Political Actors: The Example of Israelite Prophets," in *Religion and Ethics in Nigeria*, edited by R.D. Abubakre, Akanmidu, R.A. and Alana E. Olu, NASR Publication, 1993, p. 31.