Pragmatic *Sᵉdăqâ* in Nehemiah: Reconciling African Perspectives of Justice and Morality

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Abstract

It has variously been acknowledged that immigrant religions (Christianity and Islam) in Africa, rather than enhancing conscience and morality, have tended to merely exacerbate religious rituals and drive conscience and morality far away from the African society (Knitter & Muzaffar, 2002). The indigenous African society had been administered by instant justice, supervised by the potent and inherently ubiquitous, inescapable deities in the African milieu. This situation formed an incorruptible judicial system which planted a living, conscious fear of crime in the African and formed the basis for a deeply rooted morality. The immigrant religions present the idea of deferred punishment and reward (eschatology) which is completely alien to Africa, and which, in any case, dislodged the African notion of instant justice, until morality finally faded away from the African conscience and consciousness. The Book of Nehemiah presents a perspective of justice (צְדָקָה) as response to the criminal obstruction of societal aspirations, which is in line with the African indigenous pragmatic orientation that yielded instant result and enabled the project of post-exilic reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem to be accomplished. This paper employs a phenomenological perspective in examining justice and morality in Africa in the pre- and post-immigrant religions dispensations, and attempts a reconstruction of the failing conscience and morality in the contemporary African society, using Nigeria in particular as the domain of the study.

Keywords: Pragmatic, Justice, Morality, Conscience.

Background of the Book of Nehemiah

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, presented as one corpus in the Hebrew Canon, together with 1 and 2 Chronicles, form the complete works credited to the P-redactors who attempted a post-exilic reconstruction of the history of Israel, with particular focus on the sins of the people that led to the collapse of the Monarchy and the punishment of the captivity. The collection, particularly the first part, 1 and 2 Chronicles, which is a redactional reconstruction of 1 and 2Samuel, 1 and 2Kings, thus presented Monarchy in its entirety as a rebellion against the will of Yahweh. While the P-redactors were quick to observe that Yahweh was willing to give His people a judge (Hebrew שֹׁפֵט and subsequently a leader (Hebrew נָגִיד) they strictly present the emergence of the king (מֶלֶךְ in Israel as an act of rebellion of the people against the will of Yahweh, and that, according to them, was what led to the punishment of the captivity. The dissuasions to Monarchy in 1 Samuel 8:11-18 therefore obviously has a post-exilic coloration. Nevertheless, then, the people are presented in verse 19 as insisting on having a king (מֶלֶךְ to rule over them:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא כִּי אִם־מֶלֶךְ יִהְיֶה עָלֵינוּ meaning, Nay, but (Even then, Not withstanding), a king must be over us. This is the crux of the P-redactors' interpretation of the Monarchy as the singular outcome of the people's rebellion against the will of Yahweh which resulted in the eventual collapse of the Monarchy, and the punishment of the captivity. According to Burns (2001):

> The setting for the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah is the two-hundred-year period in which God's people were citizens of the Persian Empire. The Persian period began in 539 BC when Cyrus the Great of Persia (Iran) wrested control of the Ancient Near Eastern world from the Babylonians. It ended in 333 BC when the same area fell into Greek hands under Alexander the Great. (p. 5).

The events covered in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah fall within the first part of the Persian period, from 538 BC to a little after 400 BC. This was thus a time of restoration. The Jewish theological scribes interpreted this event from the perspective of Yahweh's intervention to deliver the Jews from the clutches of the Persians. However, historical and archaeological records (example, Cyrus' Cylinder) show that Cyrus, apparently worried at the demographic problem created by the collection in Persia of able-bodied warriors of conquered nations, and fear that these foreign nationals could someday outnumber the indigenes and wage war against them and conquer them, published an edict authorizing these foreign nationals to return home and develop their nations. Cyrus was indeed right in expressing doubt over the loyalty of foreign nationals abducted and forcefully settled in the area, a situation which represented the conquest policy of Babylon. By the time the Persian Empire emerged, the situation had changed drastically and what was for Babylon a policy of maintaining surveillance over the conquered nations, had constituted a severe threat to the Persians. Ezra and Nehemiah then became prominent in the fact that they led the groups of Jewish returnees to Jerusalem to undertake different aspects of the reconstruction process.

Burns (2001) pointed out that by the middle of the fifth century BC, the Persian Empire had lost some of the strength it had enjoyed under the leadership of Darius I, and revolts in Egypt may have motivated Artaxerxes to try to insure the strength and loyalty of his subjects in Judah, the region that bordered with Egypt, hence the effort to pacify the Jews by the release from captivity. Nehemiah was a high-ranking official in the Persian court. The text says that in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes (which was around 445 BC), the Emperor sent Nehemiah to Judah to serve as leader in the Jewish community (Neh. 2:1). There is little doubt over the biblical witness of the date of Nehemiah's mission.

The Book of Nehemiah tells of Sanballat, a leader of the Province of Samaria, who opposed Nehemiah's mission of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Papyri from the Jewish colony at Elephantine in Egypt confirm that Nehemiah and Sanballat were contemporaries. Extra-biblical sources inform us that Sanballat's two sons were governors of Samaria at the end of the 5th BC. Moreover, the Jewish High Priest at the end of the century was Johanan, a grandson of the High Priest, Eliashib who served during Nehemiah's time. On the basis of the Elephantine texts, it is reasonable to date the beginning of Nehemiah's mission at 445 BC, the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes I.

Pragmatic S^edăqâ in Nehemiah

When Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the restoration of the walls of Jerusalem was progressing, for the gaps were beginning to be closed up, they became extremely angry. Thereupon they plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and thus to throw us into confusion. We prayed to our God and posted a watch against them day and night for fear of what they might do. Meanwhile the Judahites were saying, "Slackened is the bearers' strength; there is no end to the rubbish, never shall we be able the wall to rebuild". Our enemies thought; "Before they are aware of it or see us, we shall come into their midst, kill them, and put an end to the work". When the Jews who lived near them had come to us from one place after another, and had told us ten times over that they were about to attack us, I stationed guards down below, behind the wall, near the exposed point, assigning them by family groups, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. When our enemies became aware that we had been warned and that God had upset their plan, we all went back, each to his own task of the wall (Neh. 3:7-15).

Ironically, Ezra also recorded in Chapter 4:1-24 the interruption of the rebuilding of the temple under his leadership by the Samaritans. North (1990) explains that these detractors of the work in Ezra were, "Doubtless, the bureaucrats (even if of Judah origin and part of the remnant) functioning for the Persian province of Samaria to which Judah was humiliatingly made subordinate" (p. 388). This clearly straightens out the grounds for the interruption of the post-exilic reconstruction work in both Ezra and Nehemiah. He went ahead to explain that the:

> Prominence of such Samaritan hostility is one of the reasons for considering this chapter (in Ezra) an episode misplaced from Nehemiah 4, (or, in the variant of Michaeli, a pre-Nehemiah effort to rebuild the wall). Without either espousing or fully rejecting this possibility, we defer to Nehemiah 4 the animated recent discussion of whether anti-Samaritanism already existed and was a primary motive for writing (Chronicles with) Ezra-Nehemiah. (p. 388).

Whether or not anti-Samaritanism, traces of which are detected here, is the reason behind Ezra's post-exilic, endogamy-based reform, needs further espousing. The eventual expulsion of the Samaritans from the post-exilic national reform, leading to the production of the Samaritan Pentateuch, cannot however be successfully divorced from the existing tension between the Judahites (Jews) and the Samaritans in the reconstruction. Two problems arise from this Sanballat (Samaritan) opposition of Nehemiah in chapter four. First is the chronological importance of the relation of this Sanballat (whose daughter was married to the High Priest, Eliashib, according to Ezra 10:6, Neh. 13:4) to three other Sanballats known from Josephus, Elephantine and Daliyeh. According to North (1999), the Aramaic papyri dated around 407AD at Elephantine include a letter written there mentioning two sons of Sanballat, Governor of Samaria and an apparently contemporary High Priest, Jonathan. (Nehemiah 12:22).

Josephus' Antiquities tells of an influential Sanballat, whose daughter (Nkaso) was married to a High Priest, Manasses, for whom he built a temple in Gezirim. The papyri found at Wadi Daliyeh in Samaria include a seal with the paleohebraic inscription; "(Hanan)iah, son of (San)Ballat Peha(t) of Samerina".

The second problem raised by this Samaritan-Sanballat opposition has to do with the dating of the Samaritan schism and its relevance to the purpose of the P-redactors in compiling the Ezra-Nehemiah corpus. A common view had been that the Samaritans of Ezra 4:4 and after were not real inhabitants of Samaria, but pagans descended from those imported from Assyria by King Sargen II in 721 BC (2 Kings 17:24).

Kippenberg (1971) and Purvis (1968) hold that the crucial moment of division was not even as early as the building of the Gezirim temple in Alexander's time, long after Nehemiah, but the editing of the distinctive Pentateuch, contemporaneous with the destruction of that temple in the Hashmonean period. North (1990) holds that the Samaritans who opposed the construction of the wall (and perhaps Temple in Ezra 4) were the "people of the land", those Judeans who had not been in exile and who had lived under the administration of the Persian Province, Samerina, thus rejecting the stand of Kippenberg (1971). They claim that at the time of Ezra 1ff, Judah was made a Province of Babylon. Purvis (1968), Kippenberg (1971) and Coggins (1975) agree however that a cordial relationship or at least a relapse in hostility had existed between the Judeans and the Samaritans ever since the Assyrian deportation. The relationship gained momentum with the return from Exile, at which time we find Ezra trying to diminish the relationship by his endogamy principle, seeing that the Samaritans by inter-marriage with the foreigners had produced mixed-breed Jews. Needless to say, Ezra's post-exilic national reform which emphasized endogamy angered the Samaritans

and led to increase of hostility between the Judeans and the Samaritans.

Pragmatism, according to Hornby (2010) is all about "solving problems in a practical way, rather than by having fixed ideas and theories" (p.1148). Webster (1972) sees pragmatic as "… relating to matters of fact or practical affairs, often to the exclusion of intellectual or artistic matters" (p. 667). He goes ahead to define pragmatism as, "a practical approach to problems and affairs." (p. 667). It was in fact C. S. Pierce and William James who founded the American movement in philosophy known by that name, Pragmatism, which is marked by the doctrines, "that the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings; that the function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief" (Webster, 1972, p. 667).

S^{e}dăqâ (צְדָקָה) is the Hebrew word commonly rendered in the Old Testament as righteousness. According to Holladay (1988), צְדָקָה (noun) has a derivative adjective, צַדִּיק which means; a thing examined and found to be in order; right; a person whose conduct is examined and found to be unobjectionable, not guilty, innocent, in the right; (morally in the right), innocent, guiltless; when used with מִן it implies comparative, more upright than; in a religious sense, it implies righteous, godly.

A description of the Judeans' appraisal of the situation clearly presents an abysmal picture: And Judah said; the strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall (Nehemiah 4:10). The word translated strength in the text is the Hebrew word חַיִל. Holladay (1988) affirms that the word means capacity, power, as used in Isaiah 30:6, it is often used with אזר (verb) to imply gird or strengthen oneself (וַיֶּאְזַר חַיִל) It may also be used to refer to property or resources, that is, wealth, as in Genesis 34:29; (עָשָׂה חַיִל gain wealth).

North (1990) explains that the word could refer to military or economic prowess, and in fact described the situation of Judea in the midst of her hostile neighbours. North identifies the ironical musical import of that verse, and points out that it: "Put colorfully before us the Semite toiler's habit of singing lustily when the work is hardest, as in Arab escalation still, a monotonous refrain, howled by all, alternates with clever improvisations in the same rhythm" (p. 394).

For Nehemiah however, it was not an occasion to bask in empty rhetorics and euphoric theorization about how to squarely confront a critical situation. It was not an occasion for endless, meaningless, conceptualization and idealization or mere theological rhetoric. It was not an occasion for aimless recitation of endless creeds and liturgical collects. It was a drastic, critical situation that demanded nothing short of urgent, decisive action. And Nehemiah rose vehemently to the occasion.

> I stationed guards down below, behind the wall, near the exposed points, assigning them by family groups with their swords, their spears and their bows. I made an inspection, then addressed these words to the nobles, the magistrates, and the rest of the people. "Have no fear of them! Keep in mind the Lord who is great and to be feared, and fight for your brethren, your sons and daughters and your homes". (Neh. 4:13-14).

The action was squarely decisive and unwavering. And equally unambiguous was the outcome. When the detractors saw that half the workers bore arms while the other half worked courageously, they knew that the game was up, and didn't need any advice to take to their heels. Pragmatic justice is instant and so is its impact and result.

Pragmatic Justice in the Traditional African Society

That the foundation of the traditional African society was anchored on firm pragmatic morality occasioned by instant this-worldly justice has been variously acknowledged. Thus Unimna (1990) admits that:

> In the traditional (African) set up, religion and the priesthood are inseparable from other aspects of life. There is no distinction between politics and religion, farming and religion, sexuality and religion, or justice and religion. Whatever a person does is done within the context of a religious experience. Religion, morality and politics are thus integral parts of the people's daily life. (pp. 45-46).

In other words, the people lived in an environment that was under intense spiritual surveillance. The repercussion of failing to abide by the order of the society was instant and this was so even if the act of indiscretion was done in utmost secrecy. Thus, in the African traditional society, there was no secrecy, and there was nothing like committing a taboo secretly. There was nothing hidden that could not be known without bias or compromise. And everyone was aware of this.

> Umeagudosi (1990) asserts that:
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> Taboos in effect facilitate the process of socialization because children at their early stage of growth readily obey the ethical arrangement of their society without question. They are equally subject to the taboos. There is no freedom to think or act differently, and they are nurtured straight into the tradition established by their fathers. (p. 68).

Umeagudosi attributes to the cult of Ala the responsibility of preserving public morality in that it is the earth goddess, Ala, that identifies all act of offence whether committed secretly or in the open; and once identified, the repercussion was instant. In some cases, the repercussions of the violation of the cosmic order or balance would be universal, that is, beyond the person or persons that committed the offence. However, even in that situation, the person(s) that committed the offence was (were) not shielded. This is because the elders would make consultations and a spiritual investigation, by divination, would

be instituted, and by this, the individual or persons involved in the violation would be identified and taken through a ritual for cleansing which often leads to their public disgrace and punishment. This act provided sufficient deterrence for future intending offenders. Nothing justifies and enhances evil and crime as a situation, as in our society today, in which known or suspected culprits go scot free and instead prosper from the proceeds of their evil activities, to the chagrin and utter dismay of the entire society.

Ademilokun admits that:

In Yoruba societies, there is a strong belief in magic and charms. Some charms are used to punish and curb immoral acts. *Magum* (Don't mount) is an example of charms used particularly in traditional Yoruba societies to curb adultery. The belief is that whoever has sexual coition with another man's wife who is believed to be under the influence of *magun* will die either through falling down from the woman or some other means. Many among the Yoruba dread the charm and therefore run from adultery. (p. 81).

The point of whether the morality here is voluntary or induced does not arise, after all induced or forced morality would over time translate to a personal choice. But the point is that pragmatic instant justice worked effectively in maintaining high level of morality and sanity in the traditional African society.

In the traditional African society, one of the revered functions of the priesthood was divination. In the event of a secretly performed act of desecration that disrupted the ontological order and brought harm to humanity, the first pot of call was the diviner priests. Once consulted, they would engage the devices of divination and, without bias or compromise, reveal the real offenders, and quite often instituted a cleansing procedure that reversed the evil trend.

Delayed (Eschatological) Justice of the Immigrant Religions in Africa

Eschatological is literally the doctrine of the last things. According to Collin (1990):

> It was first introduced in systematic theology in the 19th century to refer to matters concerning judgment after death and the end of the world. In Biblical Studies, it refers in a broader sense to expectation of any decisive change in the course of history through the intervention of God. (p. 298).

The immigrant religions in Africa, (Christianity and Islam) then annulled the traditional African impression of pragmatic (instant) justice (*s^{e}dǎqậ*) and replaced it with eschatological (delayed, other-worldly) judgment. The implication was that if someone did evil, there was no repercussion or punishment at all, until in the far withdrawn eschatological period. With that, the sense of existential punishment for evil which was vital in ordering the African society was completely lost. Immigrant religions in Africa have presented the notion of a God who is incapable of (or unwilling in) punishing evil in the here and now. The result is that evil doers, criminals, are seen to just continue to thrive. Besides, the Christian religion has also presented along with it a Western judicial system that is based entirely on human operations, from the point of investigation to the point of adjudication. Being human-driven, the Western judicial system is therefore subject to abuse, compromise, influence and corruption, as we regularly see today. Unlike the African traditional judicial system which was driven by spirits that were not only ubiquitous (being everywhere and all-seeing) but also incorruptible, the Western judicial system is based on a vast array of corruptible human factors and has been highly compromised. Today, in Africa, many criminals carry on their criminal activities, undeterred, knowing that at every point in time they can influence the human-based judicial system that has become highly compromised. The God of the

immigrant religions in Africa is completely aloof from the maintenance of morality in the world, being only concerned with the world to come. Thus, within the religious setting of the immigrant religions in Africa, morality is only optional, and the only enticement to it is the far-withdrawn eschatological reward, the impact of which, as far as the present mortal life is concerned, is very remote and minimal. Besides, certain theological trends in the immigrant religions even directly militate against societal morality and justice in the here and now. For instance, the theology of grace in relation to eschatological salvation displaces righteousness as far as the issues of eternity are concerned. Paul's elucidation on this grace drives the point home more lucidly: For by grace you are saved, through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The implication of this is that even the eschatological reward presented by the immigrant religion is not attained by doing good. So, doing what is good is out of the question entirely. Gradually, an African society has been created in which the value of morality and justice have become so frantically diminished that they have in fact ceased to be tenable aspirations, neither in fact are they divinely compelled, as in the traditional African society. The net result of this is in fact the emergence of an African society that is tottering on the threshold of sudden total collapse, on account of the internal decay of the moral fibres of the society.

Today, the culture of the European environment of the Christian religion has produced a religion which does not necessarily entail morality, not is morality a tenable aspiration in the religious system. Okolie and Ezeibe (2009) have argued that, "the debate over the nexus of law and morality starts, ends, and starts again ad infinitum. Positivist scholars have necessarily denied any connection between law and morality" (p. 233). The implication of this is that the Western judicial system instituted is Africa by the adherents of the

immigrant religion (Christianity), in place of what existed in Africa, was not in any way intended to establish a moral society in the here and now, as was the aspiration, at least in part, in the African traditional religious system. This painful predicament of the modern day African society has, sadly, remained an incurable omen.

Conclusion

Nehemiah employed the pragmatic instant S^{e}dăqâ in order to vanquish the oppressive detractors that sought to obstruct his divinely enunciated of post-exilic reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem. Commendably, Nehemiah did not begin to vacillate or embark on endless euphoric rhetorics in the face of firm, fierce opposition. He rose to the occasion, marching force with force until the oppressive opposition had been quelled. Similarly, Africa had a system of justice that was spiritually driven, which employed instantaneous justice in dealing with evil. Because this judicial system was driven by forces beyond human control, it was not subject to abuse, compromise or corruption. For that reason, the African society, before the advent of the immigrant religions, was morally ordered. However, unfortunately, the immigrant religions in Africa introduced a system of delayed (eschatological) justice which implies that evil people continued to thrive in this mortal life until such eschatological, remote, far-withdrawn dispensation in which they would be judged. For that reason, the African sensitivity to morality collapsed completely. Even the theology of grace in relation to eschatological salvation worsened the situation by positing that even the eschatological reward is not earned by doing good works but by grace. African society today as a result of collapsed moral fibres, totters on the threshold of total sudden collapse, as is already being witnessed in all facets of life.

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