



RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPERATIVES OF JETHRO'S COUNSEL IN EXODUS 18 AS A PARADIGM FOR LEADERSHIP SELECTION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the leadership principles embedded in Exodus 18 and how they offer a biblical framework for understanding and improving the process of leadership selection in contemporary Nigeria. The passage, which recounts Jethro's counsel to Moses regarding the delegation of leadership duties, provides a theological and administrative model that stands in contrast to the crises and corruption that characterize Nigeria's leadership culture. Using a qualitative method that combines biblical exegesis with contextual analysis and literature review, the study interrogates the implications of Exodus 18 for Nigerian leadership ethos. The paper argues that a return to values such as integrity, competence, accountability, and divine fear—as found in Jethro's counsel—could address the deep-rooted dysfunctions in Nigeria's leadership recruitment process. The paper concludes with theological and practical recommendations for adopting biblical principles in shaping political and ecclesiastical leadership structures in Nigeria.

Keywords: Leadership, Exodus 18, Moses, Nigeria, Governance, Biblical Ethics, Jethro

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Leadership in Nigeria remains a pressing concern in both secular and religious contexts. Despite the country's vast resources and promising potential, the nation has been beset by recurrent crises of governance, largely due to poor leadership selection and lack of accountability. From political mismanagement to ecclesiastical compromises, the consequences of flawed leadership choices are evident in national insecurity, economic disparity, and spiritual apathy. Within biblical traditions, leadership is a divine responsibility that demands character, wisdom, and a heart inclined toward justice. Exodus 18, which recounts Jethro's advice to Moses concerning the delegation of leadership duties, offers a compelling framework for evaluating and reforming leadership paradigms in Nigeria. The passage emphasizes qualities such as godliness, truthfulness, ability, and disdain for dishonest gain—qualities sorely lacking in many Nigerian leaders today.

This paper undertakes a theological and contextual re-reading of Exodus 18, arguing that its principles remain relevant for Nigeria's current leadership crises. By exploring the dynamics of leadership appointment in Exodus and comparing them to contemporary practices in Nigeria, the paper aims to contribute to the discourse on ethical leadership and governance reform from a biblical perspective.

2.0. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Biblical Leadership Models in Old Testament Literature

The Old Testament presents a rich tapestry of leadership models—patriarchal, prophetic, judicial, and monarchic—that provide insight into divine expectations for leaders. Moses, in particular, emerges as a paradigmatic figure whose leadership embodies divine calling, moral authority, and judicial acumen. Scholars such as Brueggemann (2001) and Wright (2006) argue that Moses represents a servant-leader archetype, rooted in covenantal obedience and communal responsibility. Exodus 18, which features Jethro's counsel to decentralize leadership through capable men, is widely regarded as the foundational text for shared or delegated leadership in biblical tradition.

According to Osmer (2008), the passage affirms the necessity of sustainable leadership structures and the discernment of character in appointing leaders. Jethro's four-fold criteria—fear of God, truthfulness, ability, and hatred of dishonest gain (Exodus 18:21)—serve as universal principles transcending historical context. This makes the passage fertile ground for leadership studies in contemporary society.

2.2 Leadership Crises in Nigeria

Nigerian scholars and commentators have persistently critiqued the dysfunctional leadership culture in the country. From Achebe's (1983) famous assertion that "the trouble with Nigeria



is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" to Ogbu (2015) and Adebani & Obadare (2011), the consensus is that leadership failure remains Nigeria's most pressing challenge. Issues of nepotism, corruption, incompetence, and lack of vision are common in both public and private sectors.

Leadership in Nigeria is often driven by ethnicity, patronage networks, and political manipulation, rather than merit or character. The result is a recurring cycle of poor governance, social unrest, and institutional decay. As Ojo (2012) observes, "Leadership selection in Nigeria has become an elite auction where the highest political bidder often wins, not the most competent."

2.3 Biblical Ethics and African Leadership Discourse

Several African scholars have emphasized the role of biblical ethics in shaping socio-political discourse. Ukpong (2001), for instance, advocates for inculturation hermeneutics, arguing that biblical texts must be interpreted within the African socio-political milieu to be transformative. Similarly, Agbiji and Swart (2015) argue for a prophetic theological engagement that challenges systemic injustice and promotes ethical leadership. In this light, a contextual reading of Exodus 18 provides an opportunity to apply ancient wisdom to contemporary Nigerian leadership problems. The text is not merely an historical record but a theological resource for envisioning just and accountable leadership structures.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology rooted in contextual biblical interpretation and empirical reflection. It employs two primary methods: exegetical analysis and socio-theological reflection. Exegetical Method is a detailed exegetical analysis of Exodus 18 is undertaken, using both historical-critical and literary approaches. The analysis focuses on the narrative structure, characters, dialogue, and theological motifs in the passage. Commentaries from scholars such as Childs (1974), Durham (1987), and Alexander (2002) are consulted to provide scholarly depth and balance in interpretation. Socio-Theological Reflection involves a critical engagement with the Nigerian socio-political context through the lens of the biblical text. Contemporary Nigerian leadership practices are examined in light of Jethro's criteria in Exodus 18:21. Key themes such as fear of God, honesty, competence, and aversion to corruption are explored in comparison with current realities in Nigeria. Additionally, interviews with ten clergy and five political science scholars in Nigeria were conducted informally to gain insights into the practical relevance of Exodus 18 in leadership discourse. Their responses enriched the theological application of the passage in today's Nigeria.

3.1. Limitations of the Study : The study is primarily qualitative and interpretive; it does not claim exhaustive empirical generalizability. It also focuses mainly on Exodus 18, though other biblical texts on leadership may offer complementary insights. Nevertheless, its



contextual depth and theological reflections offer valuable contributions to the discourse on ethical leadership in Africa.

4.0. DISCOURSES

4.11. Exegetical Analysis of Exodus 18

Exodus 18 is a pivotal chapter in the leadership narrative of Moses. Coming shortly after the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, this chapter highlights the first recorded administrative reform among the Israelites. The encounter between Moses and Jethro—his father-in-law and priest of Midian—provides not only a humanizing narrative of Moses' burdens but also introduces enduring principles of leadership delegation, accountability, and wise governance.

4.1.2. Literary Context and Structure

Exodus 18 serves as a transitional chapter between Israel's journey through the wilderness and their reception of the Law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19ff). The narrative structure can be divided into three major parts:

1. The arrival and reunion of Jethro and Moses (vv. 1–12),
2. Moses' overextension and Jethro's observation (vv. 13–18),
3. Jethro's advice and Moses' implementation (vv. 19–27).

Thematically, the passage explores relational leadership, the burden of solitary leadership, and the benefits of shared responsibility. Jethro functions as a wise elder whose outsider perspective allows him to see Moses' unsustainable leadership model clearly.

4.1.3. Verses 13–18: The Problem of Centralized Leadership

Moses' attempt to single-handedly govern and judge the entire Israelite community reflects a common leadership flaw: over-centralization. Verse 13 states that "Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening." Jethro's response is direct and diagnostic: "What you are doing is not good" (v. 17). His concern is not only for Moses' health but also for the welfare of the people, who experience delay and disconnection in the delivery of justice. Jethro introduces a foundational leadership critique: when leaders overextend themselves, both they and their communities suffer. The recognition of human limitation is essential to biblical leadership.

4.2.1. Verses 19–23: The Prescription of Delegated Leadership

Jethro proposes a system of shared leadership, structured hierarchically yet anchored in character. Verse 21 presents the famous leadership criteria: "You shall select capable men



from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain.” These leaders would be appointed as officials over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens.

Key principles drawn from this verse include:

- Capability (Ability): Leaders must possess the intellectual and emotional competence for governance.
- Fear of God: Reverence for divine justice ensures moral alignment and humility.
- Truthfulness: Integrity remains a non-negotiable in leadership.
- Hatred for dishonest gain: Leaders must be free from greed, bribery, and exploitation.

The layered delegation not only reduced Moses’ burden but created opportunities for broader participation and the development of leadership skills among the people.

4.2.3. Verses 24–27: Moses’ Response and Implementation

Moses listens to Jethro and implements the advice, showing humility and wisdom. Verse 24 underscores this virtue: “Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said.” Leadership here is portrayed not as infallibility but as teachability. This passage reveals that effective leaders must be open to counsel and willing to adapt for the good of the people. Moses’ adoption of Jethro’s system paves the way for more sustainable governance and communal justice.

4.3. Application to the Nigerian Leadership Context

The principles embedded in Exodus 18 resonate profoundly with the socio-political and ecclesiastical leadership crises in Nigeria. This section applies Jethro’s counsel to Moses within the Nigerian context, identifying areas where biblical criteria for leadership selection challenge and inform contemporary practices.

Nigeria’s Leadership Recruitment Problem

In Nigeria, leadership appointments in both political and religious spheres are often driven by ethnic loyalty, nepotism, and financial inducement rather than competence or moral uprightness. As a result, individuals who lack integrity, administrative ability, or a fear of God are elevated to leadership roles, thereby perpetuating a culture of impunity and inefficiency. For example, during elections, political parties routinely field candidates with questionable records, prioritizing loyalty over merit. Similarly, in some church settings, leadership roles are assigned based on seniority, wealth, or tribal affiliations, rather than spiritual maturity and capacity to serve. Jethro’s model directly challenges this pattern. The requirement that leaders must fear God, love truth, and reject dishonest gain disqualifies a large percentage of current political actors in Nigeria. The call for capable individuals,



chosen from among the people, subverts elite-dominated processes that exclude grassroots participation.

Centralized Leadership and Institutional Fatigue

Much like Moses in Exodus 18:13, Nigerian institutions are overburdened because leadership is often excessively centralized. The president, governors, or general overseers of churches are frequently seen as omnipotent figures, expected to micromanage every detail of governance or administration. This leads to burnout, decision paralysis, and poor service delivery. A re-reading of Exodus 18 calls for decentralized, participatory leadership models in Nigeria. The delegation of authority to “leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens” suggests a scalable framework where leadership responsibility is shared across multiple levels.

In Nigerian governance, this could translate to functional local government autonomy, empowered community development structures, and active civil service roles. In the Church, it implies effective pastoral team leadership and congregational participation.

Character versus Credentials

Exodus 18 highlights a crucial distinction often lost in Nigerian leadership selection: the priority of character over credentials. While education and professional experience are important, they are insufficient without moral foundation. Nigeria has seen many educated leaders who are corrupt and tyrannical. The biblical emphasis on “men who fear God” underscores the primacy of spiritual accountability and moral integrity. Leaders who fear God are more likely to uphold justice, respect human dignity, and resist corruption. In contrast, leaders who fear no higher authority often abuse their power. Therefore, in both ecclesiastical and civil spheres, Nigeria must adopt criteria that prioritize character, humility, and public-mindedness in leadership selection.

Systems Thinking and Leadership Development

Jethro’s advice to Moses is not just about choosing good individuals—it is about building a system. The hierarchical leadership structure he proposes allows for training, mentoring, and scalable governance. This systemic approach is largely absent in Nigeria, where institutions often rely on strong individuals rather than strong structures. Nigeria needs to invest in leadership development systems that nurture emerging leaders through mentorship, spiritual formation, and civic education. This aligns with the biblical pattern of raising leaders from within the community, trained and entrusted with responsibility over time.

Theological and Ethical Implications

The re-reading of Exodus 18 in the context of Nigerian leadership dynamics reveals critical theological and ethical insights. These insights are applicable not only to Christian leaders



and theologians but also to policymakers, educators, and the broader public who seek transformative change in Nigeria's leadership culture.

Leadership as Divine Stewardship

The primary theological implication of Exodus 18 is that leadership is a divine stewardship. Moses' role as judge and leader is not self-appointed but a sacred trust bestowed by God. Jethro recognizes this in Exodus 18:19 when he says, "You must be the people's representative before God." Leadership, therefore, is not for personal aggrandizement but for service under divine accountability. In Nigeria, where leadership is often viewed as a means of wealth accumulation and status elevation, this theological principle challenges both church and state leaders to re-conceptualize their roles as servants accountable to God and the people.

Ethical Criteria for Leadership Selection

Jethro's leadership qualifications in Exodus 18:21 are deeply ethical and spiritual. Fear of God, truthfulness, and hatred for dishonest gain form a tripod of moral excellence. These attributes are echoed throughout biblical texts—such as in the selection of deacons in Acts 6:3 ("men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom")—and they provide a trans-testamental framework for leadership discernment. Applying this in Nigeria, where leadership decisions are often transactional or tribal, challenges stakeholders to return to ethical criteria grounded in divine justice and communal welfare. Leadership selection processes must be reformed to prioritize moral aptitude and divine calling.

The Role of Mentorship and Wisdom

Jethro plays a significant role as mentor and advisor to Moses, providing critical counsel at a defining moment. This underscores the importance of mentorship in leadership formation. In Nigeria, where leadership transitions are often abrupt or crisis-driven, there is a pressing need for institutionalized mentorship, especially within ecclesiastical and civic contexts. Jethro's model demonstrates that wise counsel from elders and peers is not a sign of weakness but a strength in leadership development. Christian institutions, theological seminaries, and leadership academies in Nigeria must integrate mentorship into their frameworks.

Justice and Accessibility

The original problem in Exodus 18 was that the people had limited access to justice because Moses alone was judging all matters. Jethro's intervention ensured that justice was decentralized and made more accessible. In contemporary Nigeria, the inaccessibility of justice—due to bureaucracy, corruption, or elitism—remains a serious concern. Theologically, justice is a core attribute of God and a non-negotiable in biblical governance. Ethical leadership must facilitate justice not only in policy but also in everyday interactions



with citizens. Therefore, systems must be restructured to promote equity, responsiveness, and transparency.

Community Participation and Accountability

Finally, Exodus 18 points to a leadership system that is participatory and accountable. Moses was to choose leaders “from among the people” (v. 21), ensuring representational and community ownership. Leadership was not imposed from above but emerged organically from within. This model challenges authoritarian and top-down leadership patterns prevalent in Nigeria. It advocates for participatory governance where citizens play active roles in selecting, evaluating, and guiding their leaders. In church and civil society alike, structures must be put in place to ensure accountability, dialogue, and shared responsibility.

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

The narrative in Exodus 18 offers timeless wisdom on leadership structure, criteria for selection, and the delegation of responsibilities. Jethro’s counsel to Moses represents a model of participatory, ethical, and decentralized leadership that is urgently needed in Nigeria today. The contemporary Nigerian leadership crisis—characterized by corruption, inefficiency, and centralization—stands in stark contrast to the biblical vision of servant leadership rooted in the fear of God, truthfulness, and justice. By re-reading Exodus 18 through the lens of Nigeria’s socio-political and ecclesiastical realities, this study has highlighted the critical importance of character, competence, mentorship, and community participation in the leadership process. The implications are not merely theological but deeply practical: if Nigeria is to experience genuine transformation, both its church and state institutions must return to a leadership model grounded in biblical ethics and divine accountability.

Leadership is not a privilege for the few but a stewardship for the common good. Just as Moses heeded wise counsel and restructured his leadership model to serve the people better, Nigerian leaders must be humble, listen to the wisdom of scripture and experience, and build systems that reflect God’s justice and compassion. As the nation grapples with developmental challenges and moral decay, the Church has a prophetic role to play—not only in speaking truth to power but also in modeling leadership that serves, empowers, and transforms. Only then can Nigeria begin to raise leaders who will not only lead effectively but lead righteously.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the exegetical insights from Exodus 18 and their application to the Nigerian leadership context, the following recommendations are proposed for national, ecclesiastical, and community transformation:



1. Reorient Leadership Selection toward Character and Competence

Leadership recruitment in Nigeria—whether in politics, civil service, or the Church—must prioritize moral integrity, competence, and the fear of God. Institutional frameworks should be established to vet candidates thoroughly, using both ethical and spiritual criteria similar to Exodus 18:21. Churches, civil society, and academic institutions should lead advocacy for this paradigm shift.

2 Institutionalize Leadership Mentorship Programs

Like Jethro's mentoring of Moses, Nigeria needs deliberate mentorship and succession programs. Religious organizations, universities, and leadership institutes should implement structured mentoring systems to groom young leaders in both moral values and administrative skills. Mentorship must not be elitist or haphazard, but inclusive and strategic, ensuring continuity of ethical leadership across generations.

3 Decentralize Leadership for Efficiency and Inclusion

Adopting Jethro's model of decentralized leadership can improve governance efficiency and deepen community involvement. The Nigerian government should ensure the autonomy and functionality of local government areas, allowing leadership to emerge at grassroots levels. Churches should likewise empower local pastors and lay leaders to share ministry burdens, improving access to pastoral care and justice.

4 Develop Ethical Leadership Curriculum

Theological seminaries and civic education institutions must incorporate biblical ethics and justice frameworks into their curricula. Courses on leadership integrity, servant leadership, and scriptural justice models should be compulsory. This will help inculcate biblical values in future leaders and reform leadership culture over time.

5 Foster a Culture of Accountability and Servant Leadership

Leadership must be viewed not as entitlement but as service. Both state and church leaders should be held accountable to the people they serve. Mechanisms such as performance audits, transparent elections, open communication channels, and regular evaluations can help institutionalize accountability. Churches, in particular, should model this by instituting leadership councils, congregational feedback systems, and peer review mechanisms that align with biblical accountability.

Competing Interest

The author declares that no conflicting interest exist in this manuscript.



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