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ANCIENT ISRAELITES' RELIGIOUS PRACTICES ON NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR FAITH - RESILIENCE

KENNETH OSARODION OSARUMWENSE, Ph.D
Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts
University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State-Nigeria
kenneth.osarumwense@uniben.edu

Abstract

Nigerian Christianity has witnessed significant growth, diversification, and contextual adaptation over the past centuries. Central to this development is the increasing appropriation of Biblical Israelite religious practices, including ritual symbols, prophecy, covenant theologies, prayer, fasting traditions, sacred objects and spaces. These religious practices are especially evident within African Churches; despite their dispensation, culture, and context, they both share a common thread of adversities, experiences, and hardship that test their faith. The study examines a complex socio-religious, historical, and economic context of Nigeria, where Christians, particularly in certain regions, face various forms of persecution, marginalization, violence, and financial hardship that can erode their Christian faith. The church of ancient Israel functioned as a powerful spiritual resource for identity formation, endurance, and resilience. Christians increasingly turn to Israelite ritual models as spiritual survival mechanisms within Nigeria's volatile socio-economic and political environment which enhance faith-resilience and emotional stability. The study employs both historical and descriptive research methods to explore their experiences. Part of the finding is that, many churches employed Old Testament themes, symbols and spiritual exercises. Such practices often reinforce believers' sense of divine protection and spiritual empowerment. However, the study recommends that churches should continue to teach God's providence as demonstrated in the history of Israel, to maintain hope and resilience amid economic, political and social challenges; Church leaders should place greater emphasis on the ethical teachings reflected in Israelite traditions such as care for the poor, compassion, justice, hard-work with diligence and honesty

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Keywords: **Biblical Israel, Christianity, Faith-Resilience, Economic-Hardship, Ethics.**

Introduction

Christianity in Nigeria represents one of the most vibrant and dynamic expressions of global Christianity, characterized by theological creativity, ritual intensity, and deep spiritual engagement. Since its formal introduction through European missionary activity in the nineteenth century, Nigerian Christianity has undergone profound processes of contextualization, adapting biblical teachings to indigenous cultural worldviews, social realities, and existential needs (Kalu, 2008). One of the most striking features of this adaptation is the extensive appropriation of ancient Israelite religious practices, which include modes of prophecy, ritual performance, fasting, theology, sacred objects, cathedral imagery/painting, and spiritual warfare motifs. These practices, were drawn primarily from Old Testament traditions and became central to worship, spirituality, and pastoral praxis among African Christian churches, particularly Nigeria.

Scholars of African Christianity have consistently noted the strong affinity between African religious worldviews and Old Testament theologies. According to Sanneh (2008), African Christians frequently connect with the Israelite experience because "the Old Testament provides a theological framework through which Africans interpret their spirituality, social struggles, and historical destiny." This affinity enables believers to perceive ancient Israelite narratives as culturally meaningful and existentially relevant, fostering deep identification with Israel's experiences of suffering, deliverance, exile, and restoration. Consequently, Israelite ritual patterns and symbolic actions are reinterpreted as practical spiritual resources for confronting personal and communal crises. This contextual appropriation of Israelite religious traditions has contributed significantly to faith resilience among Nigerian Christians. Faith resilience refers to the capacity of individuals and communities to maintain spiritual stability, hope, and moral commitment amid adversity, uncertainty, and suffering (Kalu, 2008). In Nigeria, where socio-economic hardship, insecurity, political instability, ethnic conflict, and health challenges persist, religious practices play a crucial role in sustaining psychological endurance and spiritual perseverance. Kalu (2008) observes that African Pentecostal spirituality constructs "a theology of survival and resilience, in which Old Testament motifs of deliverance, covenant, and divine intervention function as tools for confronting existential vulnerability."

Furthermore, Marshall (2009) notes that Nigerian Christianity thrives partly because it offers "ritualized frameworks through which believers reinterpret everyday struggles as spiritual battles, thereby transforming anxiety into hope and despair into expectation." This ritual orientation enables Nigerian Christians to construct meaning in the midst of hardship, reinforcing both individual and communal resilience. Similarly, Louw (2014) emphasizes that African spirituality functions as a vital aspect of their life, asserting that "religious symbolism provides existential anchorage, enabling believers to endure suffering with dignity, courage, and hope." In relation, Israelite religious practices significantly contribute to the formation of resilient Christian identity in Nigeria. However, the increasing reliance on Israelite ritual patterns also raises critical theological and pastoral concerns. Scholars caution that uncritical literalism and ritual absolutism may undermine Christ-centered faith formation and ethical transformation. Meyer (2010) argues that ritualized Christianity in African contexts often prioritizes symbolic performance over theological reflection, noting that "religious efficacy is frequently sought in ritual action rather than in moral responsibility and spiritual discipline." This dynamic risks fostering spiritual materialism, magical religiosity, and transactional faith, where religious practices become instrumentalized for personal gain rather than spiritual growth.

Similarly, Omenyo (2014) warns that the extensive appropriation of Old Testament ritual forms may result in functional syncretism, whereby pre-Christian religious worldviews subtly re-emerge under biblical terminology. He contends that "the challenge of African Christianity lies in discerning where contextualization ends and syncretism begins." In the Nigerian context, this tension complicates theological education, pastoral leadership, and discipleship, raising questions about doctrinal coherence, ethical accountability, and spiritual maturity. Despite the growing scholarly interest in African Christianity, Pentecostalism, and contextual theology, systematic theological analysis of Biblical Israelite practices and their implications for faith resilience in Nigerian Christianity remains limited. Existing studies often focus on prosperity theology, spiritual warfare, or charismatic ritual without offering sustained biblical-theological reflection on Israelite ritual appropriation and its long-term effects on

Christian formation. Kalu (2008) aptly observes, "the central challenge confronting African Christianity today is not numerical expansion but theological depth and spiritual authenticity."

Concept of Faith Resilience

Faith resilience refers to the capacity of individuals and communities to sustain spiritual commitment, emotional stability, and moral integrity in the face of adversity (Kalu, 2008). Pargament (2007) defines religious resilience as "the use of sacred beliefs and practices to interpret and deal with life stressors." Such way of addressing hardship, enable individuals to reinterpret suffering as spiritually meaningful and manageable. In African contexts, ritual practices provide symbolic meaning, emotional catharsis, and psychological reassurance. Louw (2014) emphasizes that spirituality functions as "a vital existential anchorage enabling individuals to confront suffering with hope and dignity." In Nigeria, Israelite-inspired rituals such as fasting, prophetic declarations, symbolic actions, and prayers serve as a mechanisms for resilience-building. According to Marshall (2009), these practices "transform everyday crises into sacred struggles framed by hope and expectation." However, resilience fostered through ritual alone may produce spiritual dependency. Meyer (2010) cautions that excessive reliance on ritualized coping risks "reinforcing fear-based religiosity and undermining personal agency."

Biblical Israelite Practices

Ancient Israelite religion was deeply ritualistic, symbolic, and communal. Central elements include sacrificial worship, covenant, prophecy, fasting, and sacred objects. These practices served as mediators for divine presence, instruments of social cohesion, and mechanisms for forming spiritual identity. According to Brueggemann (2001), Israelite religion functioned as "a symbolic world in which ritual, memory, and covenant shaped both religious consciousness and communal resilience." Ritual practices such as sacrifice, festivals, purification rites, and prophetic acts were not merely ceremonial but conveyed theological meaning and social regulation. Similarly, Wright (2006) emphasizes that Israelite rituals were embedded in covenantal identity, arguing that "Israel's religious practices were inseparable from its ethical responsibilities and communal solidarity." The covenant framework linked ritual obedience to moral conduct, social justice, and communal faithfulness. Prophetic symbolism also played a central role. Ezekiel's dramatic enactments (Ezek. 4–5), Jeremiah's symbolic actions (Jer. 13; 27), and Hosea's marital metaphor (Hos. 1–3) illustrate how ritual acts conveyed theological truths. According to Heschel (2001), prophetic actions were designed to "transform abstract divine messages into concrete experiential realities." These Israelite practices provided theological foundations for worship, identity, resilience, and communal continuity, which later influenced early Christian traditions and continue to shape global Christian spirituality.

Old Testament Themes in African Christianity

The Old Testament occupies a central position in African Christian thought and practice because many of its themes resonate strongly with African worldviews, communal values, religious consciousness, and cultural traditions. African Christians often identify with the experiences of ancient Israel, particularly in areas such as covenant relationship with God, divine providence, leadership, liberation, justice, worship, and community life. Consequently, Old Testament narratives and teachings have significantly influenced Christian theology,

ethics, worship, and social engagement across Africa. Scholars have observed that the affinity between African religious culture and the Old Testament contributes to the widespread acceptance of Christianity on the continent. According to Mbiti, "Africans are notoriously religious," and religion permeates every aspect of life (Mbiti, 1969). This deep religious consciousness provides fertile ground for understanding Old Testament concepts of God's involvement in human affairs. The relationship between African culture and the Old Testament has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Mbiti argues that many African societies easily identify with the social and religious structures of ancient Israel because both contexts emphasize family solidarity, communal responsibility, reverence for elders, and belief in divine intervention. Mbiti (1990) notes that African readers often find the Old Testament more relatable than some aspects of the New Testament because of these cultural parallels.

African Christianity exhibits a strong affinity for Old Testament theology due to structural similarities between African traditional religious worldviews and ancient Israelite cosmology. Bediako (1995) argues that African Christians identify deeply with Israel's religious experience because "both share a primal religious imagination that perceives reality as spiritually charged and relational." Sanneh (2008) similarly notes that the Old Testament resonates strongly within African Christianity because it "provides symbolic resources for interpreting suffering, hope, deliverance, and divine intervention." This resonance facilitates the creative appropriation of Israelite narratives and ritual frameworks. Similarly, Bediako maintains that Christianity in Africa has flourished partly because biblical traditions connect meaningfully with African cultural realities. He states: "The Christian faith in Africa has found a natural home because the biblical worldview addresses questions that are already present in African religious experience" (Bediako, 1995). Old Testament themes such as covenant, sacrifice, kingship, prophecy, and divine protection continue to shape African Christian spirituality. Many African churches draw lessons from the experiences of Israel in understanding God's guidance during periods of political instability, economic hardship, and social transformation. The theme of liberation is particularly significant. The Exodus narrative is frequently interpreted as a model of God's concern for oppressed people. According to Desmond Tutu: "The Exodus story demonstrates God's preferential concern for those who suffer oppression and injustice" (Tutu, 1984). This theme has influenced African Christian responses to colonialism, apartheid, poverty, and social injustice.

Another prominent Old Testament theme in African Christian practice is divine providence. African Christians often emphasize God's active involvement in daily life, reflecting Israel's understanding of Yahweh as protector and provider. According to Brueggemann: "The Old Testament consistently portrays God as actively engaged in the affairs of His people, sustaining and guiding them through history" (Brueggemann, 2002).
This perspective aligns with African Christian beliefs regarding God's continuous intervention in personal and communal affairs. The prophetic tradition of the Old Testament also informs African Christianity. Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah provide models for addressing corruption, injustice, and moral decline. Gathogo observes that African churches frequently employ prophetic teachings to challenge unethical leadership and advocate social transformation. Furthermore, the Old Testament emphasis on community life corresponds closely with African communal values. Ancient Israel understood identity primarily in collective rather than individual terms. Likewise, African societies traditionally

prioritize communal welfare, kinship relationships, and mutual support. According to Oduyoye: "The communal ethos of the Bible finds a ready reception in African societies where personhood is realized through community" (Oduyoye, 2001). Consequently, many African Christian practices, including communal worship, family-centered faith, and collective responsibility, reflect Old Testament influences. In contemporary Africa, Old Testament themes continue to shape Christian responses to challenges such as insecurity, poverty, disease, governance crises, and social inequality. Churches frequently employ biblical models of faith, resilience, covenant faithfulness, and hope to encourage believers amid difficult circumstances. Thus, the Old Testament remains a vital theological resource for African Christianity and contributes significantly to the development of indigenous Christian expressions across the continent.

Risk of Syncretism with African Indigenous Religion

The interaction between Christianity and African Indigenous Religion (AIR) has been one of the defining features of African Christianity. While the contextualization of the Christian faith has enabled the gospel to become meaningful within African cultures, scholars have warned that an uncritical blending of Christian beliefs and traditional religious practices may result in syncretism. Syncretism generally refers to the fusion of elements from different religious traditions in ways that alter or compromise the essential teachings of a faith (Mbiti, 1990). In the Nigerian context, the appropriation of biblical Israelite practices such as covenant rituals, prophetic acts, anointing ceremonies, and spiritual warfare has sometimes been influenced by indigenous religious worldviews. Although these practices may strengthen believers' sense of divine protection and resilience, there is a risk that some Christians may attribute spiritual efficacy to objects, rituals, or mediators in ways that resemble traditional religious practices rather than biblical Christianity.

According to Mbiti, Christianity in Africa does not exist in a cultural vacuum but encounters deeply rooted religious traditions that continue to shape the worldview of converts. Mbiti (1990) observes that "Africans are notoriously religious", highlighting the pervasive influence of religion in African life. While this religious consciousness can facilitate Christian commitment, it may also create conditions where traditional beliefs are incorporated into Christian practice without adequate theological reflection. Similarly, Kwame Bediako argues that the Christian faith must be genuinely rooted in African culture, but such contextualization should remain faithful to the biblical revelation in Christ. Bediako (1995) indicates that African Christians often seek continuity between their pre-Christian heritage and their Christian identity. While this continuity can enrich faith, it may become problematic when traditional religious concepts assume authority equal to or greater than Scripture. Another significant contribution comes from Walls, who argues that Christianity is both locally rooted and universally accountable. Walls (1996) contends that every cultural expression of Christianity must be evaluated in light of the gospel. In his words, "The gospel is at home in every culture, yet it is never captive to any culture" (paraphrased from his broader argument). This insight suggests that cultural adaptation should not override biblical norms.

Lamin Sanneh emphasizes that Christianity's translation into local cultures is one of its greatest strengths. However, Sanneh (1989) maintains that the gospel possesses a transformative capacity that challenges and affirms cultural values. Therefore,

contextualization must involve discernment to ensure that cultural practices are evaluated through the lens of biblical truth. In many Nigerian churches, concerns about syncretism arise when practices such as the use of consecrated objects, excessive dependence on prophetic declarations, ritualized deliverance activities, or consultation of spiritual powers mirror elements found in African Indigenous Religion. Scholars caution that when believers place confidence in rituals or sacred objects rather than in God's grace and the redemptive work of Christ, Christian faith may be distorted (Bediako, 1995; Mbiti, 1990).

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between legitimate contextualization and syncretism. Contextualization seeks to communicate the Christian message within a cultural framework, whereas syncretism occurs when incompatible religious beliefs and practices are merged in ways that compromise the core teachings of Christianity. Bediako (1995) argues that, authentic African Christianity should be both genuinely African and genuinely Christian. Therefore, while biblical Israelite practices can enrich the faith and resilience of Nigerian Christians by reinforcing trust in God's providence and communal solidarity, church leaders must exercise theological discernment. Proper biblical teaching, theological education, and Christ-centered interpretation are essential for ensuring that contextual expressions of faith strengthen rather than dilute Christian doctrine.

Perseverance in the Face of Hardship

Perseverance through hardship is a recurring theme in both biblical theology and Christian experience. Throughout the history of ancient Israel, periods of war, exile, famine, disease, and economic deprivation tested the faith of God's people. Yet, these challenges often became occasions for spiritual growth, dependence on God's providence, and communal solidarity. Similarly, Nigerian Christians have faced significant hardships in recent years, including insecurity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and widespread poverty. In response, many believers have drawn upon biblical teachings and religious practices to sustain their faith and resilience. Biblical scholars note that suffering and perseverance are inseparable themes within the Judeo-Christian tradition. According to Walter Brueggemann, Israel's faith was forged in experiences of crisis and uncertainty, where trust in God's faithfulness became the foundation for survival and hope. Brueggemann (1997) argues that Israel's testimony consistently points to a God who remains present and active even amid suffering and social disruption.

Insecurity and Christian Resilience

Nigeria has experienced persistent security challenges, including terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, and farmer-herder clashes. These conditions have resulted in displacement, loss of lives, destruction of property, and psychological trauma. Despite these difficulties, many Nigerian Christians continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience through prayer, communal worship, and trust in divine protection. According to Miroslav Volf, Christian hope is sustained by the conviction that suffering does not have the final word because God remains faithful in the midst of adversity. Volf (2015) observes that faith enables believers to endure difficult circumstances without surrendering to despair. This perspective resonates strongly with Nigerian Christians who interpret security challenges through a theological framework of divine providence and ultimate redemption.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Faith-Resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented social, economic, and religious disruptions across the world. In Nigeria, lockdowns, restrictions on public worship, job losses, illness, and deaths generated widespread uncertainty and anxiety. Churches responded by adopting online worship services, prayer initiatives, and welfare interventions to support members. Reflecting on the role of faith during crises, N. T. Wright notes that Christians are called not merely to explain suffering but to respond through faithful presence, prayer, compassion, and hope. Wright (2020) writes, "The point of the Christian faith is not to provide explanations but to provide hope and healing." This insight highlights how faith communities became important sources of emotional and spiritual support during the pandemic. Similarly, John Lennox argues that crises such as pandemics often expose human vulnerability while simultaneously creating opportunities for deeper trust in God. According to Lennox (2020), Christian faith provides a framework for confronting uncertainty without losing hope.

Poverty and Endurance

Poverty remains one of the most pressing challenges confronting many Nigerians. Rising inflation, unemployment, and limited access to social services have increased economic hardship for millions of households. In such circumstances, faith communities frequently serve as sources of material assistance, emotional encouragement, and spiritual strength. The biblical tradition consistently links faith with endurance under economic hardship. According to Craig C. Hill, biblical communities often viewed perseverance as an expression of trust in God's sustaining grace rather than passive resignation to suffering. The experiences of Israel in the wilderness and during exile demonstrate how faith enabled communities to endure prolonged periods of scarcity and uncertainty. Likewise, Goldingay observes that Israel's faith was nurtured through repeated experiences of divine provision during times of need. Goldingay (2006) argues that the memory of God's past faithfulness encouraged future confidence, even when circumstances appeared hopeless. This dynamic is evident among many Nigerian Christians who draw encouragement from biblical promises and testimonies of divine provision.

Pentecostalism has significantly amplified the use of Israelite ritual motifs in Nigerian Christianity. Practices such as anointing oil, prophetic actions, fasting seasons, covenant prayers, and deliverance rituals mirror Old Testament religious patterns. Marshall (2009) observes that Nigerian Pentecostalism frequently draws upon Israelite symbolism to construct "a theology of power, protection, and prosperity capable of addressing existential insecurity." Similarly, Kalu (2008) asserts that Old Testament motifs enable African Pentecostalism to "translate biblical power narratives into practical strategies for survival and empowerment." Despite these positive contributions, critics argue that excessive ritualization risks commodifying spirituality. Meyer (2010) contends that ritual-centered Christianity often produces "a transactional faith where divine intervention is expected in direct proportion to ritual performance."

Practice of Faith among Nigerian Christians

Faith formation refers to the holistic development of Christian belief, identity, character, and practice. In African Christianity, faith formation is deeply experiential, communal, and ritualized. According to Groome (2011), Christian formation involves "a lifelong process of spiritual, moral, and theological maturation shaped by communal practice and narrative

identity." In Nigeria, ritual practices grounded in Old Testament symbolism play a major role in shaping Christian consciousness and identity. However, Kalu (2008) cautions that faith formation in African Christianity faces the danger of "ritual inflation without corresponding theological depth." This imbalance can undermine critical biblical interpretation, ethical responsibility, and doctrinal coherence. Furthermore, Adeboye (2013) argues that Nigerian churches must move beyond ritual performance toward "intentional discipleship that integrates biblical teaching, ethical responsibility, and spiritual maturity."

Ancient Israel's Military Response and Nigerian Christians' Non-Retaliatory Response

The history of ancient Israel reveals that the preservation of national well-being frequently involved military resistance against external threats. The Old Testament portrays Israel as a covenant community whose survival often depended upon defending itself against hostile nations. Military campaigns against the Amalekites, Philistines, Midianites, and other enemies were understood within the framework of divine command and covenant preservation. According to Von (1991), warfare in ancient Israel was not merely a political activity but a religious act carried out under the conviction that Yahweh fought on behalf of His people. Von argues that because Israel believed that God was fighting for them, they were "inspired and obliged to fight even harder." In contrast, the New Testament presents a different paradigm for responding to persecution. The early Christians lived under the authority of the Roman Empire and generally did not respond to persecution with armed resistance. Instead, they emphasized endurance, prayer, forgiveness, and faithful witness. Jesus taught, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44), while the apostles encouraged believers to endure suffering for the sake of Christ (1 Pet. 2:21–23). Yoder (1994), indicates that the cross represents a deliberate rejection of violence as the primary means of advancing God's kingdom. Yoder argues that the Christian response to hostility is shaped by the example of Jesus, whose victory came through sacrificial suffering rather than military force. This comparison helps to identify the reasons why many Nigerian Christians who experience violent attacks, displacement, and other forms of persecution often respond through prayer, advocacy, humanitarian assistance, legal action, and appeals to government protection rather than organized retaliation. Their response is rooted less in the Old Testament model of covenant warfare and more in the New Testament ethic of perseverance and redemptive suffering.

Implications for Faith and Resilience

The comparison demonstrates that while ancient Israel often protected its collective well-being through divinely sanctioned warfare, contemporary Nigerian Christians generally draw upon the New Testament tradition of endurance, forgiveness, and hope amid persecution. Consequently, Christian resilience in Nigeria is frequently expressed not through retaliation but through steadfast faith, communal solidarity, prayer, and confidence in God's ultimate justice. This posture reflects a transition from the Old Testament model of covenant warfare to the New Testament model of faithful witness under suffering. The experiences of insecurity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and poverty have demonstrated the continuing relevance of biblical themes of perseverance and trust in God's providence. Like the ancient Israelites, Nigerian Christians often interpret adversity as a context in which faith is tested, refined, and strengthened. Through prayer, fasting, communal support, scriptural reflection, and hope in God's promises, believers cultivate resilience that enables them to endure difficult circumstances. Jürgen Moltmann famously states, "Hope is the anticipation of that which is

promised." (Moltmann, 1967). This theology of hope helps explain why many Nigerian Christians continue to persevere despite persistent hardships. Their resilience is rooted not merely in personal determination but in confidence in God's faithfulness, providence, and future restoration.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that Israelite practices function as significant spiritual resources for resilience, enabling believers to interpret adversity through biblical narratives of exile, deliverance, covenant loyalty, and divine intervention. Within the Nigerian context, marked by insecurity, poverty, unemployment, and social instability, these narratives reinforce faith, nurture spiritual confidence, and promote psychological stability. However, this study has also shown that the uncritical appropriation of Israelite ritual models poses substantial theological and pastoral challenges. Excessive ritualism, symbolic literalism, and selective biblical interpretation risk reducing Christian faith to mechanistic spirituality, where divine favor is pursued through ritual performance rather than ethical obedience and spiritual maturity. Furthermore, the study highlights the growing tension between contextual adaptation and syncretism within Nigerian Christianity. While contextual theology affirms the importance of cultural engagement, it also demands critical theological discernment. The study suggest for an urgent need for a balanced, Christ-centered, and contextually sensitive theological framework that integrates biblical fidelity, African cultural consciousness, and ethical discipleship. Such a framework would enable Nigerian Christianity to preserve its vibrant spirituality while fostering mature faith formation, moral responsibility, and social engagement. The study affirms that Biblical Israelite practices remain vital for nurturing faith resilience within Nigerian Christianity, but their appropriation must be guided by sound hermeneutics, theological discernment, and pastoral wisdom. Only through such balanced engagement can Nigerian Christianity sustain its spiritual dynamism, deepen discipleship, and contribute meaningfully to ethical transformation, peace-building, and national development.

Recommendations

Christians in Nigeria should be encouraged to emulate the ancient Israelites' trust in God's providence, perseverance during adversity, and commitment to God's word.

Church leaders should interpret and apply Israelite practices within the framework of the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Church leaders should place greater emphasis on the ethical teachings reflected in Israelite traditions such as care for the poor, compassion, justice, hard-work with diligence and honesty.

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