Religion, Political Power and the Ethics of Electoral Manipulation in Nigeria: An Old Testament Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Religion remains a powerful presence in Nigerian public life. It shapes moral imagination, communal identity, political speech and civic participation, and it can strengthen democratic accountability and peaceful coexistence. It can also be exploited when politicians or religious authorities mobilize sacred identity, clerical legitimacy and claims of divine favour for partisan gain. This study asks what is ethically at stake in such instrumentalization, and it approaches the question through selected Old Testament narratives. The method is qualitative, interpretive and library-based: a contextual reading of the biblical texts is set alongside contemporary Nigerian scholarship, constitutional provisions and electoral legislation. Six cases anchor the discussion: Jeroboam's re-organization of worship to secure political loyalty (1 Kings 12:26–33), the manipulation of religious and legal procedure in Naboth's dispossession (1 Kings 21:1–16), the commercialization of prophetic authority (Mic. 3:5–11), the court prophets' accommodation of royal desire (1 Kings 22:1–28), Absalom's cultivation of public allegiance (2 Sam. 15:1–12) and Nathan's confrontation of David (2 Sam. 12:1–14). The texts are not read as direct equivalents of modern elections. They are used to bring out recurring patterns in the relationship between religious authority and political power. The paper argues that religious participation is legitimate when it serves truth, justice, human dignity, accountability and the common good, and that it turns manipulative when religion is reduced to a means of securing loyalty, inspiring fear, excluding others, spreading misinformation or sanctifying unaccountable power. It closes by proposing a framework built on prophetic independence, interreligious respect, truthful public communication and issue-based political judgement.

Keywords: Religion, political power, electoral manipulation, Nigeria, political ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion has a visible and influential place in Nigeria's political and social life. Christian and Muslim institutions are woven into community life, schooling, welfare provision, public debate and the shaping of moral values. Religious leaders draw wide public attention, and religious language turns up routinely in political speeches, campaign events, public prayers and commentary on national affairs. None of this is undemocratic in itself. Faith communities can enrich political life by raising ethical concerns, educating citizens, advocating peace, monitoring governance and pressing public officials to answer for their conduct. The difficulty begins when religious identity or authority is deployed strategically to win loyalty, discredit opponents, justify exclusion, or stand in for public reasoning with appeals to sacred inevitability. Earlier Nigerian scholarship has described religion in just this light, as a channel through which the political class manipulates the polity (Anifowose, 2017). The 2023 presidential election drew fresh attention to how religion, ethnicity and electoral competition interact. Scholars have documented the strategic use of religious and ethnic identities by political parties and other actors, and the way electoral discourse casts religious communities as rival political blocs (Chigbu et al., 2025; Uroko et al., 2025). Joshua et al. (2025) likewise point to the continuing weight of ethno-religious factors in the 2015 and 2023 general elections. These findings do not show that voters act only from religious motives, or that every religiously informed political judgement is manipulative. What they show is the need to tell responsible religious participation apart from the use of faith as an electoral instrument.

Existing scholarship offers important but partial accounts of this problem. Kukah (1993) traces how religion has been bound up with the struggle for power in northern Nigeria, and Obadare (2018) shows how competition between Pentecostal Christianity and Islam has shaped democratic politics in the Fourth Republic, including a chapter on what he calls electoral theologies. Anifowose (2017), Salahu (2023), Uroko et al. (2025), Joshua et al. (2025) and Chigbu et al. (2025) examine religious manipulation, electoral outcomes, party strategy and religious othering from political, sociological and discourse-analytic standpoints. These studies establish convincingly that religion is used for political ends, but their main task is to describe and explain that use. They do not supply a biblical-theological standard against which religious participation in elections can be judged. Ufere (2026) moves in a normative direction by distinguishing prophetic responsibility from partisan endorsement, but that discussion concentrates on clerical engagement and electoral endorsement. To the author's knowledge, no study has yet read a connected set of Old Testament narratives as a normative test for separating legitimate religious participation in Nigerian elections from manipulative instrumentalization.

This study addresses that gap in three ways. First, it uses Old Testament narratives as a source of ethical criteria and not merely as illustration. Second, it distinguishes four forms of religious involvement in elections, namely religious mobilization, clerical endorsement, prophetic compromise and deliberate electoral misinformation, and states when each is legitimate and when it becomes manipulative (section 3.4). Third, it analyzes every biblical case in the same sequence, keeping what the text meant in its own setting apart from what it can contribute ethically today (sections 2 and 5).

By instrumentalization, this study means the process by which religion, whether as symbol, institution, identity, leader or claim to divine authority, is treated chiefly as a means to political ends. In an election this might take the form of deliberately activating religious solidarity, presenting a candidate as uniquely favoured by God, portraying opponents as threats to a faith community, or using clerical influence to deliver votes with little regard for policy, competence or accountability. It also happens when religious leaders trade prophetic independence for patronage, access or political cover. Religion's presence in public life is not the problem. The problem is the subordination of religious integrity to partisan ambition. The study takes up the question through selected Old Testament narratives. The Hebrew Bible returns again and again to the dangers that follow when rulers manipulate worship, suppress truth, buy religious approval or use sacred institutions to legitimize injustice. Jeroboam's creation of rival cultic centres, meant to keep the people's allegiance from drifting back to the Davidic monarchy (1 Kings 12:26–33), is the most telling case. Other passages shed light on related patterns: Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1–16), Micah's attack on compromised prophets (Mic. 3:5–11) and Micaiah's resistance to the royal consensus (1 Kings 22:1–28).

The central argument is that these narratives supply a critical theological vocabulary for judging the manipulation of religious authority in the pursuit or defense of political power. They cannot be mapped mechanically onto Nigerian electoral processes, since they come out of ancient Israel's monarchic, covenantal and literary settings. Even so, they press questions that have not gone away: how rulers protect themselves, what gives religious speech its legitimacy, what truth and justice require, and what responsibility religious voices bear for challenging abusive power. Religion serves Nigerian democracy when it encourages justice, truthfulness, human dignity, peaceful participation and accountability. It damages democracy when it divides citizens, manufactures political legitimacy or shields leaders from scrutiny.

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive and library-based methods. It draws on selected Old Testament passages, biblical commentaries (for example Provan, 1995, on Kings and McKane, 1998, on Micah), works on Old Testament ethics and prophetic theology (for example Brueggemann, 2001), peer-reviewed studies of religion and Nigerian elections, and relevant constitutional and electoral provisions. The biblical texts are read in their literary and historical contexts, with attention to setting, character motivation, theological claims and ethical consequences. Contemporary Nigerian scholarship is used to identify patterns in electoral discourse and political mobilization. The study does not rest on interviews, surveys or original fieldwork. The choice of texts is purposive, not exhaustive. First Kings 12:26–33 serves as the principal narrative because it links political insecurity directly to the re-organization of worship. First Kings 21:1–16 shows religious and legal procedure being used to carry out an injustice. Micah 3:5–11 and 1 Kings 22:1–28 deal with compromised prophetic authority and the silencing of unwelcome truth. Second Samuel 15:1–12 shows how public allegiance and a

religiously meaningful place can be drawn into a bid for power, and 2 Samuel 12:1–14 offers a constructive counter-example in the prophet who holds a king to account. Amos 5:21–24, Isaiah 1:16–17 and Micah 6:8 supply wider ethical principles.

The contemporary focus is Nigeria, in particular the Fourth Republic and the electoral cycles of 2015, 2019 and 2023, so far as relevant scholarship exists. The paper acknowledges Nigeria's religious plurality and does not assume that the Old Testament carries common theological authority for all Nigerians. Its direct interpretive claims belong to Christian theology, while the civic implications are put in terms that can be taken up in wider democratic discussion.

2. HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH, SELECTION OF TEXTS AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

2.1 Hermeneutical approach

The study follows a paradigmatic and contextual-ethical hermeneutic. A paradigmatic reading, as developed by Wright (2004), treats Israel's narrative and legal traditions as paradigms: they show how God's moral purposes were worked out in one particular society, and so they yield principles that can be carried into other societies without being copied. The approach has three steps. The first is historical and literary. Each passage is read in its canonical setting, mainly the Deuteronomistic History (1 Kings and 2 Samuel) and the eighth-century prophetic book of Micah, with attention to narrative structure, characters, speech and the narrator's evaluation (Provan, 1995; McCarter, 1984; McKane, 1998). The second step is theological. The passage is asked what it teaches about God, kingship, worship, justice and prophetic speech within the covenant framework of the text. The third step is ethical and contextual. The principle identified is brought into dialogue with Nigerian electoral realities, including the constitutional and electoral-law framework discussed in section 4, and the limits of the analogy are stated openly. Brueggemann's (2001) account of prophetic criticism of royal power supplies the interpretive lens for the prophetic cases. This sequence keeps the original meaning of a text apart from its contemporary use. A claim about what the text meant is argued from the text and its context. A claim about what it implies for Nigeria today is an ethical inference, and it is labelled as such.

2.2 Criteria for selecting the six narratives

The six narratives were selected against five criteria. (1) Political-religious interaction: the text must show religious institutions, rituals, language or officials being used by, or acting upon, political power. (2) Narrative depth: the text must be a sustained narrative or prophetic oracle with identifiable characters and an evaluative voice, so that its moral judgement can be read from the text and not imposed on it. (3) Pattern coverage: together the texts should cover distinct forms of the problem that Nigerian electoral politics also displays, namely the manipulation of worship, religiously justified injustice, commercialized prophecy, pressure on prophets to endorse power, the mobilization of public allegiance, and prophetic accountability. (4) Constructive balance: at least one text must show the positive alternative, so that the framework is not built from failures alone. (5) Canonical spread: the texts come from the Deuteronomistic History and the Latter Prophets, which allows the narrative and the prophetic evaluation of kingship to be compared. Table 1 shows how each text meets these criteria.

Table 1. Selection of the six Old Testament narratives

Text	Form of the problem	Reason for selection
1 Kings 12:26–33	Manipulation of worship for regime security	Clearest case of worship reorganized to secure political loyalty
1 Kings 21:1–16	Religious and legal forms used to legitimize injustice	Shows fast, assembly and due process turned against a citizen
Micah 3:5–11	Commercialized prophetic and priestly authority	Ties religious office directly to payment and favour
1 Kings 22:1–28	Pressure on prophets to	Contrasts a unanimous court consensus with

	endorse power	independent truth-telling
2 Samuel 15:1–12	Mobilization of public allegiance under religious cover	Shows a vow, sacrifice and invited notables used to legitimize a bid for power (see 5.5)
2 Samuel 12:1–14	Prophetic accountability (constructive case)	Shows a prophet holding the king to a moral standard

2.3 Method of analysis for each case

Every case in section 5 is analyzed in the same order: (a) historical and literary setting; (b) original theological meaning; (c) the pattern of instrumentalization or accountability that the text displays; (d) contemporary ethical implications for Nigeria, including the constitutional and electoral-law context where relevant; and (e) the limits of the analogy. Parts (a) to (c) concern what the text meant in its own setting. Parts (d) and (e) are the author's ethical inference, and they are argued separately and marked as such at the end of each subsection.

3. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CLARIFICATION

3.1 Religion and political power

Religion may be understood as a constellation of beliefs, practices, institutions, symbols, moral commitments and communal identities oriented towards what adherents hold to be sacred or ultimate. Political power, for its part, is the capacity to make binding decisions, allocate public resources, shape institutions and influence collective behaviour. The two are neither inherently opposed nor automatically aligned. Religious traditions can furnish moral resources for public criticism and social solidarity, and political institutions can protect religious freedom and peaceful pluralism. At the same time, religious authority can be recruited to legitimize political decisions, and political authorities can seek religious endorsement to bolster their credibility. The real ethical question is not whether religion should stay silent on public affairs. That position would shut religious citizens out of democratic participation and ignore what faith communities contribute to public advocacy. The sharper question is whether a given instance of religious participation respects equal citizenship, stays open to public scrutiny and serves the common good, or instead turns sacred authority into a tool of domination. Public theology is useful here because it asks how theological conviction can enter public debate while remaining alert to pluralism, justice and democratic accountability.

3.2 Instrumentalization of religion

Instrumentalization differs from ordinary religious influence. Influence occurs when conviction shapes how a person thinks about justice, leadership, welfare or public responsibility. Instrumentalization occurs when religious resources are used mainly as tools for some external goal, and political advantage outweighs religious integrity. In elections it can take several forms: reducing candidates to their religious identities, presenting a vote for one candidate as loyalty to God or to a faith community, demonizing opponents as threats to a religion, using religious gatherings for partisan mobilization, trading clerical endorsement for patronage, and circulating unverifiable prophecies or misinformation. Not every clerical endorsement, public prayer or faith-based political statement amounts to manipulation. Religious leaders have a right to speak on public questions, and the assessment depends on content, context, method and consequence. A cleric who measures candidates against publicly defensible standards of justice and integrity is doing something different from one who presents a partisan preference as an unquestionable divine command. Ufere (2026) argues that prophetic responsibility requires religious leaders to address injustice and governance, while taking care over partisan electoral endorsement, which can blur moral witness and political allegiance.

3.3 Electoral manipulation and democratic choice

Electoral manipulation covers practices that distort the conditions under which citizens form political preferences or cast their votes. Coercion, misinformation, intimidation, identity-based incitement and the exploitation of social vulnerability all belong here. Religious instrumentalization becomes electorally

manipulative when it limits independent judgement: when it presents a political choice as a test of religious loyalty, threatens spiritual or communal consequences, or portrays a candidate's victory as divinely guaranteed. It can also weaken accountability by drawing attention away from policy, competence and performance towards symbolic identification. The concept should not be stretched to cover every appeal to religious values. A candidate may explain how personal convictions inform a commitment to reducing poverty, keeping the peace or advancing social justice, and a religious organization may advocate policies that fit its ethical commitments. Manipulation is more plausibly present where identity-based appeals are used to exclude, deceive, intimidate or override reasoned political judgement.

3.4 Distinguishing legitimate participation from manipulative instrumentalization

Sections 3.2 and 3.3 treat instrumentalization as a single category. Four forms need to be kept apart, because they differ in what is wrong with them and in the remedy they call for. Religious mobilization is the organized use of religious networks, identity or language to encourage political action. Clerical endorsement is a religious leader's public support for a candidate or party. Prophetic compromise is the loss of a religious leader's or institution's independent moral voice through patronage, loyalty or fear. Deliberate electoral misinformation is the knowing circulation of false or unverifiable claims, including fabricated prophecies, in order to influence votes. Each of these can be legitimate or manipulative, and the same act can move from one to the other depending on how it is carried out.

Five tests help to separate legitimate participation from manipulation. (1) Truthfulness: the claims made are accurate and open to verification. (2) Voluntariness: no spiritual, social or material coercion is applied. (3) Inclusiveness: no group is presented as inherently dangerous, disloyal or unfit for office. (4) Issue orientation: the appeal can be assessed by public reasons such as policy, record and integrity. (5) Independence and transparency: the religious voice remains free to criticize any officeholder, and any benefit, relationship or institutional position is disclosed. An act that meets the tests is legitimate participation. An act that fails one or more is open to the charge of manipulation, and the more tests it fails, the stronger the charge. The tests are drawn from the biblical cases analyzed in section 5 and from the Nigerian scholarship cited above. Table 2 applies them to the four forms, and the distinctions are used in sections 6.1 to 6.6.

Table 2. Four forms of religious involvement in elections

Form	Legitimate participation	Manipulative instrumentalization	Main biblical paradigm
Religious mobilization	Encouraging members to register, vote peacefully and weigh candidates by ethical standards	Presenting a vote as loyalty to a faith community or casting rivals as threats to it (Chigbu et al., 2025; Uroko et al., 2025)	Jeroboam (1 Kings 12); Absalom (2 Sam. 15)
Clerical endorsement	A leader gives a reasoned personal political judgement, says it is personal, and remains free to criticize the endorsed officeholder (Ufere, 2026)	Presenting a partisan preference as a divine command or a condition of faith, and staying silent about the endorsed leader's failures	Micaiah against the court prophets (1 Kings 22); Nathan (2 Sam. 12)
Prophetic compromise	Receiving lawful support openly and accountably while keeping the freedom to criticize	A religious message shaped by payment or favour (Mic. 3:5, 11)	Micah 3:5–11
Deliberate electoral misinformation	Verification, honest correction and truthful testimony	Fabricated prophecies and false accusations given religious cover	Naboth (1 Kings 21); Exod. 20:16; Jer. 23:16–22

4. RELIGION AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF NIGERIAN ELECTORAL POLITICS

Nigeria's political development has been shaped by the interplay of religious, ethnic, regional and institutional

identities. These are not fixed electoral blocs, and religious affiliation does not determine political behaviour in any uniform way. Even so, religion has often supplied a powerful language through which political competition is read. Salahu (2023) examines religion's influence on electoral behaviour and outcomes, including in the 2023 presidential election, while Uroko et al. (2025) study how the two dominant parties use religious and ethnic identity to gain electoral advantage. The 2015 and 2023 elections are instructive because religious and ethnic narratives figured prominently in public discussion of candidates, party tickets and the nation's political direction. Joshua et al. (2025), working from an instrumentalist approach, examine the part played by ethno-religious factors in both contests. Chigbu et al. (2025) analyzed more than 14,000 Facebook comments and found three strategies of religious othering in electoral discourse: demonization, in-group ostracization and stereotyping. Their findings show how electoral communication can reproduce the boundaries between religious communities and turn political disagreement into a contest over collective identity.

These dynamics need careful interpretation. Nigeria's constitutional order establishes no state religion: section 10 of the Constitution prohibits the adoption of one, and section 38 protects freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Section 97 of the Electoral Act 2022 prohibits campaigning or broadcasting on religious, tribal or sectional grounds for the purpose of promoting or opposing a political party or candidate. Together these provisions set a legal framework against certain forms of identity-based campaigning, although whether they are effectively enforced is a separate matter. The Nigerian context therefore presents a dual reality. Religious communities are important civil-society actors with legitimate interests in governance, justice, education, security and welfare. Yet religious identity can also be mobilized in ways that deepen suspicion, encourage political exclusion and weaken issue-based evaluation. An ethical account has to resist two opposite assumptions: that religion has no rightful place in public life, and that religious authority should settle electoral choice.

5. OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES OF RELIGION, POLITICAL POWER AND ETHICAL FAILURE

5.1 Jeroboam's political manipulation of religious worship (1 Kings 12:26–33)

The account belongs to the Deuteronomistic History and describes the division of the kingdom after Solomon's death in the late tenth century BC. Deuteronomy 12 insists on one place of worship chosen by the LORD, so Jeroboam's rival shrines at Bethel and Dan break that principle at its root. His declaration that these are the gods who brought Israel out of Egypt (1 Kings 12:28) deliberately echoes the golden calf of Exodus 32:4, and the Kings narrator keeps returning to the sin of Jeroboam as the standard by which later northern kings are judged (Provan, 1995).

After the division of the united monarchy, Jeroboam becomes king over the northern tribes. He fears that continued pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom, may lead the people to give their allegiance again to Rehoboam. His reasoning is stated openly: if the people keep worshipping in Jerusalem, their hearts may turn back to the house of David and he will lose the kingdom (1 Kings 12:26–27). So, he sets up worship centres at Bethel and Dan, makes golden calves, appoints priests from outside the traditional Levitical arrangement and institutes a festival of his own choosing (1 Kings 12:28–33). The narrative shows a ruler re-organizing religious practice in response to political calculation. Jeroboam does not begin with any independent theological enquiry into worship; what drives him is the wish to keep power. Shrines, images, priestly appointments and festival arrangements all become instruments of a strategy to stabilize the regime. The narrator judges the actions harshly and ties them to the sin of Jeroboam. In the literary and theological world of Kings, the objection is more than administrative innovation. Worship has been made to serve political expediency.

The relevance for Nigeria lies in this pattern of instrumentalization, and it does not depend on any direct equivalence between the northern kingdom and the modern Nigerian state. Jeroboam illustrates how political actors can exploit religious symbols, institutions and practices to secure allegiance. Modern analogies might appear when candidates or parties cultivate religious platforms chiefly to consolidate support, when religious

identity becomes the deciding criterion of political loyalty, or when religious leaders enter arrangements that compromise their independent judgement. The passage asks whether religious participation directs citizens towards truth and justice, or whether it has been re-organized to protect those who seek or hold power.

The text also challenges the assumption that political success validates religious practice. Jeroboam's arrangements may well have served their immediate purpose of consolidating his kingdom, yet the narrative measures them against a theological standard that lies beyond expediency. Electoral victory is similar. It does not by itself establish ethical legitimacy, and a candidate's ability to mobilize a religious constituency cannot substitute for integrity, competence, respect for rights and accountability.

In its own setting the text teaches that worship belongs to God and cannot be re-engineered to protect a throne, and the narrator treats the political motive as the root of the offence. The implication for Nigeria, drawn by analogy and not by equivalence, is that religious symbols and institutions must not be reorganized or courted chiefly to secure political loyalty. The analogy is limited. Jeroboam was a king creating a state cult, whereas Nigerian politicians operate under a constitution that bars a state religion (section 10) and under campaign rules that forbid appeals on religious grounds (Electoral Act 2022, section 97).

5.2 Ahab, Jezebel and religious legitimation of injustice (1 Kings 21:1–16)

The episode belongs to the Elijah cycle in the ninth century BCE, in the reign of Ahab, whose wife Jezebel came from Tyre. Naboth's refusal rests on the conviction that his family's land is a covenant inheritance not to be traded to the king (1 Kings 21:3; cf. Lev. 25:23). Jezebel writes in Ahab's name and under his seal, and the elders and nobles proclaim a fast and seat Naboth before the people while two false witnesses accuse him (1 Kings 21:8–13). The procedure echoes the Torah's requirement of more than one witness (Deut. 17:6; 19:15). Elijah's announcement of judgement (1 Kings 21:17–24) shows that the narrator condemns the whole process (Provan, 1995).

Ahab covets Naboth's vineyard, but Naboth refuses to give up his ancestral inheritance. Jezebel responds by arranging a public fast, seating Naboth in a place of prominence and procuring false witnesses who accuse him of cursing God and the king. The charge invokes religious and political authority together. Naboth is condemned and put to death, and Ahab then takes possession of the vineyard (1 Kings 21:8–16). The story exposes the corruption of institutions that ought to protect the community. The fast, the elders, the nobles and the judicial process are not corrupt in themselves; what makes the episode so devastating is the way they are manipulated. Religious observance becomes the public setting for a fabricated accusation, legal procedure becomes a means of dispossession, and royal power profits from a death produced by false testimony.

For Nigerian electoral politics this narrative sheds light on religiously framed accusations, manufactured moral scandals and the use of institutional authority to destroy opponents. Political actors may portray rivals as enemies of a religious community, threaten the security of a faith group, or circulate claims that cannot survive verification. Religious leaders may be pressured to lend credibility to allegations without adequate evidence. The lesson is that religious language does not make an accusation true, and a public religious ceremony does not make an unjust process legitimate. Truthful testimony, due process and the protection of the vulnerable have to remain non-negotiable.

In its own setting the story teaches that the monarchy stands under covenant law, which protects ancestral property and requires truthful testimony, and that ritual and legal form cannot legitimize injustice. The implication for Nigeria is that religious language, public ceremonies and institutional procedure cannot make a false accusation or an unjust process legitimate, and that religious leaders should refuse to lend their authority to unverified charges against opponents. The analogy is limited. Naboth's case is a judicial murder, far beyond ordinary electoral misconduct, so the text speaks to the pattern of legitimizing injustice and does not equate every campaign accusation with it.

5.3 Commercialization of prophetic authority (Micah 3:5–11)

Micah of Moresheth prophesied in Judah in the late eighth century BC. Chapter 3 is a three-part indictment of

leaders (3:1–4), prophets (3:5–8) and the heads, priests and prophets of Jerusalem together (3:9–12), and it ends with the announcement that Zion will become a ploughed field (3:12). Micah contrasts his own message, which he describes as filled with the Spirit of the LORD, with justice and with might (3:8), with that of prophets whose oracles follow whatever is put into their mouths (3:5; McKane, 1998).

Micah condemns prophets who lead the people astray and whose messages are shaped by material reward. Those who feed them are promised peace, and those who do not are threatened with war (Mic. 3:5). The charge extends to rulers who despise justice, priests who teach for a price and prophets who divine for money while claiming that the Lord is among them (Mic. 3:9–11). The text challenges religious professionals who use their office for material gain while presenting their activity as divinely authorized.

The passage bears on clerical involvement in elections. Religious leaders may receive gifts, financial support, appointments, access or political protection from candidates and officeholders. Such relationships are not automatically corrupt, since religious organizations may deal with public institutions and accept lawful support. The ethical problem arises when material benefit determines the religious message, when a leader's judgement comes to depend on a political benefactor, or when divine authority is invoked to shield a transactional relationship from criticism. Micah does not forbid religious leaders from receiving material support. His target is the distortion of prophetic responsibility by self-interest. The contemporary application therefore concerns transparency, independence and the ability to speak truthfully even when the message displeases powerful benefactors. Ufere (2026) similarly separates prophetic engagement with governance from partisan endorsement that risks compromising clerical credibility.

In its own setting the text teaches that prophetic and priestly offices exist to serve justice, and that when judgement, teaching and prophecy are sold, the institution loses its claim to divine protection. The implication for Nigeria is that religious institutions should disclose and manage political money and favours so that their public message cannot be bought. The analogy is limited. Micah does not condemn material support as such, and the criticism applies where the message follows the payment.

5.4 Ahab's prophets and Micaiah: political consensus versus truth (1 Kings 22:1–28)

Ahab of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah plan a joint campaign to retake Ramoth-gilead. About four hundred prophets promise victory (1 Kings 22:6), and Zedekiah son of Chenaanah makes iron horns as a sign (22:11). Micaiah's vision of the heavenly council, in which a lying spirit is allowed to speak through the court prophets (22:19–23), explains the unanimity as deception, and Ahab's death in battle (22:34–37) vindicates Micaiah. The narrative belongs to the Deuteronomistic concern with how true prophecy is recognized (cf. Deut. 18:20–22; Provan, 1995).

King Ahab wants to recover Ramoth-Gilead and consults prophets who overwhelmingly predict success. Jehoshaphat asks whether another prophetic voice is available. Micaiah is summoned, though Ahab dislikes him because he never prophesies good concerning the king. Micaiah first echoes the favourable prediction, then describes a vision that exposes the danger of the campaign and the deceptive spirit behind the court's prophetic consensus. He is rejected and imprisoned, and the king goes on towards battle. The narrative examines the pressure political power places on religious speech. The court already has a preferred answer, and the king values affirmation above truth. Micaiah's role is to speak what he understands to be true, at personal cost, and he is not there to offer religious reassurance. The story sets speech that serves royal expectation against prophetic speech that keeps its independence.

In electoral politics a similar danger appears when religious voices are expected to validate a candidate or party whatever the evidence, policy or conduct. Prophetic language may be converted into campaign messaging, while dissenting voices are branded disloyal or faithless. Micaiah offers a counter-ethic. Religious credibility is measured by fidelity to truth and moral responsibility, not by proximity to power or popularity, and a long list of religious endorsements cannot by itself prove a political claim true.

In its own setting the story teaches that unanimous religious approval is not evidence of truth and that a prophet is known by fidelity to the word received, not by agreement with power. The implication for Nigeria is

that a chorus of religious endorsements is no test of a candidate's fitness, and that religious leaders must keep the freedom to say what the powerful do not wish to hear. The analogy is limited. The passage offers a criterion for prophetic integrity and does not give modern readers a method for deciding which political claims are true, which requires evidence and public verification.

5.5 Absalom's political strategy and public allegiance (2 Samuel 15:1–12)

The episode belongs to the Court Narrative (2 Samuel 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2) and follows Absalom's return from exile and his reconciliation with David. Nathan's oracle had announced that trouble would rise against David from within his own house (2 Sam. 12:10–11), and the narrative invites readers to connect Absalom's revolt with that word (McCarter, 1984). Absalom's revolt is not, on its face, a story about religious manipulation, and the text does not accuse him of corrupting worship. It is included because the narrator shows religious forms being placed in the service of a bid for power. Absalom first builds public allegiance through visible display, with a chariot, horses and fifty men running before him (15:1), through access at the city gate, and through the claim that no one is appointed to hear the people's cases (15:2–6). He then asks David's permission to go to Hebron to fulfil a vow (15:7–8) and receives the king's blessing (15:9). At Hebron he offers sacrifices (15:12), has secret messengers ready to proclaim him king (15:10), and brings two hundred invited men from Jerusalem who go in good faith and know nothing of the plot, so that their presence gives it an appearance of legitimacy (15:11). The vow, the sacrifice, the sacred place and the guests together provide religious cover and public credibility for a political conspiracy.

Three features make the text relevant to electoral ethics: religious ritual used as cover for a political purpose; the recruitment of well-meaning participants who unknowingly lend credibility to the project; and ambition presented as concern for justice. Unlike Jeroboam, Absalom does not rebuild the cult. His case shows the milder and more common pattern in which existing religious practice is used instrumentally. It therefore supplies a case of religious mobilization, in the sense defined in section 3.4, that the other five narratives do not provide.

Absalom cultivates public allegiance through calculated visibility. He stations himself at the city gate, listens to grievances, suggests that the king has not given them adequate attention and declares that he would deliver justice if he were appointed judge. Little by little he wins the hearts of the people. He later goes to Hebron under the stated pretext of fulfilling a vow, and there the revolt gains momentum (2 Sam. 15:1–12). The text does not settle whether Absalom's vow was insincere. Its relevance lies in the wider political strategy: calculated public visibility, exploitation of dissatisfaction, promises of better judgement, and the use of a religiously meaningful location in mobilization. It invites reflection on how public trust and religious symbolism can be drawn into struggles for power.

In Nigeria, political communication may use religious gatherings, sacred sites, public prayers or declarations of spiritual commitment to create an impression of moral legitimacy. Such practices call for contextual evaluation. A public prayer is not manipulative in itself, and a candidate's religious identity is no ground for disqualifying that person from office. The ethical concern arises where religious symbolism hides the lack of a substantive programme, manufactures a sense of divine inevitability or secures allegiance without any scrutiny of the candidate's record.

In its own setting the narrative shows how public trust can be captured by display, flattery and religious pretext, and it presents the revolt as part of the unravelling of David's house. The implication for Nigeria is that religious settings and rituals such as prayer events, thanksgiving services and vows should not become stages for building political allegiance, and that religious participants should ask what a gathering is for before lending it their presence. The analogy is limited. The text does not condemn political ambition or public religious acts as such, and it applies only where ritual serves as cover for a concealed political aim.

5.6 Nathan's confrontation of David: prophetic independence and accountability (2 Samuel 12:1–14)

The parable follows David's adultery with Bathsheba and the arrangement of Uriah's death (2 Samuel 11). Nathan approaches the king through a legal parable that leads David to pass judgement on himself (12:1–7).

David's confession, 'I have sinned against the LORD' (12:13), is met with forgiveness and with announced consequences (12:10–14; McCarter, 1984).

Nathan confronts David after the king's abuse of power involving Bathsheba and Uriah. He tells a parable of a rich man who takes a poor man's only ewe lamb, draws out David's condemnation of the offender, and then declares, 'You are the man' (2 Sam. 12:7). The prophet names the king's wrongdoing and announces its consequences. Nathan shows that political office puts no ruler beyond moral judgement. He does not treat the king's status as a reason for silence, and he does not use religious authority to flatter or protect him. He appeals to a moral standard that binds the powerful and the vulnerable alike. The passage supports an understanding of religious authority as accountable witness rather than partisan possession. Brueggemann (2001) similarly reads the prophets as a standing critique of entrenched royal power.

For Nigerian democracy, Nathan offers a model for religious leaders and institutions. They should commend good governance and criticize wrongdoing whatever the political party, religious identity or personal relationship of the officeholder. If corruption is condemned only when opponents commit it and excused when allies do, religious criticism becomes an extension of partisan competition and ceases to be moral accountability.

In its own setting the passage teaches that Israel's king is subject to covenant law and to prophetic judgement, and that no royal status removes accountability. The implication for Nigeria is that religious leaders should hold every officeholder to the same moral standard whatever the party or personal relationship, and that officeholders should accept such scrutiny. The analogy is limited. Nathan acts as a prophet with a specific word from God, so modern clerics who claim comparable authority should support their criticism with evidence and avoid presenting partisan opposition as prophecy.

6. MANIFESTATIONS OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUMENTALIZATION IN NIGERIAN ELECTORAL POLITICS

6.1 Religious identity as electoral mobilization

One manifestation is the presentation of elections as contests between religious communities, when they should be democratic choices among candidates, programmes and records. Voters may be urged to back a candidate because of a shared religion, or to reject another because of a perceived religious difference. Research on the 2015 and 2023 elections points to the strategic use of religious and ethnic identity by political actors (Joshua et al., 2025; Uroko et al., 2025). Such mobilization hides the diversity within religious communities and wrongly suggests that every member of a faith group has the same political interests. The ethical danger is that citizenship becomes conditional on religious belonging. The vote, which ought to express individual judgement, is recast as an obligation to defend a collective religious bloc. That weakens democratic agency and intensifies distrust, and it lets political elites avoid scrutiny of their policies and performance.

6.2 Partisan clerical involvement and loss of prophetic independence

Religious leaders have a legitimate right to take part in public debate. They may speak about corruption, insecurity, unemployment, poverty, education, healthcare and constitutional rights, encourage citizens to vote, and assess public officials against ethical standards. Trouble begins when clerical office is used to steer a congregation towards a candidate without transparency, or when partisan loyalty keeps a leader from criticizing that candidate's failures. The distinction between prophetic engagement and partisan mobilization is essential. A religious leader who publicly supports a candidate should make clear whether the statement is a personal political judgement or an official institutional position. Nor should the leader present a preference as a divine command, threaten dissenting congregants or imply that a particular vote is a condition of religious fidelity. Ufere (2026) argues that clerical responsibility requires engagement with public morality while guarding against confusion between prophetic witness and partisan endorsement.

6.3 Religious endorsements and manufactured legitimacy

Candidates may seek endorsements from prominent religious leaders because these can convey moral credibility to a large constituency. A public endorsement may simply express a leader's political judgement. When it is presented as revelation beyond question, however, religious authority is turned into a political credential, and scrutiny of competence, public record, policy and respect for constitutional limits is discouraged. The court prophets of 1 Kings 22 are a reminder that religious voices surrounding a ruler do not guarantee that the ruler's actions are just or wise. Proximity to power becomes dangerous when the religious voice exists chiefly to confirm what the ruler already wants. Democratic legitimacy has to rest on lawful procedure, public consent, accountable institutions and demonstrable performance, and exclusive claims of divine approval cannot replace these.

6.4 Patronage, financial inducement and institutional dependence

Political patronage can compromise religious independence when material benefits influence public judgement. Gifts, donations, construction projects, appointments or privileged access may create expectations of support in return. Receiving a donation is not in itself the ethical problem. The problem is a lack of transparency, or the conversion of a religious institution into a campaign instrument. Micah 3:5–11 offers a theological critique of religious speech shaped by material reward. Religious institutions should adopt transparent procedures for receiving political donations, engaging candidates and issuing public statements. They should avoid arrangements that make their moral voice depend on a political officeholder's favour. Financial accountability protects the integrity of public religious witness.

6.5 Fear, religious othering and electoral polarisation

Religious othering occurs when members of another faith are represented as inherently dangerous, disloyal or unfit for public office. Chigbu et al. (2025) identify demonization, in-group ostracization and stereotyping in online Nigerian electoral discourse. Such practices turn political disagreement into suspicion of whole communities, and they lead voters to see elections as threats to religious survival rather than as contests governed by constitutional rules. The consequences reach well beyond election day. Polarization erodes intercommunal trust, legitimizes discrimination and may increase hostility. It also harms religious communities themselves, because it lets political actors define their identity and interests for them. An ethical response rejects collective blame, protects religious minorities and affirms that public office is a constitutional responsibility and not the property of one faith community.

6.6 Digital religion, misinformation and electoral prophecy

Digital platforms have widened the reach of religious communication. Sermons, livestreams, prayer networks, short videos and messaging groups can educate citizens and encourage peaceful participation. The same channels can carry fabricated prophecies, misleading campaign claims, edited recordings and inflammatory messages, and a claim may gain credibility simply because it is attributed to a cleric or wrapped in religious language. Religious communicators therefore carry responsibilities of verification, contextual accuracy and restraint. Leaders should separate personal opinion from revelation, avoid forwarding unverified allegations and correct false statements in public. Congregations, for their part, should weigh political claims against credible evidence and not against the standing of whoever circulates them. The biblical concern for truthful testimony (Exod. 20:16) remains relevant to digital electoral communication.

7. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Erosion of individual political agency

When religious identity is used to dictate how members of a community should vote, the individual capacity for independent judgement is weakened. Democratic choice requires that voters assess candidates and policies free of coercion, intimidation or spiritual threat. Religious leaders may offer moral guidance, but they should

not take the place of the voter's own conscience. Members of the same congregation may in good faith reach different political conclusions.

7.2 Displacement of policy-based accountability

Identity-based mobilization can draw attention away from measurable questions of governance. Voters may be encouraged to put faith identity ahead of public finance, security, education, employment, healthcare, infrastructure and the rule of law. This gives political elites room to secure loyalty without showing competence. Religious communities should reconnect political evaluation with the material conditions and dignity of citizens.

7.3 Corruption of religious authority

Religious authority rests on trust, integrity and a credible commitment to professed values. When leaders are seen as agents of political parties or beneficiaries of patronage, their ability to speak across political divisions suffers. The problem is not that religious leaders hold political opinions. It is that their office can disguise partisan interest as sacred obligation. Micah's critique of prophets and priests who serve for reward remains a serious warning.

7.4 Weakening of national cohesion and religious pluralism

Nigeria's constitutional democracy requires citizens of different religious and ethnic identities to share public institutions. Electoral rhetoric that depicts political competition as a struggle between faith communities undermines this civic foundation, encourages collective suspicion and may legitimize exclusion. The ethical response affirms equal citizenship, freedom of religion and the right of every qualified citizen to take part in public life without religious discrimination.

7.5 Normalization of unaccountable power

The most serious danger arises when religious endorsement shields political leaders from criticism. If a ruler is portrayed as divinely chosen in a way that makes scrutiny look irreligious, the prophetic function of religion is turned upside down. Religion stops holding power to account and starts protecting it. Nathan's confrontation of David and Micaiah's resistance to Ahab show why religious voices must keep the freedom to challenge rulers.

8. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES FOR ETHICAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

8.1 Justice as the measure of public leadership

The Old Testament puts justice at the centre of public responsibility. Micah 6:8 sums up the divine requirement as doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God. Amos 5:21–24 rejects worship that is cut off from justice and calls for justice to roll down like waters. Isaiah 1:16–17 joins repentance to the defense of the oppressed, the orphan and the widow. These texts challenge religious communities to judge political power by how it treats people, especially the vulnerable. Applied to elections, justice requires attention to policies and records and not merely to religious affiliation. Religious communities should ask whether candidates protect human rights, distribute resources fairly, address insecurity, reduce poverty and strengthen institutions. Religious identity alone cannot establish a candidate's ethical worth.

8.2 Truthfulness and resistance to political deception

The prohibition of false testimony (Exod. 20:16) and the prophetic condemnation of false visions (Jer. 23:16–22) give a foundation for truthful public communication. Religious leaders should not manufacture divine messages to advance political preferences, and political actors should not exploit religious trust to spread falsehoods. Truthfulness calls for verification, correction and a willingness to admit uncertainty.

8.3 Human dignity and equal citizenship

The creation of human beings in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27) gives a theological basis for affirming human dignity across religious, ethnic and political lines. In a plural society this conviction should encourage respect for every citizen, including those who do not share one's faith. No one should be treated as less deserving of political rights because of religious affiliation. The theological affirmation of human dignity supports constitutional equality and peaceful coexistence.

8.4 Prophetic independence and accountability

Nathan and Micaiah show that religious responsibility includes the freedom to confront power. Prophetic independence is not hostility towards government. It is the capacity to commend what is good and challenge what is unjust without being controlled by political patronage or partisan loyalty. Religious institutions should keep the freedom to criticize any administration, whatever the religious identity of its leaders.

8.5 Servant leadership and the common good

The biblical vision of leadership cannot be reconciled with treating public office as private possession. The prophetic critique of rulers and the New Testament image of servant leadership (Mark 10:42–45) support a view of authority as service. Religious communities should promote humility, responsibility, competence and service in place of personality cults or claims of political entitlement.

8.6 Peaceful coexistence and interreligious respect

Religion should contribute to peace and not add to division. Ufere (2025) argues that religion, although often a mobilizing factor in conflict rather than a primary cause of it, can also be a powerful force for peace. In Nigeria, Christian and Muslim leaders can cooperate on civic education, election peace initiatives, the protection of vulnerable communities and the rejection of hate speech, without hiding real theological differences. Such cooperation affirms that disagreement need not turn into hostility.

9. TOWARDS AN ETHICALLY RESPONSIBLE MODEL OF RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIAN ELECTORAL POLITICS

An ethically responsible model should distinguish civic engagement from partisan capture. Religious communities should not withdraw from public life, but their participation needs to follow principles that protect democratic freedom and religious integrity.

9.1 Issue-based political evaluation

Religious institutions should encourage citizens to assess candidates by publicly relevant criteria: integrity, competence, policy proposals, respect for constitutional order, record of service and commitment to human rights. A candidate's religious identity belongs to that person's personal life and should not stand in for these criteria. Congregational education should equip voters to compare manifestos, examine records and ask hard questions.

9.2 Transparent boundaries between religious institutions and campaigns

Religious institutions should set out clear policies on the use of worship spaces, official platforms, communication channels and organizational resources during election periods. Where a leader voices a personal political opinion, the difference between personal capacity and official institutional endorsement should be made explicit. Safeguards of this kind reduce the risk that congregational trust will be converted into partisan leverage.

9.3 Financial transparency and resistance to patronage

Religious organizations should disclose and account for significant political donations, gifts and benefits, in line with applicable law and institutional policy. They should avoid arrangements that create obligations to endorse candidates or to stay silent about wrongdoing. Transparent governance protects institutions from the perception that their public statements have been bought.

9.4 Responsible use of prophetic language

Claims that God has chosen, rejected or guaranteed the victory of a candidate call for exceptional theological and ethical caution. Religious leaders should not use prophetic language to close debate or intimidate dissenters. Political judgements should be offered with humility and stay open to examination against evidence and ethical standards. Micaiah's story is a caution against manufacturing religious consensus around political desire.

9.5 Interreligious civic collaboration

Christian and Muslim organizations can work together on non-partisan voter education, peacebuilding, election observation where the law permits, conflict prevention and advocacy for credible elections. Such collaboration does not require theological uniformity. It can rest on shared civic commitments to human dignity, truthful communication, peaceful participation and the protection of all citizens.

9.6 Digital verification and public correction

Religious institutions should adopt practical standards for digital communication. These include verifying claims before publication, naming sources, avoiding inflammatory labels, correcting errors visibly and discouraging unverified prophecies or allegations. Digital literacy should form part of voter education, especially where messaging applications and social media are major channels of political communication.

9.7 Consistent prophetic accountability after elections

Religious responsibility does not end when the votes are counted. The standards used to evaluate candidates before an election should be applied to elected officials after they take office. Religious leaders should monitor governance, speak against corruption and injustice, commend policies that serve the public and defend citizens whose rights are under threat. Consistency matters if religious participation is to be more than episodic electoral mobilization.

10. CONCLUSION

The relationship between religion and political power is ethically complex. Religion can deepen democratic life by shaping moral responsibility, encouraging civic participation, promoting peace and holding leaders to account. It can also be manipulated, when religious identity, symbols, institutions and authority are made subordinate to partisan ambition. Nigeria's electoral experience shows the continuing importance of religious and ethnic identity in political mobilization, and recent scholarship documents religious othering and the strategic use of identity in electoral discourse (Chigbu et al., 2025; Joshua et al., 2025; Uroko et al., 2025). The selected Old Testament narratives offer a critical framework for examining these dangers. Jeroboam's re-organization of worship to protect his throne shows religious practice made subordinate to political self-preservation. The Naboth story exposes the manipulation of religious and legal procedure to legitimize injustice. Micah condemns religious leaders whose messages are shaped by material reward, and Micaiah shows why political pressure has to be resisted. Absalom's rise at the city gate and at Hebron shows how public trust and religious setting can be drawn into the pursuit of power, and Nathan's confrontation of David offers a positive model of prophetic accountability. Taken together, these texts show that religious authority loses its ethical integrity when it becomes a means of protecting power from truth and justice.

These narratives do not describe modern Nigerian elections, and they do not remove the historical and theological differences between ancient Israel and contemporary Nigeria. Their value lies in the questions they raise. Who benefits when religion is mobilized in political competition? Does religious speech tell the truth, or does it flatter the powerful? Does it protect the vulnerable or deepen exclusion? Does it encourage citizens to judge for themselves, or does it demand unquestioning loyalty? Religious leaders, political actors and voters all have reason to keep asking them. Religious participation in Nigerian electoral politics is ethically defensible when it advances justice, truthfulness, dignity, peaceful coexistence and public accountability. It becomes manipulative when it turns faith into a partisan weapon, treats political allegiance as a test of religious loyalty or uses sacred authority to shield leaders from scrutiny. The right response is not to exclude religion from public life but to recover its critical and moral independence. Religion should help citizens judge political power, and it should not become a tool through which political power controls them.

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