

The Shepherd Motif In The Old Testament And Its Implications For Leadership In Nigeria

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Abstract

The shepherd motif is a prominent and enduring metaphor in the old-testament, used to describe god's relationship with Israel and to shape the understanding of human leadership. This study examines the theological foundations of the shepherd motif in selected old-testament texts, particularly within the Pentateuch, psalms, and prophetic literature, where leaders such as Moses, David, and Israel's kings are depicted as shepherds entrusted with the care, guidance, and protection of the people. Special attention is given to prophetic critiques of failed leadership, especially in Ezekiel 34, which condemns selfish and irresponsible shepherds while affirming god as the true shepherd of his people. The study further explores the implications of the shepherd motif for contemporary leadership in Nigeria by engaging the biblical model with current socio-political and religious realities. It argues that the old-testament shepherd paradigm emphasizes accountability, servant leadership, justice, and compassion, and thereby elucidates that values urgently needed in Nigerian leadership contexts. The study concludes that reclaiming the shepherd model can provide a Biblical grounded framework for ethical leadership and national transformation in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Shepherd motif, Old Testament, Biblical Leadership, Servant Leadership, Nigeria, Ethics, Prophetic Critique*

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I. Introduction

Leadership is a central theme in human society, shaping the destiny of individuals, communities, and nations. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the metaphor of the shepherd serves as one of the most profound biblical images of leadership. In the Old Testament, the shepherd motif is deeply embedded in Israel's history, theology, and political life. From the pastoral life of the patriarchs (Genesis 13:5–7) to the Davidic kingship (2 Samuel 5:2), the image of the shepherd conveys guidance, protection, provision, and accountability. Unlike the secular models of power and control, the shepherd leader is called to serve, nurture, and safeguard the flock of God (Ezekiel 34:1–10; Psalm 23:1–6). This motif thus provides an ethical and spiritual framework for evaluating and reforming leadership in contemporary societies.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, faces enormous challenges in governance, ranging from corruption, insecurity, and poverty to ethnic and religious conflicts. Leadership crises have repeatedly undermined national development, leaving many citizens disillusioned and distrustful of political authority (Akinwale, 2019; Oshewolo, 2020). Despite Nigeria's rich cultural and religious heritage, leadership has often been marked by exploitation, selfish ambition, and weak institutions rather than sacrificial service to the people. In this context, the Old Testament shepherd motif offers a timeless paradigm of leadership that emphasizes responsibility, justice, and care for the vulnerable, such as qualities desperately needed in Nigeria today.

The shepherd motif is not merely a poetic or theological metaphor; it embodies a practical philosophy of leadership rooted in divine accountability. God, as the ultimate Shepherd of Israel (Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 40:11), models compassionate and righteous leadership. Human leaders such as Moses, David, and the prophetic figures are portrayed as under-shepherds tasked with guiding God's people according to His will (Numbers 27:16–17). When leaders fail in their shepherding role, prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel issue scathing critiques, holding them accountable for neglect, exploitation, and injustice (Jeremiah 23:1–4; Ezekiel 34:2–6). These texts not only highlight the ethical demands of leadership but also demonstrate the societal consequences of failed shepherding.

Applied to Nigeria, the shepherd motif challenges leaders to move beyond authoritarian and exploitative tendencies toward servant leadership grounded in justice, empathy, and moral integrity. It demands a shift from leadership as self-enrichment to leadership as stewardship. For religious, political, and community leaders alike, this motif calls for vision, responsibility, and care for the common good, especially in addressing

poverty, inequality, and insecurity. By drawing from the Old Testament's rich theological tradition, Nigerian leadership can be re-imagined in ways that foster accountability, reconciliation, and sustainable development.

This study, therefore, examines the shepherd motif in the Old Testament and explores its implications for leadership in Nigeria. It seeks to demonstrate how biblical principles of shepherding can provide ethical insights and transformative models for addressing Nigeria's leadership crisis. Ultimately, this investigation contributes to the ongoing discourse on the intersection between faith, ethics, and governance in African societies.

The Concept of Shepherd in the Old Testament

The shepherd motif in the Old Testament is one of Scripture's most pervasive and integrative images, uniting Israel's social world, theological convictions, and political ideals. Rooted in a pastoral economy where tending flocks demanded vigilance, mobility, courage, and intimate knowledge of terrain and seasons, "shepherding" became a ready metaphor for care, guidance, and accountable leadership (King & Stager, 2001; Walton, Matthews, & Chavalas, 2014). The Hebrew verb *rā'āh* ("to pasture, tend") and the noun *rō'eh* ("shepherd") designate both literal stock-keepers and those tasked with the nurture and governance of people (Koehler, Baumgartner, & Stamm, 2001). Because the daily work of a shepherd combined tender provision (leading to pastures and water) with protective resolve (defending against predators and dangers), Israel could speak of God and of rulers, priests, and prophets as "shepherds," measuring their faithfulness by a standard drawn from lived agrarian experience (Laniak, 2006; Wright, 2018).

At the heart of the motif stands the confession that Yahweh is Israel's ultimate Shepherd. Psalm 23 condenses this confession into poetry: the Lord's presence removes lack, his guidance restores life, his rod and staff secure fearful paths, and his hospitality culminates in overflowing communion (Ps 23:1–6). Other texts echo the same divine profile: God "shepherds" Joseph like a flock (Ps 80:1), "gathers the lambs in his arms" (Isa 40:11), and is remembered as the Shepherd who sustained Jacob "all my life long" (Gen 48:15, NIV). The exodus and wilderness traditions, with their topography of scarcity and dependence, sharpen the metaphor; God leads, feeds, and protects a vulnerable people through desolate spaces (cf. Deut 8; Ps 78:13–25). Thus, the shepherd image is not sentimental but covenantal and missional: God's shepherding is the enactment of steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness that forms a people capable of reflecting his justice and compassion (Brueggemann, 2016; Wright, 2018).

Because leadership among God's people is derivative, answering to the divine Shepherd, human leaders are repeatedly cast as "under-shepherds." Moses prays that the Lord will appoint a successor "who shall go out before them and come in before them... that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd" (Num 27:16–17). David's rise explicitly reframes kingship in pastoral terms: "You shall shepherd my people Israel" (2 Sam 5:2), and later reflection praises him for shepherding "with integrity of heart" and "skillful hands" (Ps 78:70–72). The ideal king protects the weak, adjudicates justly, and orders the community's flourishing much as a wise herder arranges grazing, rest, and safety (Goldingay, 2006; Laniak, 2006). This same expectation reaches beyond Israel: astonishingly, Yahweh calls the Persian monarch Cyrus "my shepherd," underscoring that political authority, wherever found, is accountable to the purposes of the true King (Isa 44:28). The metaphor therefore both dignifies and constrains power: it dignifies leadership as a vocation of care and sacrifice, and it constrains it by reminding rulers that the flock does not belong to them.

The prophets deploy the shepherd motif as a diagnostic tool for social ethics, exposing malpractice and calling for reform. In Micaiah's vision, Israel is "sheep without a shepherd," a political-theological verdict on failed rule (1 Kgs 22:17). Jeremiah denounces leaders who "destroy and scatter the sheep" (Jer 23:1–4), promising that God himself will gather the remnant and raise up faithful shepherds. Ezekiel's sustained indictment (Ezek 34) is definitive: false shepherds prey on the flock, feed themselves, neglect the sick and injured, and fail to pursue the strayed; therefore God will rescue his sheep, judge between sheep and sheep, and appoint "one shepherd... my servant David." Here the metaphor becomes eschatologically charged: the hoped-for shepherd is marked by justice, restorative care, and covenant fidelity, a horizon that later texts reinforce (e.g., Mic 5:4; Zech 10:2; 11:4–17; 13:7). In these passages, the shepherd image functions as a criterion for public righteousness, locating leadership failure not merely in policy mistakes but in moral dereliction: indifference to the vulnerable, greed, violence, and abandonment of the common good (Brueggemann, 2016; Laniak, 2006; Wright, 2018).

Israel's use of shepherd imagery resonates with, yet distinctively reshapes, broader ancient Near Eastern (ANE) royal ideology. Across Mesopotamia and Egypt, kings were frequently styled "shepherds" of their peoples, a title that conveyed benevolent oversight and cosmic order (Halla & Younger, 2000; Van De Mieroop, 2016). Israel appropriates this political vocabulary but subjects it to covenantal critique: shepherd-kings are legitimate insofar as they mirror Yahweh's justice and compassion; when they deviate, prophetic judgment strips the title of honor and exposes it as a mask for exploitation. In other words, Scripture refuses to

absolutize royal power: the shepherd's staff, in biblical perspective, is an instrument of service rather than domination (Laniak, 2006; Wright, 2018).

The concrete realities of pastoral life further deepen the metaphor's ethical texture. Shepherds must know their terrain, anticipate seasons, find water, and rotate pastures so as not to exhaust fragile ecosystems; they must keep watch by night, treat wounds, assist births, and count the flock constantly (King & Stager, 2001). David's recollection of confronting lions and bears to protect sheep (1 Sam 17:34–35) illustrates the courage and responsibility embedded in the role. Tools such as rod and staff, symbols of guidance and defense, compress a whole profile of competencies, direction, discipline, protection, and presence into portable images (Goldingay, 2006). Transposed to social leadership, these elements demand foresight, prudence, patient formation of people, and the willingness to absorb cost for the community's safety. The shepherd, then, is an integrative image: spiritual guide, moral exemplar, strategic organizer, and frontline protector.

Lexically and theologically, the shepherd motif intersects with covenant law and wisdom traditions. Deuteronomy's limitations on royal accumulation (Deut 17:14–20) align with the shepherd ideal by resisting the drift toward self-aggrandizement and by prescribing daily immersion in Torah so that the king's heart remains humble and just. Wisdom literature, with its attention to the vulnerable and its warnings against oppressive rulers, presupposes the shepherd's responsibility to strengthen the weak and defend the poor (cf. Prov 29:4; Ps 72). Psalms of communal trust and lament "we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (Ps 95:7; 100:3), rehearse a communal identity that simultaneously comforts and obligates: to belong to Yahweh's flock is to be shaped by his shepherding character. By binding together love of God, love of neighbor, and public justice within a single pastoral metaphor, the Old Testament crafts a thick vision of leadership as stewardship under God (Brueggemann, 2016; Wright, 2018; Routledge, 2016).

Finally, the shepherd motif is inherently restorative and missional. When shepherds fail, God's response is not merely punitive but redemptive: he seeks, gathers, heals, feeds, and reconstitutes a scattered people (Ezek 34:11–16). The promise of a faithful Davidic shepherd keeps hope alive in exilic and postexilic epochs, anchoring Israel's future in a leadership that embodies covenant justice and compassionate care. The Old Testament thus offers not a nostalgic rural picture but a rigorous theological anthropology and political ethic: leaders are entrusted with lives that are not their own; authority exists for nurture, protection, and the pursuit of shalom; and all human shepherding is accountable to the God who knows his flock by name (Yerokun & Soneye, 2025). In its breadth, spanning patriarchal narratives, royal ideology, prophetic critique, worship, law, and wisdom, and in its depth probing motivation, character, and institutional responsibility, the shepherd motif furnishes Scripture's most complete portrait of what leadership before God is meant to be (Laniak, 2006; Brueggemann, 2016; Wright, 2018).

The Contemporary Shepherd Leadership: How Today's Leaders Model it.

Contemporary shepherd leadership translates the Old Testament's pastoral vision, presence, guidance, protection, provision, and accountability into the complex realities of twenty-first-century organizations, churches, public institutions, and civic movements. At its core, shepherd leadership reframes authority as stewardship: power is held "for" rather than "over" people, exercised to promote shared flourishing, justice, and moral growth. This paradigm sits in fruitful conversation with modern leadership scholarship, especially servant, ethical, authentic, adaptive, and systems leadership, each offering research-backed practices that mirror the shepherd's vocation. Servant leadership, revived in modern discourse by Greenleaf (2002), centers the growth and well-being of followers and communities. Empirical syntheses show that when leaders adopt servant postures listening, empathy, empowerment, healing teams report higher trust, stronger identification, prosocial behavior, and improved performance (van Dierendonck, 2011; Hoch et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019). Ethical leadership adds the normative spine of the shepherd: modeling moral conduct, using power accountably, and enforcing fair processes; meta-analytical and review evidence links ethical leaders with reduced misconduct and greater citizenship behaviors (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Hoch et al., 2018). Authentic leadership presses character and self-transparency into the center leaders act from internalized values, balance relational openness with self-awareness, and cultivate followers' agency (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Adaptive leadership takes the shepherd's attentiveness to terrain and threats and converts it into practical tools for mobilizing people through value-laden, uncertain challenges, protecting voices, regulating distress, and keeping attention on the "work" rather than personality politics (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Systems leadership widens the shepherd's field of vision: organizations are living systems whose health depends on learning loops, interdependence, and alignment around purpose (Senge, 2006). Across these streams, a consistent finding emerges: leading like a shepherd is not soft; it is exacting, disciplined, and oriented to long-term human development.

Three practice domains show how this paradigm becomes concrete. First, the shepherd's presence now means building trust, psychological safety, and moral courage in teams. Trust remains a function of perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995); shepherd leaders earn it by competence (clear strategy,

consistent execution), by benevolence (care for people's dignity, not just outputs), and by integrity (value-aligned decisions under pressure). Psychological safety, people's belief they can speak up without punishment, predicts learning, innovation, and error reporting; it is fostered when leaders invite dissent, respond appreciatively to bad news, and treat failures as data (Edmondson, 2019). In crisis contexts, such presence stabilizes systems: shepherd leaders communicate frequently, share what is known and unknown, protect the vulnerable, and pace change to avoid overload, behaviors associated with effective crisis management (Boin et al., 2017). Second, the shepherd's provision and guidance translate into purpose-led strategy and stakeholder stewardship. Rather than maximizing narrow metrics, shepherd leaders clarify a moral purpose, co-create standards of excellence, and design jobs that nourish competence and meaning (Kouzes & Posner, 2023; Freeman et al., 2010). They steward resources with prudence (time, attention, money, reputation), invest in capability building, and align structures (feedback, recognition, advancement) with espoused values, thereby preventing the cynicism that arises when culture and incentives diverge. Third, the shepherd's protection becomes safeguarding human sustainability. Leaders actively prevent exploitation overwork, psychological harm, and inequity, and build rhythms that counter burnout by addressing workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values fit (Maslach & Leiter, 2022). Compassion, far from sentimentality, is an operational capacity: noticing suffering, interpreting it wisely, feeling with others, and taking effective action at individual and systemic levels (Worline & Dutton, 2017).

Evidence from servant-leadership research illustrates these dynamics at scale. Validated servant-leadership measures and longitudinal studies connect servant climates with stronger unit performance, customer service, and collective helping, partly via a culture that normalizes serving behaviors across levels (Liden et al., 2014; Eva et al., 2019). These findings align strikingly with the shepherd's communal telos: health spreads when leaders model service and embed it in norms, systems, and stories. Importantly, a shepherd ethic must be culturally intelligent. In plural societies and the Global South, Nigeria included leaders often confront institutional fragility, religious and ethnic diversity, and youth-heavy demographics. Here, Ubuntu-inflected leadership traditions ("a person is a person through other persons") resonate with shepherding by emphasizing relational dignity, reciprocity, and communal responsibility, and have been shown to strengthen cohesion and prosocial conduct when thoughtfully adapted to contemporary organizations (Mangaliso, 2001). Faith-based leaders add a covenantal dimension, integrating pastoral care with civic virtue, advocating for the poor, and mediating conflict; when they embrace shepherd virtues, integrity, compassion, courage, prudence their public witness builds trust beyond congregations and across sectors.

Operationalizing shepherd leadership today requires disciplined habits. Leaders structure listening into governance (open forums, "skip-level" rounds, anonymous channels), and then act visibly on what they hear, closing the loop to reinforce voice. They design decision rights and guardrails that localize authority to those closest to problems while maintaining ethical oversight "tight on values, loose on methods." They measure what matters: not only outputs, but also trust, inclusion, learning, and human sustainability; they pair these with transparent reporting to inoculate against performative virtue. They develop successors intentionally, treating leadership as a relay rather than a pedestal, and normalize mentoring and sponsorship to distribute opportunity. They cultivate moral imagination using narratives, liturgies, and symbols to connect daily work with higher purposes because people live by stories as much as by plans. And they practice "boundary-spanning shepherding": convening unusual allies, translating across vocabularies, and stitching networks that outlast any single initiative, an antidote to siloed efforts that dissipate energy (Senge, 2006; Northouse, 2022).

Contemporary shepherd leadership is also digitally and civically literate. In an algorithmic public square, shepherds treat information stewardship as part of care: they resist manipulation, model epistemic humility, and create spaces for slow thinking and dialogue. They are prudent about visibility, using platforms to amplify the voiceless rather than the leader's brand, and they set norms for respectful discourse, recognizing that organizational culture now lives both on-site and online. In polarized contexts, they practice principled pluralism: protecting conscience, drawing bright lines against dehumanization, and pursuing common goods where agreement is possible. When wrongdoing occurs, they respond with both justice and restoration, setting consequences while repairing relationships, mirroring the shepherd's combinations of rod and staff.

None of this is easy. The shepherd leader embraces paradox: tenderness and toughness, patience and urgency, humility and authority, stability and change. But research and practice converge: such leadership is both morally compelling and pragmatically effective. It forms people, strengthens institutions, and multiplies social trust, the quiet infrastructure without which development falters. In a world marked by volatility and fragmentation, the shepherd model offers a coherent, deeply human way to lead: attentive to persons and systems, animated by purpose, and accountable to truths larger than the leader.

The Decadence of Leadership and Its Implications to Nigeria

The decadence of leadership in Nigeria is best understood as a long arc of moral, institutional, and performance decline that corrodes the social contract and disrupts pathways to development. At its core is a

widening gap between the normative obligations of office, stewardship, justice, and accountability, and the practices that have too often prevailed: prebendal allocation of public resources, patronage networks insulated from scrutiny, and chronic impunity. Classic African political theory captured the deep structure of this unraveling long before today's metrics: Ekeh's (1975) "two publics" described a split moral universe in which obligations to the "civic" public are thin while those to the "primordial" public (ethnic, kin, religious) are thick, legitimizing corruption in the state while valorizing generosity in the community. Joseph (1987) named the pattern "prebendalism," a system in which office is treated as a share of state rents to be distributed to clients. Bayart (2009) called it "the politics of the belly," underscoring how elite accumulation fuses with state power. Achebe's (1983) spare but devastating verdict "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" remains a touchstone not because it is aphoristic, but because it anticipates how leadership vices metastasize into institutional decay.

Contemporary data confirm the persistence and recent intensification of that decay. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for 2024 scores Nigeria at 26/100, ranking 140th of 180 countries, signaling entrenched perceptions of public-sector corruption and stalled anti-corruption momentum (Transparency International, 2025). Afrobarometer's most recent Nigeria release finds 80% of citizens say corruption increased over the previous year; majorities perceive "most" or "all" police officers, parliamentarians, and even the presidency as corrupt; and only 10% believe corruption can be reported without fear of retaliation, an index of how far trust and deterrence have eroded (Afrobarometer, 2025). The Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) registers broader governance strain: Nigeria's overall governance score sits at 45.7/100 (rank 33 of 54), with a decade-long decline in Security & Rule of Law, particularly Personal Safety, alongside deteriorations in Anti-Corruption Mechanisms and Access to Identity (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024). These independently compiled indicators converge on a single point: governance quality has remained too low for too long, and in crucial dimensions it is slipping further.

The implications for welfare are severe. When leadership fails, public goods fail. Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics reports that 133 million Nigerians are multidimensionally poor, a statistic that captures overlapping deprivations in health, education, living standards, security, and work outcomes no macroeconomic snapshot can fully convey (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Leadership decadence shows up not merely in fiscal leakages but in non-delivery: schools without teachers during recurrent strikes, clinics without essential drugs, water systems that never move from budget line to borehole, rural roads that dissolve with the first heavy rains. The World Bank's 2025 Nigeria Development Update underscores how macroeconomic reforms will falter without credible institutions to protect the vulnerable, curb rent-seeking, and coordinate policy governance capacity, not only policy content, is the binding constraint (World Bank, 2025). The result is a vicious circle: weak leadership begets poor service delivery, poor delivery erodes trust, eroded trust normalizes informal payments and evasion, and the consequent revenue and legitimacy losses further weaken the state (Yerokun, Adedeji, Adekola & Ayodele, 2025).

Security externalities amplify these costs. Where state authority is transactional or absent, predatory violence and opportunistic criminality flourish. The IIAG's sustained decline in Personal Safety and Rule of Law aligns with Nigeria's stubbornly high levels of insurgency, kidnapping-for-ransom, banditry, oil theft, and communal conflict (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024). Oil theft is particularly emblematic of governance decadence because it blends organized crime with bureaucratic complicity. NEITI's latest audit shows crude losses falling sharply in 2023, from 36.7 million barrels in 2022 to 7.68 million barrels, after intensified enforcement, but the very scale of prior losses (and arrears owed by operators) reveals years of weak oversight, regulatory capture, and corrosive incentives (NEITI, 2024). Insecurity and extractive-sector leakages are not separate stories; both express the same institutional problem: leadership unable or unwilling to discipline powerful interests and credibly protect the commons.

Economic opportunity pays the price. Leadership decadence depresses productive investment by raising uncertainty and transaction costs, channels entrepreneurship into arbitrage rather than innovation, and encourages capital, and talent flight. The much-discussed japa wave is not a cultural fad; it is a revealed-preference referendum on governance. Research on the phenomenon documents an acceleration in the emigration of skilled Nigerians, including health workers and students, in response to insecurity, inflation shocks, and stalled mobility at home (Okunade, 2023). GMC's 2024 workforce report shows the UK's rising reliance on internationally trained doctors, a pull factor that interacts with Nigeria's push factors to deepen domestic shortages (General Medical Council, 2024). Beyond health care, the outward flow of engineers, academics, and tech talent lowers the ceiling on growth and undermines reform constituencies inside Nigeria. Diaspora remittances help households manage shocks, but they cannot substitute for the public goods and predictable rules only states can guarantee.

Electoral and administrative institutions struggle in this climate. Afrobarometer reports that Nigerians' trust in electoral authorities has weakened, and large majorities doubt the government's anti-corruption seriousness (Afrobarometer, 2023, 2025). When citizens do not expect clean elections or fair adjudication, they

rationality shift into defensive strategies: voting along clientelist lines, hedging with informal payments, or exiting the system altogether. Over time, these micro-choices harden into macro-outcomes, low tax morale, under-provisioned municipalities, politicized policing, and a judiciary drawn into patronage networks (Yerokun, Abodunrin, Soneye & Akinleye, 2025). In institutional economics terms, Nigeria is trapped in a “limited access order” (North et al., 2009), where political stability is purchased through distributing rents to powerful coalitions rather than through impartial enforcement of rules. Such orders are stable, but at a low equilibrium of growth and public trust (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Khan, 2010).

The social costs of leadership decadence are not only economic; they are moral and civic. As prebendal norms spread, young people absorb a civics curriculum of cynicism: that office is for the taker, that enforcement is for the unconnected, that truth is negotiable. Religious and ethnic entrepreneurs fill the vacuum, at times offering solidarity and services, at times deepening fragmentation. Public discourse polarizes; conspiracy outcompetes competence. The shepherd ideal leadership that knows, guards, and sacrifices for the flock becomes countercultural. Yet the same survey evidence that documents despair also signals a route back: Nigerians overwhelmingly want democracy and accountability; they value integrity in clerical and community leadership more than in state institutions; and they punish visible impunity (Afrobarometer, 2024; 2025). Reform therefore hinges on reconstructing credible, shepherd-like leadership habits inside government: visible personal probity at the top, institutionalized transparency in procurement and budgeting, professionalized policing and revenue administration, and enforced consequences for malfeasance, especially within elite networks. Where these have been attempted, whether in reductions in crude theft in 2023 or in targeted digitalization drives, the gains arrive quickly, suggesting that decadence is not fate but a reversible equilibrium (NEITI, 2024; World Bank, 2025).

Nigeria’s leadership decadence is a systemic condition rooted in historically patterned moral economies and reproduced by incentives that reward distribution over delivery. Its implications radiate: poverty that is multidimensional rather than merely monetary, insecurity that is organized rather than incidental, growth that is extractive rather than inclusive, and migration that is survival rather than choice. Changing this trajectory requires leaders who accept shepherd constraints knowledge of the flock, vigilance against predators within and without, and willingness to bear the costs of enforcement, and citizens who, through elections, professional associations, faith communities, and the courts, insist that those constraints stick. The data are grim but not terminal; institutional renewal where it has been tried shows that trust and performance can rebound. What remains is to scale those pockets of integrity until they define the Nigerian state rather than defy it.

II. Conclusion

The shepherd motif in the Old Testament stands as a timeless model of leadership rooted in responsibility, compassion, and accountability. It portrays leadership not as domination or exploitation but as a sacred trust where the leader serves as a guide, protector, and provider for the people. This vision of leadership challenges modern societies, especially Nigeria, to reimagine governance in terms of service rather than self-interest. The biblical image of the shepherd underscores that leaders are accountable before God and the community they serve, and their legitimacy rests on their ability to safeguard justice, nurture the weak, and promote the common good.

In Nigeria, where leadership has often been marred by corruption, insecurity, and neglect of the masses, the shepherd motif offers both a critique and a corrective. It exposes the failures of exploitative leadership while pointing toward a redemptive model grounded in integrity, justice, and sacrificial service. If Nigerian leaders embrace these principles, leadership can be transformed into an instrument of healing, reconciliation, and nation-building. Ultimately, the shepherd motif reveals that the strength of a nation depends not on the power of its rulers but on their willingness to serve with humility, compassion, and accountability.

III. Recommendations

Drawing from the shepherd motif in the Old Testament and its implications for leadership in Nigeria, several recommendations are necessary for reimagining governance and restoring integrity in leadership. First, leaders in Nigeria must embrace servant-leadership as a guiding principle. The biblical shepherd demonstrates that authority is not about control or personal enrichment but about responsibility, sacrifice, and care for the flock. Nigerian leaders should therefore place the welfare of the people above personal or sectional interests, ensuring that policies and decisions are directed toward the common good.

Second, ethical accountability must be reinforced in every sector of leadership. Just as the shepherd is answerable to God for the welfare of the flock, leaders must recognize their accountability not only to citizens but also to a higher moral authority. Strengthening institutions that ensure transparency, fight corruption, and promote justice will help to bridge the gap between leadership ideals and current realities. Religious and community leaders also have a role to play in holding political leaders accountable while modeling the values of integrity, compassion, and humility.

Third, leadership development in Nigeria should prioritize moral and character formation alongside technical competence. The shepherd motif reminds us that good leadership flows from an inner disposition of care, wisdom, and responsibility. Educational systems, religious institutions, and civic organizations must therefore invest in nurturing leaders who combine vision with empathy, justice with service, and authority with accountability.

Finally, Nigerian citizens must not remain passive recipients of leadership but active participants in shaping it. The shepherd-flock relationship in the Old Testament was based on trust and mutual responsibility, and in the same way, citizens must demand accountability, engage constructively in governance, and uphold values of justice and honesty in their own lives. By aligning leadership with the biblical shepherd model, Nigeria can gradually move away from decadence toward renewal, building a society where leaders serve faithfully and the people thrive.

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