

From Mantle to Ministry: The Symbolism of Prophetic Transfer in 1 Kings 19:15–21 and Its Implications for Clergy Training in Nigeria

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Abstract

The training of clergy in Nigeria is confronted with serious challenges: the rapid growth of churches has outpaced the capacity of existing formation structures, many candidates lack access to formal theological education, and the models inherited from Western missionary institutions remain disconnected from African cultural realities. These gaps have produced ministers who are ill-prepared for the communities they serve. This study examines the account of prophetic transfer in 1 Kings 19:15-21 with a view to recovering biblical principles that can address these deficiencies. The text was subjected to historical-critical exegesis, including analysis of the Hebrew text, its *Sitz im Leben*, literary structure and a close reading of the passage. The findings show that the mantle-casting episode encodes principles of divine calling, mentorship-based formation, symbolic public commissioning and unconditional vocational commitment. These principles are not only scripturally grounded but also consonant with African traditions of elder-apprentice knowledge transfer. Based on these findings, the study recommends that Nigerian theological institutions restructure their formation programmes to incorporate structured mentorship, culturally appropriate commissioning practices and community-supported training, drawing from both the biblical text and indigenous African wisdom.

Key Words: Prophetic Succession, Clergy Training, Nigeria, Mantle Symbolism, Mentorship, 1 Kings 19:15-21

1. Introduction

The growth of Christianity in Nigeria over the past five decades has been remarkable by any measure. New churches have multiplied across urban and rural areas alike, and the demand for trained clergy has grown accordingly. Yet the institutions responsible for producing that clergy have struggled to keep pace. Many ministers enter active ministry without adequate preparation, and the formation models that do exist have been largely borrowed from Western seminary traditions that were designed for very different cultural and ecclesial contexts. The result is a widening gap between the kind of formation ministers receive and the kind of ministry the Nigerian church actually requires.

The passage that forms the centre of this study, 1 Kings 19:15-21, records the moment when Elijah cast his mantle upon Elisha, marking the beginning of a prophetic succession. The passage spans seven verses and moves from divine commission through symbolic calling to decisive human response. It is a text that has attracted considerable exegetical attention, yet its direct application to the question of ministerial formation in Africa has received little scholarly treatment. The account is set against the backdrop of Elijah's theophany at Mount Horeb, where God redirected the exhausted prophet from spectacular public confrontation toward the quieter work of raising a successor. That redirection is itself significant: the perpetuation of the prophetic office through a properly formed successor is presented as a matter of divine concern, not merely institutional management.

The problem this study addresses is therefore twofold. First, there is a practical crisis in Nigerian clergy formation, characterised by inadequate structures, financial barriers, cultural disconnection and uneven quality. Second, there is a scholarly gap: the exegetical resources available in 1 Kings 19:15-21 have not been systematically brought to bear on this crisis. This study aims to bridge that gap by conducting a close reading of the Hebrew text and drawing from its findings principles that can inform a more adequate approach to clergy training in Nigeria. The study proceeds by analysing the biblical text through established exegetical methodology and then applying the findings to the Nigerian ecclesiastical context. Primary data were drawn from the Hebrew text of 1 Kings 19:15-21 and secondary data from relevant biblical scholarship, African theology and literature on theological education.

2. Biblical Exegesis and Prophetic Succession

Scholarship on the Elijah-Elisha narrative has a long history within Old Testament studies. Robert Cohn (1982) demonstrated how Elisha's calling functions as a structural pivot in the narrative, marking the transition from Elijah's confrontational individual ministry to the broader institutional challenge of prophetic succession. Burke Long (1984) drew attention to the symbolic weight carried by the mantle within the prophetic tradition, while Georg Hentschel (1984) provided philological analysis of the Hebrew term *aderet*, deepening the understanding of what the garment represents in its ancient context.

Robert Wilson (1980) approached the question anthropologically, examining how prophetic authority was established and transmitted in Israelite society. David Petersen (1981) complemented this by analysing the institutional dimensions of prophetic succession, including the role of prophetic communities in sustaining the tradition across generations. Joseph Blenkinsopp (1996) situated the Elijah-Elisha relationship within a broader history of Israelite prophecy, while Walter Brueggemann (2001) read the prophetic imagination as a sustained challenge to the dominant social consciousness, a challenge that required transmission through a properly formed successor. Leah Bronner (1968) examined the material objects in the Elijah-

Elisha narratives, including garments, as polemical markers of divine authority over against Baal worship.

Victor Turner's (1969) theoretical work on liminality and rites of passage, though not a biblical study, provides a useful framework for reading the mantle transfer as a ritual act that marks a fundamental change of identity and role. Othmar Keel (1978) placed the symbolism of biblical garments within the wider iconographic world of the ancient Near East, confirming that the transfer of outer garments was a recognised practice for establishing successor relationships in that cultural world.

3. Theological Education and Ministerial Formation

Edward Farley (1983) identified the fragmentation of theological education as a fundamental problem in Western seminaries, arguing that academic disciplines had been pursued in isolation from the spiritual formation that gives them their proper purpose. Robert Banks (1999) proposed mentorship-based alternatives to the dominant seminary model, noting that the Elijah-Elisha pattern offers a more integrated approach to formation than classroom instruction alone can provide. The empirical study by Foster, Dahill, Golemon and Tolentino (2006) confirmed that relational and experiential learning is not supplementary to ministerial formation but is central to it.

Sharon Parks (2000) examined the developmental dimensions of mentoring young adults in vocational discernment, and Laurent Daloz (1999) analysed the dynamics of mentor-learner relationships in terms of challenge and support. David Kelsey (1992) insisted that theological education must hold together academic rigour and spiritual formation, and that separating them produces graduates who are technically competent but vocationally shallow. These contributions from the literature on theological education point consistently toward the kind of relational, experiential and holistic formation that the Elijah-Elisha narrative enacts.

4. African Christianity and Contextual Theology

Lamin Sanneh (1989) argued that the translation of the Christian message into African languages and cultural forms is not a compromise of the gospel but an expression of its essential nature. Andrew Walls (1996) extended this argument by tracing how the missionary movement has consistently produced indigenous appropriations of Christianity that differ from the forms that missionaries intended to transmit. Kwame Bediako (1992) examined how African cultural heritage and Christian theological reflection have interacted in the postcolonial period, showing that African Christianity has resources of its own that Western theology has not always taken seriously.

Matthews Ojo (1988) and Ogbu Kalu (2007) have illuminated the specific dynamics of Nigerian Christianity, including the charismatic movements that have reshaped the ecclesiastical landscape and developed their own informal approaches to ministerial formation. Deji

Ayegboyin (2001) identified persistent challenges in Nigerian theological education, such as financial constraints, the dominance of inherited Western curricula and questions of quality assurance, challenges that remain unresolved decades after they were first identified. Jean-Marc Ela (1988) called for a theology that begins with the concrete situation of the African poor, and Robert Schreiter (1985) provided a methodology for constructing local theologies that take both scripture and cultural context seriously.

The gap in the literature is clear. Exegetical studies of 1 Kings 19:15-21 are numerous, and scholarship on African theological education is growing, but no study has systematically brought the findings of a close reading of this passage to bear on the problem of clergy formation in Nigeria. This study addresses that gap.

5. Methodology

This study is qualitative in design. The primary data consist of the Hebrew text of 1 Kings 19:15-21, which was examined through the standard steps of historical-critical exegesis: analysis of the Hebrew text, English translation, textual criticism where textual problems exist, identification of the *Sitz im Leben*, analysis of the literary structure and a close reading of the passage, followed by a statement of exegetical findings. Secondary data were drawn from commentaries, journal articles and monographs in biblical studies, African theology and theological education. The exegetical findings were then applied to the Nigerian context by engaging existing literature on African Christianity and clergy training. The limitations of the study include its reliance on secondary sources for the description of current practice in Nigerian theological institutions; empirical fieldwork would strengthen the practical proposals in future research.

6. Exegetical Analysis of 1 Kings 19:15-21

6.1 Hebrew Text of 1 Kings 19:15-21

The following is the Hebrew text of 1 Kings 19:15-21 as found in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS):

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵךְ שׁוּב לְדִרְבַּךְ מִדְּבַרָה דְמִשְׁקָה׃
וּבֹא תָ וּמְשַׁחֲתָ אֶת־חֲזָאֵל לְמַלְךְ עַל־אַרְם׃
וְאֵת יְהוּא בֶן־נִמְשִׁי תִמְשַׁח לְמַלְךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־אֱלִישֶׁע בֶּן־שַׁפְטַי מֵאֵבֶל מְחֹלָה תִמְשַׁח לְנָבִיא
תַּחֲתָיו׃
וְהִיא הַנְּמִלֶּטֶת מִתְּרַב חֲזָאֵל יָמִית יְהוּא וְהַנְּמִלֶּטֶת מִתְּרַב יְהוּא יָמִית אֱלִישֶׁע׃
וְהַשְׂאֲרָתִי בְיִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁבַעֶת אֲלֹפִים כָּל־הַבְּרָכִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־כָרְעוּ לְבַעַל וְכָל־הַפֶּה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־נָשַׁק לוֹ׃
וַיֵּלֶךְ מִשָּׁם וַיִּמְצָא אֶת־אֱלִישֶׁע בֶּן־שַׁפְטַי וְהוּא חָרַשׁ שְׁנַיִם־עָשָׂר צְמִדִים לְפָנָיו וְהוּא בִשְׁנַיִם הָעָשָׂר
וַיַּעֲבֹר אֵלָיו וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶדְרָתּוֹ אֵלָיו׃
וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶת־הַבְּקָר וַיֵּרֶץ אַחֲרָיו אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲשֶׁקֶה־נָּא לְאָבִי וְלְאִמִּי וְאַלְכָה אַחֲרָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֵךְ שׁוּב
כִּי יָמָה עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ׃
וַיֵּשֶׁב מֵאַחֲרָיו וַיִּקַּח אֶת־צִמְד הַבְּקָר וַיִּזְבְּחֵהוּ וַיִּבְכְּלֵי הַבְּקָר בְּשֶׁלֶם הַבָּשָׂר וַיִּתֵּן לָעָם וַיִּאֲכְלוּ וַיִּגְּמֻם
וַיֵּלֶךְ אַחֲרָיו אֵלָיו וַיִּשְׂרָתָהוּ׃

6.2 English Translation of 1 Kings 19:15-21

The following translation is based on the Hebrew text above, with reference to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and the New International Version (NIV):

15. The LORD said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

16. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.

17. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill.

18. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.

19. So he set out from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was ploughing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him.

20. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, 'Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.' Elijah said to him, 'Go back again; for what have I done to you?'

21. He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.'

6.3 Textual Criticism of 1 Kings 19:15-21

The Masoretic Text (MT) of this passage is generally well preserved. The Septuagint (LXX) follows the MT closely, with no significant variants that affect the meaning of the passage. The Syriac Peshitta and the Vulgate likewise show no divergence of consequence. One minor variant appears in verse 19, where some manuscripts read the verb as passive rather than active in relation to the casting of the mantle, but this does not alter the theological thrust of the text. The MT reading is to be preferred as the *lectio difficilior*. For this study, the MT as represented in the BHS will be treated as the base text.

6.4 Sitz im Leben of 1 Kings 19:15-21

The passage belongs to the Elijah cycle (1 Kings 17-2 Kings 2), a collection of narratives widely understood to have originated in northern prophetic circles and subsequently incorporated into the Deuteronomistic History during the period of the Israelite monarchy. The immediate historical setting is the reign of King Ahab of Israel and his Phoenician queen Jezebel, whose promotion of Baal worship represented a direct challenge to the exclusive worship of Yahweh. Elijah had publicly confronted this challenge at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), but after Jezebel's threat on his life, he fled to Horeb in despair.

The encounter at Horeb and the subsequent commission of 1 Kings 19 must be read in this context. God's instruction to Elijah to anoint successors, including Elisha as prophetic successor, is not simply a personnel decision. It is a divine response to the apparent failure of the prophetic witness: if Elijah cannot continue alone, the mission will be sustained through others.

The prophetic office is larger than any individual who holds it. The Sitz im Leben of the passage is therefore one of institutional crisis and divine renewal, a setting that has obvious resonances with the present situation of clergy formation in Nigeria.

6.5 Structure of 1 Kings 19:15-21

The passage is divided into two clearly demarcated units. The first, verses 15-18, records the divine commission given to Elijah at Horeb. It moves through three commands (anoint Hazael, anoint Jehu, anoint Elisha) and concludes with God's disclosure that seven thousand faithful remain in Israel. The threefold commission places Elisha's calling within a broader political and theological programme of covenant renewal. The second unit, verses 19-21, narrates the execution of the third commission. It moves through four scenes: Elijah's departure and his finding of Elisha (v.19a); the casting of the mantle (v.19b); Elisha's request and Elijah's response (v.20); and Elisha's decisive action and departure (v.21). The structure of the second unit is compact and deliberate. Each scene advances the action and eliminates any ambiguity about what is taking place.

6.6 Close Reading of 1 Kings 19:15-21

The passage opens with a divine command to Elijah: "Go, return on your way" (v.15). The verb used, *lekh-shuv*, combines going and returning and signals that the work is not finished. Elijah's despondency at Horeb is not the end of the story; there is still a mission to fulfil, and fulfilling it requires appointing successors. The three anointing commissions that follow establish that the continuation of the prophetic witness is a matter of divine concern. Elisha is commissioned specifically as prophet "in your place" (*takhtekha*, v.16), a phrase that leaves no ambiguity about the nature of the succession. This is a designated replacement, not a junior assistant.

Verse 19 narrates the meeting between the two men. Elisha is found at work, ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen. The detail is significant: twelve yoke suggests a prosperous household, which means Elisha is not a marginal figure responding to a calling out of necessity. He has something to give up. Elijah's action is sudden and without verbal explanation: he passes by and throws his mantle over Elisha. The Hebrew verb for throwing, *wayashlekh*, carries weight; it is not a gentle gesture. The mantle, the *aderet* (אֲדֶרֶת), was Elijah's distinctive outer garment, the same garment by which he would later divide the Jordan (2 Kings 2:8) and which Elisha would inherit after the ascension (2 Kings 2:13). In casting it over Elisha, Elijah transfers something of his own prophetic identity and authority. The act requires no words because the symbol speaks for itself.

Elisha's immediate response, abandoning the oxen and running after Elijah, shows that he has understood the meaning of the act. His request to say farewell to his parents introduces a moment of negotiation that tests the seriousness of the call. Elijah's reply, "Go back; for what

have I done to you?", is not a withdrawal of the call but a challenge to count its cost. Elijah will not compel Elisha. The call is real, but the response must be free and fully considered. Elisha returns, but the manner of his return removes any ambiguity about his decision. He slaughters his oxen, burns his ploughing equipment as fuel, cooks the meat and distributes it to the people. By destroying his livelihood in a public and irreversible act, he declares to his community that he is not going back. The feeding of the community from his former possessions is also notable: he does not abandon his people but reorients his relationship to them under the new vocation.

Verse 21 ends simply: "he arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him." The word translated "ministered" is *wayyesharetehu*, which implies sustained, committed service. Elisha does not merely follow Elijah; he serves him. The years that follow, described elsewhere as Elisha "pouring water on the hands" of Elijah (2 Kings 3:11), represent the formation period during which Elisha learns his vocation through proximity and service.

6.7 Exegetical Findings

From the close reading of 1 Kings 19:15-21, the following findings emerge. First, the prophetic calling originates with God, not with human initiative. Elijah does not choose his successor; he obeys a divine command. This means that ministerial authority cannot be self-generated or institutionally manufactured; it is rooted in divine election. Second, the calling is communicated through a symbolic act, the casting of the mantle that is public, visible and capable of being understood without verbal explanation. The symbol does the work of commissioning. Third, the human response to the call is free but total. Elisha is not coerced, and the period of deliberation represented by his request to farewell his parents is treated with respect. But once the decision is made, it is made irreversibly and publicly. Fourth, the formation of the new prophet takes place through extended service alongside the established prophet. There is no shortcut: Elisha learns by being with Elijah. Fifth, the one being called does not abandon his community but reorients his relationship to them under a new primary vocation.

7. Contemporary Clergy Training in Nigeria

Nigeria's Christian community is one of the largest in the world, spanning historic mission churches, African-Initiated Churches and a rapidly expanding Pentecostal and charismatic sector. The diversity of this community has produced correspondingly diverse approaches to clergy training. Mainline denominations such as the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic churches maintain formal seminary requirements, typically insisting on recognised theological degrees before ordination. Many Pentecostal and independent churches, by contrast, rely on Bible institutes run by the movement or on informal mentorship within the local church, placing greater weight on spiritual gifts and practical experience than on academic credentials (Ayegboyin, 2001).

The challenges confronting clergy training in Nigeria are well documented. Rapid church growth has generated demand for ministers that existing institutions cannot supply. Financial constraints place formal seminary education beyond the reach of many called candidates, particularly those from rural backgrounds or economically disadvantaged families. The curricula of many Nigerian theological institutions continue to reflect their missionary origins, with syllabuses and pedagogical methods borrowed from North Atlantic models that were designed for very different social and ecclesiastical contexts. The effect, as Ayegboyin (2001) notes, is that many graduates are academically capable within the inherited framework but find themselves ill-equipped for the pastoral realities of the communities they serve. The linguistic barrier is also significant: instruction predominantly in English creates difficulties for candidates whose primary languages are Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo or any of the country's other major languages.

At the same time, Nigeria possesses cultural resources that formal theological education has largely ignored. Indigenous traditions of elder-apprentice formation, in which knowledge and wisdom are transmitted through sustained proximity and graduated responsibility rather than formal instruction, are deeply rooted across the country's diverse communities. These traditions offer an organic model of formation that is not foreign to the Nigerian church but indigenous to the culture in which it lives (Kalu, 2007). The gap between what existing institutions offer and what these indigenous traditions provide is precisely the space that the exegetical findings from 1 Kings 19:15-21 can help to fill.

8. Application of Exegetical Findings to Nigerian Clergy Training

The findings from the close reading of 1 Kings 19:15-21 have direct implications for clergy training in Nigeria. Each of the five findings identified above can be translated into a concrete principle of ministerial formation. The prophetic calling originates with God, not with human initiative. The calling originates with God and not with human initiative, which calls into question any approach to clergy training that treats ministerial formation as primarily an institutional process. Nigerian theological institutions need to create space for genuine vocational discernment, allowing candidates to examine and test their calling before committing to formal training. This is not a relaxation of academic standards but a recognition that the most rigorous academic training is wasted on a person who has not genuinely been called. The Elijah-Elisha narrative places divine election before institutional formation; Nigerian clergy training must do the same.

The calling is communicated through a symbolic public act. The second finding, that the call is communicated through a symbolic public act, points to the importance of commissioning rituals that are culturally meaningful to the communities that receive them. The ordination practices of many Nigerian churches have been borrowed wholesale from Western traditions and sit uneasily in African cultural contexts. Drawing on the insight that Elijah's casting of the

mantle was understood immediately by Elisha because it spoke in a cultural language both men shared, Nigerian churches should develop commissioning practices that draw on indigenous symbolic vocabularies. Investiture practices, the use of culturally significant objects, the involvement of community elders, and the public declaration of calling all have potential here, provided they are theologically grounded and not merely decorative.

The human response to the call must be free but total. The third finding, that the response to the call must be free but total, has implications for how candidates are recruited and assessed. The current pressure to fill gaps in ministry rapidly can lead to the acceptance of candidates whose commitment is shallow or whose motives are mixed. Elijah did not compel Elisha; he challenged him to count the cost. Nigerian theological institutions should develop more rigorous processes of vocational assessment, not to exclude but to ensure that those who enter training have genuinely reckoned with what they are undertaking.

Prophetic formation takes place through extended service alongside an established practitioner. The fourth finding, that formation takes place through extended service alongside an established practitioner, is the most directly applicable to the Nigerian situation. The elder-apprentice model that Elijah and Elisha exemplify is not foreign to Nigeria; it is a pattern deeply embedded in the country's own cultural traditions of knowledge transmission. What is needed is the formalisation of this pattern within clergy training. This means assigning each candidate a designated mentor from active pastoral ministry, requiring regular structured interaction between mentor and candidate, incorporating extended field placement under the mentor's supervision and building graduated assumption of ministerial responsibility into the formal programme. Mentorship of this kind cannot be an informal add-on to academic study; it must be a core component of the formation programme, with its own expectations, accountability structures and assessment criteria.

The one called does not abandon the community but reorients towards it. The fifth finding, that the one called does not abandon the community but reorients towards it, challenges the tendency of formal seminary training to remove candidates from their communities for extended periods of time. The model suggested by the Elijah-Elisha narrative is not one of withdrawal and re-entry but of formation within and alongside the community of ministry. Part-time programmes, community-based learning and the integration of academic study with ongoing community engagement all reflect this principle. Where candidates must be separated from their home communities for part of their training, intentional structures for maintaining community connection should be built into the programme.

9. Conclusion

The account of Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kings 19:15-21 is more than a narrative of individual calling. It is a carefully constructed account of prophetic succession that encodes

principles of ministerial formation with enduring relevance. From the close reading of the Hebrew text, five principles emerge: divine initiative in calling, symbolic public commissioning, the freedom and totality of the human response, formation through extended service alongside a practitioner, and continued orientation toward the community. These principles are not abstractions; they are enacted in a specific cultural and historical setting, and their application requires sensitivity to the cultural setting in which they are to be received.

The Nigerian church stands at a point where the quality of its clergy formation will determine the character of its witness in the coming decades. The rapid growth that has made Nigeria one of the most significant Christian communities in the world has not been matched by a corresponding development of formation structures. The resources needed to address this are available, in the biblical text, in indigenous African traditions of knowledge transmission and in the growing body of scholarship on African theological education. What is needed is the will to bring these resources together in a coherent and contextually appropriate way. The Elijah-Elisha narrative offers a starting point that is both scripturally grounded and culturally resonant. The mantle has been cast; what remains is for Nigerian theological institutions to receive it with the seriousness that Elisha showed.

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