

PARTY POLITICS INVOLVEMENT: A CASE FOR CHURCH IDENTITY AND MISSION IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Involvement in party politics by church members for various reasons has become a common feature for political aspirants in Africa. What this entails remains an enigmatic and topical issue for the church in Africa. Besides being a controverted subject, the quandary created by a non-definitive position given in the context of African political cultures has left church leadership in an administratively precarious position to guide church member party-political activists. Contemporary African party politics expresses itself in forms that make it challenging for the church to retain its identity and mission. An analysis of the issues at stake warrants a biblical-theological reflection to help the church retain its identity and accomplish its mission in Africa.

Keywords: party politics, identity, mission, African party politics, involvement

1. Background

The subject on party politics involvement by professed Christian adherents of traditional denominations, protestant or evangelicals such as Seventh-day Adventists, has a potential of eliciting an academically protracted discussion. Denominational movements such as the Adventist, as pointed out earlier on, cannot confront this discussion outside of their identity and mission for existence. The case of the Seventh-day Adventist Church will be considered as a selected evangelical denomination that may serve as an example and case study for those traditional Christian denominations.

1.1. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church: Mission and Identity

It has been noted that “the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist church, is to proclaim the gospel of the whole Bible to the ends of the earth (Matt 28:19-20), and to carry the message of the three angels (Rev 14:6-12) to all peoples.”¹ Further it also states that Adventists

are a conservative protestant body of evangelical Christians whose faith is grounded in the Bible and centred on Jesus, with stress on the atoning death on the cross, ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, and soon return to redeem His people. They are known for their observance, for their emphasis on maintaining health as part of religious duty, and for their mission activities around the world.²

The constitution and by-laws of the Seventh-day Adventist Church worldwide, readily found in the denominations’ working policy, states that “the purpose of the General Conference is to teach all nations the everlasting gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the commandments of God.”³

The milieu, causes, and contributing factors to which African party politics was born, to a great and significant extent, define African identity, politics, social justice, and 21st century religiosity. These seem inevitably connected and formative to the background of the discussion. The legacies of the past and the role or place played by colonial missionaries in the 19th century in African politics are invaluable elements that cannot be excluded from this discussion. Contemporary politics in Africa may not be understood in terms of other places around the globe, although there may be commonalities in some aspects and conceptual frameworks that define party politics. The question that arises is, is it possible for a Christian to be involved in party politics and retain the church’s identity and mission in Africa?

¹Nancy J. Vyhmeister, “Who are Seventh-day Adventists,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 20.

²*Ibid.*, 1.

³Constitution of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists, Article II (As revised at the 59th Session held in Atlanta, United States of America, June 24 to July 3, 2010). See also Working Policy of the Southern Africa Indian Ocean Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*, 2015-2016 ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2015), 136.

1.2. Method

A topic of this nature, just like any other, demands both clarity⁴ and selection of the most appropriate methodology to tackle it and yield best results. Historical factors and legacies of the past and the emergence of party politics, without which the study is defeated, warrant a historical reflection of party politics. This may be compared⁵ to or considered in the light of biblical-theological⁶ insights drawn from available data. Thus “biblical-theology collates the results of exegesis and provide the data for the systematic theologian to contextualise in developing theological dogma for the church.”⁷ The study calls for an ingenious use of these different but carefully interwoven methodologies.⁸ In this case therefore,

⁴Joel M. LeMon and Kent H. Richards, “Preface,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Peterson*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent H. Richards (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), xvii.

⁵Brent A. Strawn notes that determining elements of comparison is not an easy task just as engaging in the task needs justification too. It is not easy to maintain a balance and avoid over-emphasis of similarities over differences, or vice versa. He quickly observes though that the act of comparing is neurologically encoded. Brent A. Strawn, “Comparative Approaches: History, Theory and Image of God,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Peterson*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent H. Richards (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 115. While the last observation might create further discussion, suffice to say all other factors considered, the nature of the subject under study qualifies for this element or methodology to be made use of. Comparison of more than one element is at stake here; party politics, and the church. Can a professed Adventist Christian serve the two institutions simultaneously, keep and foster the identity and mission of the church as informed by the biblical text?

⁶William P. Brown expresses it well that theological interpretation begins with or interfaces with biblical scholarship and then makes a theological inquiry which takes into account the ancient text and the contemporary context. Even though theological enterprise involves reason, the text provides its own theo-logic. William P. Brown, “Theological Interpretation: A Proposal,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L Peterson*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent H. Richards (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 387. Perhaps Grant R. Osborne has expressed even clearer, “Biblical theology constitutes the first step away from the exegesis of the individual passages and toward the delineation of their significance for the church today.” Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1991), 263. Canale has made a historical observation though, that “for about seventeen centuries Christian theology was pursued within the confines of systematic (dogmatic) theology.” Fernando Canale, “Is there Room for Systematics in Adventist Theology?” *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 12, no. 2 (2001): 114. Canale contends that there was no biblical theology from as far back as the times of Origen (c.185-253/4) and the first systematic theologian, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274). Ibid.

⁷Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 263.

⁸Methodologies can be used in combination with other methodologies, as long as there is unity of purpose and appropriateness for doing so. Ibid., xviii. Combining methodologies is not a foreign practice to academic enterprise as is evidenced by the scholarly works of Elizabeth Block Smith, and Ziony Zevit that combine more than one method. Christopher B. Hays, “Religio-Historical Approaches: Monotheism. Method and Morality,” in *Method Matters:*

this study will make use of a combination of selected methodologies. The historical, biblical-theological, and comparative approaches will be the ambit of navigation for this discussion to establish coherent principles from the study⁹ and for consideration under the discussion of party politics involvement by church members in Africa.

Accordingly, a look at the historical background, the emergence, and the nature of party politics in Africa will be considered. This will include the backdrop factors that directly and indirectly led to the party politics phenomenon in Africa. Second, selected Old Testament (OT) characters such as Moses, Joseph, and Daniel will be looked at. The first two characters served the Egyptian empire, while the third served both the Babylonian and the Medes and Persian empires at different times. These will be looked at to establish biblical-theological insights or principles with respect to African party politics. Third will be a consideration of implications for identity and mission that ought to be taken into account by Adventist Christian aspirants of party politics activism in Africa.

1.3. Limits

This study will not concern itself so much with the so called “church politics;” rather, it will leave the results of the study to be self-applicable to other nuances of political practices, church or otherwise. This study will not put special focus on one African country as a case study; rather, it will make a broad overview, leaving such focussed studies for other academics. The writers recognise the volatility of the subject and, therefore, have chosen to limit the paper to establishing a biblical-theological response to the subject without becoming emotive or an intellectual political activist in the process of the discussion. This paper will not be a political scientific investigation as would be espoused by political scientists. Rather it is intentionally limited to a biblical-theological study in the context of the OT. Further, the study will seek to consider African party politics in its African context and resist the temptation to put on academic spectacles or political orientations of the western perspective, as is often the case, arguably. African politics ought to be understood or judged in its own dynamisms and not through the prisms of other worldviews.

Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L Peterson, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent H. Richards (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 169.
⁹Canale, “Is there Room,” 131.

2. Party Politics: Historical Background and Definition

It is proper to begin the discussion on the historical background with a look at the general meaning of the word politics. The Greek word *polis* which means city or state, originates the word *politics*.¹⁰ Kenneth R. Himes further contend that the term meant how a city conducted its public affairs as opposed to private personal issues.¹¹ This entails accumulation, organisation, and use of power in governance on specified terms.¹² A political party is a body or organisation that advocates for candidates to hold public office to run the affairs of a territory or state.¹³ However, the critical question that arises with this definition of politics is, does this definition encompass everything that is meant by party politics in Africa, in pre, during, or post-colonial periods. In other words, does the expression have a similar meaning or connotation to both the colonised and never colonised states? A closer look at this element is justifiable because we are discussing African politics.

What was noted of politics around the middle of the 20th century seems unequivocally applicable in the 21st century. Herbert Spiro strongly notes that we should not “approach African politics as though it were European or American politics, if we want to avoid misleading answers.”¹⁴ The environment in which African political process takes place is unique.¹⁵ This creates the necessity to distinguish between

¹⁰Kenneth R. Himes, *Christianity and the Political Order: Conflict, Cooptation and Cooperation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 2. Himes observes that the city dwellers of Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and Thebes were called *politeis*. Ibid. David Miller weighs in by noting that politics has to do with governance and consequences for breaking rules. David Miller, *Political Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4. The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion defines politics as an “art or science of taking part in a civilised community.” Paul K. Meager, Thomas C. O’Brien and Consuelo M. Aherne, *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Corpus, 1979), s.v. “politics.” The challenge with this definition is the problematic quandary created by what is meant by civilised community. “Politics is the discourse of our public life,” writes Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics* (New York, NY: Orbis, 1994), xix.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 11, rev. ed. (London, UK: Macmillan, 1987), s.v. “politics.”

¹³Michael D. Harkavy, *The New Webster’s International Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Naples, FL: Trident International, 1996), s.v. “political party.”

¹⁴Herbert J. Spiro, *Politics in Africa: Prospects South of the Sahara* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), 10.

¹⁵Ibid. See also Sebastian Elischer, *Political Parties in Africa: Ethnicity and Party Formation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xvii. In this book Sebastian Elischer observes that there is no room to make a comparison of African politics to another continent,

“African politics” and “politics in Africa.”¹⁶ In the post-colonial era, political differences among the different states also emerged and became very visible.¹⁷

The first political party was formed in Liberia in 1860¹⁸ and, like other African countries, they all sought to fight oppression, exploitation, and inequalities created by foreign colonial imperialist rulers. Benjamin Talton informs us that Europeans set in the Berlin conference 1884-1885 held a record of 400 years experience of imperialism and exploitation in Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific.¹⁹ They used imperialism to divide, conquer, and then rule; for often, African proxies were the face of the European colonial power that was used to fight fellow Africans.²⁰ Europeans warring among themselves equipped them to become a formidable military force against the poorly military-equipped Africans.²¹ Thus, African party politics was born to fight and remove imperialism.²² Legacies that would later characterise African party politics in colonial free states.²³ Political freedom was valued ahead of wealth without liberty by most Africans.²⁴

What was the role of the church, represented in this case, by colonial missionaries? How did the missionaries relate to party politics of the colonisation? This is critical in showing us how the church fared in the past concerning party politics involvement, and to show us its impact on mission then. Robert D. Woodberry makes a historical observation that

noting that it's even challenging to make political comparisons among the African countries by themselves.

16Chris Allen, “Understanding African Politics,” *Review of African Economy* 65 (1995): 302.

17Ibid., 301.

18It was the “True Wing Party.” Giovanna Carbone, “Political Parties and Party Systems in Africa: Themes and Research Perspectives,” *World Political Science Review* 3, no. 3 (2007): 1.

19Benjamin Talton, “African Resistance to Colonial Rule,” *Africana Age*, Schoburg Centre for Research in Black Culture (2011), accessed 12 April, 2017. <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-resistance.html>

20Ibid.

21Ibid.

22Party politics therefore organised demonstrations, prolonged war and even guerrilla warfare to win their independence. Allen, “Understanding African Politics,” 315.

23Alayna Hamilton, “Political Oppression in Sub-Saharan Africa” *Topical Review Digest: Human Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa*, accessed April 12, 2017. <http://www.du.edu/korel/hehw/researchdigest/africa/politicalOppression>. See also Mohamed A. El-Khawas, and J. Anyu Ndimbe, *Democracy, Diamonds and Oil: Politics in Today's Africa* (New York, NY: Nova Science, 2006); Staffan Lindberg I, *Democracy and Elections in Africa* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins, 2006).

24Spiro, *Politics in Africa*, 9. An inscription on Dr Kwame Nkrumah's monument captures this value well. Ibid.

often times missionaries were drawn into politics because politics assisted their missionary objectives.²⁵ Often times, it has been noted that most of them wanted a *moderate* use of colonialism,²⁶ though it may be difficult to measure *moderate* against any standard. It was for this reason that “colonial abuses angered local people against Christianity – which is most associated with the West—and thus made conversions harder.”²⁷ However, some missionaries fought slavery²⁸ and established schools that gave impetus to the rise of nationalists who became party politicians that led their countries to freedom. It has been observed that “virtually all early African nationalists graduated from mission schools.”²⁹

The discussion on party politics is incomplete without a look at the cold war and its effects. The superpowers used and abused the African states in their quest for political control, access to resources, and establishment of allies.³⁰ In the process, party politics (and rebels) was funded to support, oppose, and overthrow governments.³¹ The legacy of these imperialistic party politics’ influencing behaviours have outlived the cold war era to characterise African party politics directly or indirectly to this day. Thus, it can be concluded that “internal divisions, colonial legacy, history of cultural oppression, intense rivalry and competition for political power, etc., a combination of these factors constitutes the root

²⁵Robert D. Woodberry, “Politics,” *Encyclopedia of Missions and Missionaries*, ed. Jonathan Bonk (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 347.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.* “Elder Mead led Jim into the water and baptised him. The date was December 1, 1901, a memorable one for the missionaries who had waited and prayed five and one half years for this first convert.” Virgil Robinson, *The Solusi Story: Times of Peace, Times of Peril* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1979), 77.

²⁸It has been noted that the in some British colonies, slave owners punished or restricted missionaries contact with slaves, burnt some churches of those who did not comply with their colonial agenda. In Guyana (formerly Demerara) a missionary, John Smith of the London Missionary Society was sentenced to death when slaves rebelled in 1823. Woodberry, “Politics,” 348.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 352.

³⁰Abdalla Bujra, “African Conflicts: Their Causes and their Political and Social Environment,” in *Development Policy Management Forum*, No. 4 (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Development Policy Management Forum, 2002), 9.

³¹*Ibid.* Just an example, Bujra wrote about it then, “in the Congo of 1964, the Americans intervened to remove Lumumba and install Mobutu, an intervention which has set in motion serious and unforeseen consequences which are unfolding to this day. In Somalia, it led to the collapse of the state. In Angola, it has led to the long and tragic civil war. Similarly in Mozambique (through the proxy of apartheid South Africa).” *Ibid.*

cause of these major conflicts,"³² in Africa today. Besides, African party politics mirrors pre-colonial historic ethnic rivalries.³³

Party politics in Africa has a diversity of forms and remain so today.³⁴ It is made up of the elite, mass, nationalist, religious,³⁵ ethnicity,³⁶ electoral, movement based parties.³⁷ Political parties are numerous and are continuously formed.³⁸ Whatever the case may be, the parties formulate forms of government that fall into the following categories; military regimes, one party regimes, inclusive multipatism, and racial oligarchies (South Africa prior to its independence).³⁹

First, today, party politics in Africa arguably seeks to respond to or resist economic exploitation. This is so because colonial characterisations—oppression, exploitation, and inequalities—in post-colonial era today remain in economic form,⁴⁰ making African party politics a necessity in the wake of economic exploitation of African

³²Ibid.

³³African tribes, ethnic groups, fought against each other just as European states warred against each other. However, the African inter-ethnic wars remained unresolved, as a matter of fact, were used by colonialists to their imperialistic ends. Unfortunately, they remain unresolved to this day, giving party politics another undesirable feature. "When Nigeria got its independence from the British in 1960, the various contradictions and points of inter-ethnic conflict had not been resolved. The post-colonial order was founded on the same socio-economic and political structures which were already in existence." Bujra, "African Conflicts," 21.

³⁴Carborne, "Political Parties and Party Systems," 5.

³⁵All Nigerians People's Party has a stronghold in the Islamic north. Ibid., 12. For further reading see Geoffrey K. Ingham, *Politics in Modern Africa: The Uneven Tribal Dimension* (London, UK: Routledge, 1990).

³⁶This form seems to cut across in the other forms of party politics. Carborne notes that ethnic heterogeneity is a feature that is shared regionally and it is compounded by religious divisions in some cases. Carborne, "Political Parties and Party Systems," 9. Further, it has been noted that the 'liberation factor' against colonialists, was a unifying factor, and soon as independence was attained it waned off. Ibid.

³⁷Ibid. Read Giovanne Carborne for a detailed treatise on the differences in forms of party politics. However, it must be noted that the typology that has been used by Giovanne Carborne has its own limitations because it draws from the western worldview of politics. Ibid. Whatever the differences are they seem to share specific goals, in principle, to better the lives of their people. They also share, some of them, the common factor of existing prior to independence, while some of them were formed after independence as a response to the party politics of the liberating parties styles of governance.

³⁸This was a result of reforms of the 90s that brought in a period democratisation in many African States. After most African states had gained independence, they opted for one partism as a way to foster quick economic growth and stability. However this was resisted by the masses and so the 90s saw a sweep of change to multipartism. Ibid., 3.

³⁹Ibid., 4.

⁴⁰Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, NY: Groove, 1963), 27.

resources. Monetary institutions such as International Monetary Fund and the World Bank extend economic help to African states to “assist” them in their economic development. These institutions (International Monetary Fund and World Bank) give African states economic and political conditions for loan eligibility.⁴¹

Second, party politics is focussed at the internal interests of its players. These include, but are not limited to, the following; holding on to power and allowing very minimal reforms that prevent meaningful changes,⁴² personal rule, winner takes all, corruption and looting of the economy, endemic instability, erosion of authority, and repression and violence.⁴³ This is mainly so by party politics in power. Party politics in opposition sometimes organise rebellion and attempt to overthrow government,⁴⁴ which leads to conflicts and even war, notes Abdalla Bujra.⁴⁵ Violence,⁴⁶ besides being a reaction to poverty, is often between party supporters and, in many cases, ethnic and religious affiliation.⁴⁷

Party politics in Africa is unique and cannot easily be comparable to the ones in the other continents of the planet. It has a historical background that includes the pre-colonial era, colonial, and post-colonial period. During the cold war, colonial missionaries’ involvement in party politics influenced party politics and negatively impacted the mission of missionaries. A biblical-theological perspective will now be done in the next section to establish a biblical view on party politics and whether a Christian can be involved in it and retain both the identity and mission of the church in Africa.

⁴¹Allen, “Understanding African Politics,” 312. These include but not limited to good governance, rule of law, accountability, and administrative probity. Ibid.

⁴²Carborne, “Political Parties and Party Systems,” 4. See also Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

⁴³Ibid., 308-309.

⁴⁴In the past decades after most African states gained independence it is noted that party politics has been responsible for about “80 violent changes of government.” Bujra, “African Conflicts,” 4.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶This must be understood to refer to the term *conflict*, which entails in this a “violent and armed confrontation.” Ibid., 4.

⁴⁷Ibid., 4.

3. Party Politics: A Biblical and Theological Perspective

As we delve into this section, it is paramount to briefly take note of what different scholars say about involvement in politics. It has been argued that it is practically difficult to offer double attention to God, to be ethical in practice, deliberately lie and resist snares of power and to do party politics.⁴⁸ Colson argues that a Christian can be an active party politician and yet bring transcendent moral values to the populace by determining to remain loyal to God no matter what party leaders may demand.⁴⁹

Himes, a Catholic scholar, agrees with Colson. Although he does not speak directly of the individual participation or involvement of the Christian, he advocates for the church to consider politics as critical for its practice, because politics matters because people matter.⁵⁰ He notes that it is a duty of the Christian church to build the earthly city.⁵¹ He proceeds to note the uniqueness of the Catholic Church's diplomatic relations with 176 states and that it has both voice and vote at the United Nations sponsored conferences, except the General Assembly.⁵² Johannes B. Metz gives a scholarly explanation as to why the Christian and the Church must be involved in politics, resonating with Himes, and draws examples from the Catholic Church.⁵³

We now turn to three OT Bible characters—Joseph, Moses, and Daniel. Moses was involved in the liberation of a nation from a bondage that can be rightly described as political. The three characters worked under three different empires of the ancient world. They all lived at different time periods of chronological time. They have been selected for this study, for they seem to be a representation of God-fearing men who worked or interacted with state political powers or empires in the OT. The Bible is an indivisible union of both the divine and human, and it is the Word of God with principles that are applicable to all ages.

⁴⁸Charles Colson, *Political Action* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1988), 69.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Himes, *Christianity and the Political Order*, 4-5.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 5.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 12.

⁵³Johannes B. Metz, "The Churches' Social Function in the Light of Political Theology," in *Faith and the World of Politics*, ed. Johannes B Metz (New York, NY: Paulist, 1968), 2-18.

3.1. Joseph as a High Profile Political Figure

The Genesis narrative records the account of this Bible character as the son of Israel⁵⁴ or Jacob (Gen 35:24) who suffers sibling jealousy (Gen 37:11), is sold to strangers, and becomes a slave (Gen 37:27-28). Later sold to Potiphar, an Egyptian political figure (Gen 39:1), he becomes a prisoner (Gen 39:20) and explains the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams (Gen 41:16-36). This leads to his becoming an official of the Egyptian empire at the appointment of the Pharaoh (41:37-44).

Key observations to be made is how Joseph rises to an influential political position to serve in the affairs of the state of Egypt. First, Joseph is a prisoner, a falsely charged criminal or convict serving a jail sentence based on rape allegations (Gen 39: 7-19). Second, there is a crisis because the magicians of Egypt fails to assist Pharaoh (Gen 41:8). Third, Joseph acknowledges the ability of God to give explanations to dreams (Gen 41:16). Joseph explains the meaning of the dreams and informs the king that the dreams are God originated (41:25-36). Fourth, Pharaoh appoints Joseph as a high-profile state official (Gen 41: 41-44) because Joseph is full of the Holy Spirit (Gen 41:39-39). We will look at Genesis 41:41 more closely shortly. Fifth, Joseph's duties are clear—to prepare Egypt for the hunger years ahead (Gen 41:48-49). These duties seem not to include party political activism. Sixth, Pharaoh appoints Joseph second in command over the affairs of Egypt (41:41-44). Seventh, Joseph's rise to power is part of a big picture. The narrative fits well with Joseph's own dreams prior to his going to Egypt (Gen 37:1-11), which is fulfilled when his brothers and parent "bow" before him (Gen 42:6). The context of Genesis 41 is better understood when the divine hand is seen as the active agent behind the sudden rise of Joseph to power (Gen 45:7-8). In the whole narrative, there is a clear chronology of events. Later, a Pharaoh who does not know Joseph appears in the scene.

3.2. A Closer Look at Gen 41:41

A textual analysis of Genesis 41:41 is warranted for its exposure of the appointment of Joseph as a high-profile political figure in Egypt. The text

⁵⁴Genesis 32:28.

reads *וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל־יֹסֵף רְאֵה נָתַתִּי אֶתְּךָ עַל כָּל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם*. The text has three clauses that are syntactically connected to each other. The first clause “*וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל־יֹסֵף*” informs us of the main subject and the main object. It can be translated, “And Pharaoh said to Joseph.” Pharaoh is the main subject and Joseph is the recipient of the action of Pharaoh. The second clause *רְאֵה נָתַתִּי אֶתְּךָ* comprises an imperative of command *רְאֵה*, denoting a superior talking to a subordinate. In this case, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, is commanding Joseph about his new role. Joseph is merely a recipient of what the king is telling him to assume or do. He has done nothing of his own initiative to receive what the king is giving him. The main verb of this clause *נָתַתִּי* from the root word *נתן* is a verb *qal*, first common singular. It is featured most frequently in the Pentateuch. It is the fifth most common verb in the OT text occurring 2010 times⁵⁵ in all OT books except in the book of Nahum.⁵⁶ Etymologically, the root word *נתן* is attested in Aramaic⁵⁷ and it means, “to give, to grant, bestow upon.”⁵⁸ It carries the same meaning in several OT texts for example in Genesis 24:35, Exodus 23:31, Hosea 11:8, and I Chronicles 29:25. The LXX uses the word *καθίστημι* which is a verb, first person singular present active indicative. It is best rendered “put in charge.” It is preceded by the expression *Ἰδοὺ* an interjection which denotes a call for serious attention. *καθίστημι* is then followed by two other expressions *σὺ σήμερον*. The LXX uses the expression *σήμερον*, an adverb meaning “today” to give emphasis to the fact that it is a declaration that was made at that very moment. The decision of Pharaoh is a sudden act and executed right there by him. *נָתַתִּי* can therefore be translated, “I make you in charge or appoint, ascribe or assign”⁵⁹

⁵⁵Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Old Testament* (Jerusalem, Israel: Kiryat-Sepher, 1983), s.v. “נתן.”

⁵⁶Ernst Jenni, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament (TLOT)*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westerman (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), s.v. “נתן.”

⁵⁷William Gesenius, *Hebrew and Chaldean Dictionary of the Old Testament (HCDOT)*, ed. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (London, UK: Samuel Bagster, 1979), s.v. “נתן.”

⁵⁸David, J. A. Clines, *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), s.v. “נתן.” Also defined as “to give personally, to hand, to hand to, to bestow upon.” Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* based on the lexicon of William Gesenius, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1952), s.v. “נתן.” Other general meanings include “set, lay, put, present, offer, pass on, allow, permit, surrender, deliver.” William L Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), s.v. “נתן.”

⁵⁹Gesenius, *HCDOT*, s.v. “נתן.”

From the analysis of this text, Joseph was a high-profile political figure who did not attain his position through involvement in some party politics of the Ancient Near East in Egypt. He was an appointee of the king. He was “made in charge,” “assigned,” or “given” authority to execute state duties *because* the Spirit of God was evidenced before the monarch of Egypt, the Pharaoh, to be in him (Gen 41:39-39). His qualifying mark was God’s Spirit in his life. There was no effort done on his part to obtain this favour besides being filled with the Spirit.

It does seem that the rise to power of this Bible character was not preceded by party politics involvement. The OT text does not tell us anything else that he did to remain in power. He was an appointee of the King of Egypt, Pharaoh, following an unexpected event.

3.3. Moses as a Liberator

First, Moses runs away as a fugitive after committing murder in Egypt (Exod 2:11-15) and settles in Median (Exod 2:15). Second, God takes note of a crisis that has affected His people in Egypt (Exod 2:24; 3:7, 9; 6:5) and reveals Himself to Moses (Exod 3:2, 4-6). Third, God’s plan to rescue His people solves the crisis (Exod 3:8). Fourth, God commands Moses to liberate His people (Exod 3:10). A closer look at this text will be done shortly. Fifth, Moses makes every attempt to escape the call of God: what if they ask for God’s identity (Exod 3:13) and what if they will not believe that God sent him (Exod 4:1). He gives an excuse about speech disability (Exod 4:11) and tells God to send someone else (Exod 4:13). Seventh, God delivers His people from Egyptian bondage (10 plagues, Gen 7-12) according to His word (Exod 3:8).

3.4. A Closer Look at Exodus 3:10

This text also warrants a closer look, as an example, to understand the assumption of Moses into a seemingly powerful political position that led him on a mission to confront the Egyptian monarch for equity and liberty for the oppressed and exploited nation of the Hebrews. The text that reads “ועתה לכה ואשלחך אל־פרעה והוצא את־עמי בני־ישראל ממצרים:” is made up of three clauses. Significant in the first part of the sentence “ועתה לכה ואשלחך” is the use of the expression “לכה” a qal verb imperative masculine

singular from the root “הלך” meaning “to walk, go”⁶⁰ following an adverb prefixed with a conjunction “ועתה” translated “and now.” The subject, from the previous verses, God, seems to be giving Moses a command on what he must do. The second verb “אשלחך” is qal first common singular cohortative plus pronominal suffix second masculine singular. Etymologically, the root of this expression “שלח” is attested in Phoenician and Aramaic, besides Hebrew,⁶¹ and occurs 847 times⁶² in the MT. It can be translated “to send.”⁶³ However, it is mostly translated, “To send on a specific mission,”⁶⁴ or “to be commissioned.”⁶⁵ Its meaning is attested in Genesis 24:7, 40, 32:4, 37:13; Exodus 24:5; 1 Samuel 25:40; Isaiah 19:2; and Ezekiel 23:40 for example. It is used mostly in the Pentateuch, historical books, the Major Prophets, Psalms and the book of Job.⁶⁶ This expression also carries the subject “I.” In this case, God is mentioned in the previous sentences (Gen 3:6-7). The expression can be translated, “And I will send you.” The object of this first part is in the words “אל־פַּרְעֹה” translated “to Pharaoh.” The LXX adds the expressions βασιλέα Αιγύπτου, translated “king of Egypt,” to the noun “פַּרְעֹה” in the MT. The entire first part can be translated, “And come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh.” A syntactical issue that arises here is that God is the sender, Moses is the one being commanded to go, and Pharaoh is the object to be confronted by the one sent. God is specific about whom Moses should go to. We will consider this aspect as we consider the entire meaning of the text, but first let us have a look at the second part of the sentence והוצא את־עַמִּי בְּגֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם:

The last verb in the sentence occurs in this last clause והוצא. It is hiphil imperative masculine singular. Its root is יצא and it means “bring out, come out, come forth, make to come out.”⁶⁷ The expression can be literally translated, “And cause to bring out,” or more smoothly “and bring out.”

⁶⁰HALOT, s.v. “הלך.” Also “die, flow with, go behind, go away, follow, adhere to, make, let, leadwonder, move back and forth” Ibid.

⁶¹Jenni, *TLOT*, s.v. “שלח.”

⁶²Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance*, s.v. “שלח.”

⁶³HALOT, s.v. “שלח.” Also, “let go, stretch out, let free, escort, send away, send out, be sent, be dismissed.” Ibid. Also Jenni, *TLOT*, s.v. “שלח.”

⁶⁴Jenni, *TLOT*, s.v. “שלח.”

⁶⁵CDCH, s.v. “שלח.”

⁶⁶Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance*, s.v. “שלח.”

⁶⁷HALOT, s.v. “יצא.” Other general meanings include “go forth, step forth, lead out, produce.” Ibid.

This expression is followed by a direct object *עמי* translated, “My people” because of the presence of a first common singular pronominal suffix on the word *עם*. “My” is another pronoun referring to “God” referred to in the first part of the sentence as “I.” This is followed by a noun masculine plural construct and a proper noun *בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל* translated, “Children of Israel.” The last expression *מִמִּצְרַיִם* is a noun prefixed by a preposition and is translated, “From Egypt.” The LXX adds a noun before the word Egypt, *γῆς Αἰγύπτου*, to give the meaning “land of Egypt.” Perhaps to give the emphasis that the Hebrews is not only to be freed from slavery, but also to leave the land of Egypt entirely. Syntactical observations worthy noting are: the mission of Moses is spelled out clearly “to bring out God’s children out of Egypt,” the people belong to God, the action of bringing the people out is an imperative command of God to Moses, and there seems to be no other option available.

The entire text therefore can be rendered, “And come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and you will bring out my people, children of Israel, from Egypt.” The entire narrative of Israel’s freedom from Egyptian bondage presents God as the main actor of what seemingly Moses does before Pharaoh (10 plagues, Exod 7-12). Moses is involved in a “fight for freedom” for the Hebrews in response to a divine command. He might seem to be a political figure who fought to free the Hebrews from oppression, exploitation, and inequality by the Egyptian task masters. It must be noted, however, that he made about four objections to avoid a divine command to become the deliverer of the Hebrews. Those to be liberated are not anybody’s property but God’s children. God specifically directed Moses to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. He went to fulfill a divine task with nothing but a rod in his hand (Exod 4:2-4). When one thinks of Moses as a political figure, he might have appeared to be one who advocated, performed miracles, and won freedom for the people. However, he was not a party politician for the textual evidence seems to deny that possibility. He did what God sent him to do, following repeated refusal to do so. God performed the miracles and delivered His people.

3.5. Daniel as a High Profile Political Figure

Three narratives will be considered to establish the life of Daniel as a high-profile political figure. We shall limit our consideration to the narratives found in Dan 2, 5, and 6. Each case is unique but intertextually connected. In Dan 2, the narrative progresses. First, Daniel and his friends

find themselves as slaves who had been brought from Judah in 605 by king Nebuchadnezzar. Second, there is a crisis. Nebuchadnezzar has a dream that all the wise men of Babylon have failed to make known and explain, so they are condemned to die (Dan 2:12). Third, the crisis gets a solution when Daniel explains the dream after praying to God with his friends (2:18-45). Fourth, the king appoints Daniel along with his friends to high-profile political positions, *עַל כָּל-מְדִינַת בָּבֶל* (2:48-49). Fifth, though they are high-profile figures they do not compromise their religion (chaps. 3, 6).

In Dan 5, the narrative is as follows: first, the scenario concerns the same figure who is an exile from Judah living in Babylon. Nothing has changed. Second, there is an alcoholic-Belshazzar-and-a-writing-on-the-wall crisis (5: 5-9). Third, the wise men of Babylon fail to solve the crisis (5:8). Fourth, Daniel solves the crisis (5:17-28). Fifth, King Belshazzar appoints Daniel to be the third political ruler (5:29). Sixth, King Belshazzar is killed (5:30).

In Dan 6, the narrative presents itself differently. First, Daniel is still an exile from Judah who is a former political figure of the now deposed Babylonian empire. Second, rather than a crisis as in the previous narratives, there is a need for high-profile political leadership in the new kingdom (6:1). Third, Daniel is appointed as first among the top three because he had an excellent spirit (6:3). Fourth, Daniel's unwavering commitment to God is known by all others (6:4-5). Daniel becomes a target of political jealousies and evil plots (6:4-5, 6-9). Daniel obeys God rather than man. He is willing to sacrifice his political position and life than sin against God, so he continues with his prayers (6:10-11). He suffers the consequences of his loyalty to God in the hands of party politicians (6:11-7). The monarch is a self-centered man who values his political position more than doing the right thing (6:14-15). God delivers Daniel from the lions (6:21-23).

3.6. Intertextuality of the Narratives

There seems to be a thread of a commonality of aspects for all the three characters; Joseph, Moses, and Daniel. Suffice to note that they lived in different periods under different empires or dynasties for Joseph and Moses' cases. First, each case has a character who is socially disadvantaged and finds himself being part of a solution to a crisis. Second, there is appointment by a higher authority to a position of political influence or significance. God is historically active in all cases

through His miraculous interventions. The characters have clear values and identity—they worship God. Their mission while in position of influence seems to live a life that leads earthly party political monarchs to acknowledge the supremacy of God. They choose loyalty to Him rather than have political correctness and all its advantages. There is no textual evidence for their party politics involvement to rise to political heights or to retain their positions. In all cases except Moses, the appointment is from the highest authority of the kingdom. Moses comes as an external appointee of God to confront an earthly kingdoms’ oppression, exploitation, and inequality over the people of God. Rather than an army to back up his liberation agenda, he carries a “rod” as directed by God.

1. Pharaoh’s dream is a crisis. Joseph solves the crisis and Pharaoh appoints Joseph.
2. God hears Israelites’ suffering crisis. God’s plan solves the crisis and He appoints Moses to deliver Israel.
3. Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is a crisis. Daniel solves the crisis, and he is appointed to a political position.
4. The writing on the wall against Beltshazzar is a crisis. Daniel solves the crisis. Beltshazzar appoints Daniel third ruler.
5. Darius’ legislature to be worshipped is a crisis. Daniel defies the new law and suffers the consequences, and he is kept in his political position.

The following table will help give clarity.

	Joseph (Gen 35-41)	Moses (Exod 2)	Daniel Case 1 (Dan 2)	Daniel Case 2 (Dan 5)	Daniel Case 3 (Dan 6)
Period	MBA, Around 1733 BC	LBA	Iron Age II	Iron Age II	Iron Age II 6 th century
Background	Prisoner	Fugitive in Median	Exile	Exile	Exile/Form er political figure
Crisis/Need	King’s dreams	Slavery of Israelites	King’s Dream	Writing on the wall	1. Political position 2. Darius, object of worship
Appointing	Egypt Pharaoh	Heaven God	Babylon King	Babylon King	Medes/Pers ian

Authority			Nebuchadnezzar	Beltshazzar	King Darius
Position of Appointment	Second Ruler	Liberator	Governor	Third Ruler	1.First among three 2.Retains position
Identity	Spirit-filled	God's Servant	Spirit-filled	Spirit-filled	Spirit-filled
Duties	Food Storage	Deliver God's children	Sate Provincial affairs	State affairs	State affairs

4. Party Politics: Seventh-day Adventist Identity and Mission

Based on the biblical-theological consideration that has been undertaken, there seems to be a few elements worth noting. Considering that the church has a unique identity and has a divine mission to accomplish, involvement in party politics cannot be ignored. The government of the day in African States is also the ruling party. The ruling party does not exist outside party politicking as explored in this paper. This makes it another herculean task to write about, discuss, or define African party politics with a clear delineable distinction that separates party politics from the government. Politics in Africa today means, among other things, party-policking. It can be noted, therefore, that;

1. God is involved in the political history of nations as shown in the local political historical narratives (Dan 3, 5, 6) and outline prophesies of Daniel 2, 7, 8, and 11⁶⁸ that end with a cosmic Second Coming divine judgment.⁶⁹
2. God is not dependent upon party politics and, therefore, is above it in the course of determining the political destiny of nations (Dan 1:1-2).

⁶⁸William Shea, *Daniel 1-7*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier (Ontario, Canada: Pacific Press, 1996), 35.

⁶⁹On the Second Coming as part of divine judgment read Jiri Moskala, "Toward a Biblical Theology of Judgment: A Celebration of the Cross in the Seven Phases of Divine Universal Judgment—An Overview of a Theocentric- Christocentric Approach," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 1 (2004): 138-162.

3. Victims of all forms of oppression, exploitation, and inequalities are God's property and for whom He is jealousy (Exod 3:10). All forms of party politics must acknowledge God's ownership of all humans.
4. God is not naïve about the political victims of OEI, and those who seek to collaborate with Him must do so on His terms enshrined in the Decalogue (Exod 20:1-17)—a transcript of both His nature and character.
5. Christians who assume political positions in African political systems must do so without party politicking and must remain loyal to God in their private (Gen 39: 7-19) and public lives (Dan 3, 6) even if it will cost them their political positions or life.
6. The unique identity of God's people, distinguished by the presence of God the Holy Spirit in their lives (Gen 41:39-39; Dan 6:3), is a key element that earns the respect of political powers and advances God's mission for His church. Party politics does not foster neither.
7. African Church leaders have a responsibility to avoid double standards in matters of involvement in ecclesiastical and public party politics.⁷⁰ Administrators or frontline workers need not repeat the ills of colonial missionaries by maintaining Bible-based ethical principles that are key to accomplishing mission.
8. Appointment to a political position must be considered prayerfully and not perceived as an opportunity for personal gain.
9. The Bible characters; Joseph, Moses, and Daniel and his friends did not belong to a political party or got involved in party politics prior to their rise to political positions. Their example gives timeless biblical principles applicable to all those who are confronted by a choice to assume a political position inclusive of the African volatile party political practices in the contemporary context.

5. Conclusion

As the church seeks to advance its mission in the 21st century, it can be concluded that party politics in the African context is not the best path for a practicing Bible-based Christian. Those who are approached to assume

⁷⁰Innocent Gwizo, "African Worldview as a Hermeneutical Factor to African Christology: An Analysis and Appraisal" (MA Thesis, Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, 2009), 117.

political positions should prayerfully consider such requests, and should they accept the offer, they must give their unequivocal loyalty to God and to ethical biblical principles in the execution of their state duties. The principles underlying the words of Ellen G. White are most applicable to African party politics. "As the sons and daughters of God, we are to have nothing to do with political strife. Those who engage in these contests make Satan glad, for he knows that they will exhibit the natural attributes of unregenerate hearts,"⁷¹ and so "we cannot with safety take part in any political schemes."⁷² The church, through its workers and membership, ought to stay away from party politics involvement if it should maintain its identity and accomplish its God given mission in Africa.

⁷¹Ellen G. White, *Manuscript 75*, 1898, pp. 1, 3, 4, 9. "Come Out From Among Them, and Be Ye Separate," June 6, 1898. Washington, DC. March 19, 1979.

⁷²Ellen G White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Hagerstown, MI: Review & Herald, 1985), 475.