AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY OF JUDAISM AND ENVIRONMENT AS A PANACEA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The Israelite religion, Judaism is an integral part of culture that helps in shaping the understanding, morality, religious and cultural practices and values of the Ancient people of Israel in the Ancient Near East, the Palestine or Canaan Land where they were settled. Judaism teaches that the world is God's property, making human stewards responsible for protecting rather than exploiting natural resources. Its central tenets include *bal tashchit* (do not destroy/waste), honouring the land through rest (*shmita*) and preserving biodiversity. These principles encourage sustainability and environmental responsibilities. The religion also emphasize obedience to *Torah* (Laws) and the cultivation of good morality structured in invaluable ethical values and teachings replicated in their true sense of justice, righteousness, and fulfillment of religious duties to Yahweh and their love for humanity. Recent studies reveal that faithfulness to Judaism encourages tremendous reward of sustainable growth and development of economy, morality and national life. It also implies profound peace, tranquility, unity and progress in the environment. Similarly, African nations are opened to transformation if God's love and care for humanity and environment becomes their centre of governance. But the question is, "how many African leaders can selflessly make obedience to laws and the care for humanity and environment their goal without necessarily pursuing their personal interest during their tenure in office?" This is one of the questions that this article, using historical-critical and theological approaches is trying to address and the findings are obtained from the discussion ensued.

Keywords: Judaism, Environment, Morality, Africa and Development.

Introduction

The Israelites are important people of God in Ancient Israel. They maintained a particular culture, custom, tradition, practices and monotheistic religion. They live an exclusive and ascetic life. Their religion is Judaism. It involves the reading, interpretation and the keeping of the *Torah* (the laws of God), Gemera, Talmud, Mishna, Midrash, etc. They are the covenant people of God. They have an inter-relational union with God and their neighbor and that defines their duties to God and their fellow neighbors. Unterman (1991) says that, "the primary source of Jewish religion is the Hebrew Bible, consisting of 24 books divided up into three sections: *Torrah* (the Pentateuch), *Neviim* (the prophets) and *Kethuviim* (the writings or hagiographa). Next in importance to the Bible is the Babylonian *Talmud,* a collection of rabbinical traditions consisting the main teachings of the oral *Torah.* Palestinian *Talmud* and

Midrashic commentaries on the Bible, *Mishnah Torah*, etc." According to Hinson (1997), the Jews today accept 39 books as their scripture, though some are recorded together as a single scroll.

God promised to give the land of Canaan or Palestine in the Ancient Near East to their patriarch and future descendants on oath. So God guided them through their wilderness experiences until they arrived and settled in the Promised Land. Although many of them died in the wilderness because of the sins of disobedience, but God has never failed in keeping his promises by preserving the lineage of through their younger generation until they possess and occupy the land.

Coutts (1976) asserts that, "the geography of Palestine may be conveniently divided into six sections namely, a. the Coaster Plain, b. the Central Highlands, c. the Jordan Valley, d. the Easter Highlands, e. the Sea and f. the Desert." McCain (1996) in an attempt to describe the Ancient Near East infers that, "the Garden of Eden was located where four rivers came together (Genesis 2:10 – 14). This was in the area of Mesopotamia which was located to the North and East of Palestine and there was a fertile area running alongside the Euphrates River reaching to the North up into the area near the present Syria, not too far from Mediterranean Coast. Traders frequently took this rout and the term "Fertile Crescent" was coined to describe this area." So, the Canaan land in the Ancient Near East is a fertile land that was described on the map as the Fertile Crescent. This land is good for agriculture. It has seaports which were used for commercial and transportation purposes. The land eventually became the world center of attraction (tourism) that generates so much income for the maintenance of the kingdom. Hinson (1990) also noted that "the people living in Canaan reached a fairly high level of civilization. Their cities were well built and strongly fortified with some fine houses alongside the smaller dwelling places. Most cities had their overlord and their own small farming area nearby. Some of the city dwellers were people of authority and power, while others were their servants. Trade was carried on with Egypt and Mesopotamia and even with places as far away as the land we know as Greece." Other kingdoms constantly contend in battle to possess the land because of its values. They believe that if they can control this Canaan Land, then they would be able to control the world because traveling through the deserts and other Arabian countries was seen as a suicide mission. Asaju (2015) opines that, "of all the Jews in exile, those in Babylon retained more of the elements of their religion and culture and this was because of the religions and cultural freedom granted them by their leaders," while Judaism was greatly influenced by Hellenism, the Greek culture in other places.

The Israelites' duties are to obey all the Mosaic Laws given by God completely and be faithful to the worship of Yahweh. They must till and care for the land. They must avoid waste or destruction of the land and the land must be allowed to rest or fallow for at least a period of seven years according to the Law of Moses, so that the land can regain its nutrients and productivity. However, where there is a limited area available for agricultural purposes, then the farmers are advised to practice shift cultivation so that they can still maintain the same land for agricultural purposes over time and also avoid scarcity of food. Wright observed that, God had put Israel on an open stage. So if Israel would keep the laws God had given them, their national life would be so conspicuously righteous that other nations would notice and ask questions about their laws and their God, (Deut. 4:6 – 8). But on the other hand, if they fail to

do so and God kept his threat and acted in judgment upon his own people, destroying his own city, land and temple, then the nations would ask why such an incredible thing could have happened. The answer was ready in advance, (Deut. 29:22 – 28)." Similarly, our contemporary African leaders should also encourage, educate and enact laws on the usage of our land in the continent of Africa to enhance sustainable growth and development of our economy.

Methodology

The article adopts historical – critical and theological approaches in carrying out this research. Findings are obtained from the exegesis of Genesis 2:15 and the discourse that ensues.

Historical and Literary Context of Genesis 2:15

Genesis 2:15 describes a pre-agricultural, pre-rain world lacking human cultivation, setting the stage for man's creation and role in the Garden of Eden. It highlights that vegetation and growth require both divine action (rain) and human stewardship (tilling), highlighting the close relationship between humanity and the ground.

Historical/Cultural Context of Genesis 2:15

Genesis 2:15 was Written within an agricultural context. The verse emphasizes the essential need for rain and human labour (tilling) to bring forth food, highlighting a partnership between God and humanity. The text uses a specific, poetic style, emphasizing the lack of man to till the ground. It paints a picture of a good world waiting for human stewardship which was later disrupted in chapter 3.

Literary Context of Genesis 2:15

i. **Distinct Account:** Unlike the cosmic, formulaic approach of Genesis 1, Genesis 2:15 comes from a second, more narrative-focused creation account that concentrates on the intimate details of the Garden of Eden.
ii. **Contradiction of Nuance:** While some interpret this as a direct contradiction to the creation of plants in Genesis 1, it is often viewed as a specific focus on shrubs of the field and cultivated crops that need human care, rather than vegetation in general.
iii. **Key themes:** the verse focuses on the absence of cultivated plants rather than all vegetation.

Grammatical and Linguistic Analysis of Genesis 2:15

Genesis 2:15 serves as a fundamental verse detailing the purpose of humanity, often interpreted as the mandate for work and stewardship.

Linguistic Analysis of Key Hebrew Terms: The core meaning of the verse hinges on two key Hebrew verbs in the infinitive construct, denoting purpose or intention.

i. **Hd"Þb.['Âl*Avad***: Often translated as to work or till. This verb comes from the root, "to serve." It denotes service, labour or cultivation. In a theological context, it is closely related to priestly service and serving God, suggesting that human labour is intended to be an act of worship rather than merely economic activity.
ii. **Hr"(m.v'Âl*Shamar*:** Translated as to keep, to guard or to take care of. This verb means to watch over, protect or preserve. It implies guarding the garden from threat, suggesting a role of stewardship and responsibility.

Together, *avad* and *shamar* create a holistic picture of environmental stewardship: cultivating the earth while protecting its integrity,

Grammatical Structure and Context of Genesis 2:15

i. **Theological Action:** The verse starts with two waw-consecutive verbs (wayyiqtol) indicating sequential action, took (wayyiqqach) and put/set (wayyannichehu). This emphasizes God's active role in placing humanity in a design environment.
ii. **Purpose Infinitives:** the verb, to work and to keepare infinitive constructs with the preposition *le* meaning "to" or "for"). This structure clearly outlines the purpose for which the man was placed in the garden.
iii. **Pronoun Reference:** Both infinitive verbs, Hr"(m.v'Âl.ÂW Hd"Þb.['Âl end with a third person feminine suffix (-ah), which refers back to the garden (feminine in Hebrew), signifying the task is specific to that space.
iv. **The man and the Ground:** The text uses *ha adam* (the man) in relation to *gan-eden* (the garden) and *ha adamah* (the ground), highlighting a phonetic and theological connection between humanity and the earth.

Exegetical Study of Genesis 2:15

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (New International Version 'NIV', 1984)

!d<[eêÂ-!g:Âb. WhxeäNIY:Âw: ~d"_a'Âh'(Â-ta, ~yhiÞl{a/ hw"ïhy> xQ:±YIÂw:
`Hr"(m.v'Âl.ÂW Hd"Þb.['Âl.

The text made it clear that after God had created finished his creation activities, he put the man, Adam into the Garden of Eden, a very good, beautiful and conducive environment that he had created out of love for humanity and saddled him with a divine responsibility of working and taking care of it. Working the garden here means tilling, cultivating or putting it into agricultural use so that it can produce food in meeting his needs. Taking care of it could also be interpreted to mean guiding, guarding, protecting and watching over the garden against the attack of intruders. He must care for it to prevent it from deforestation, encroachment and bush-burning which could destroy the ecosystem and the biodiversity in the garden.

Similarly, African leaders are encouraged to educate their subjects to be protective of their environment, tilling it when necessary, avoiding waste and destruction of the environment and also allowing the land to at least fallow or rest for a period of seven years and they should also practice shift cultivation where land availability for agricultural purposes are limited so that they can record huge and quality sustainable growth and development of our economy in Africa and beyond.

Theological Evaluation of Genesis 2:15

Genesis 2:15 establishes that human work, stewardship and purpose are divine mandates initiated before the fall. Work is portrayed not as a burden or curse, but as a purposeful original blessing. The verse also affirms that work is a spiritual endeavour designed for developing both creation and human character.

The Relevance of the Study to Promote Sustainable Development in Africa

The study on the religion of Israel, Judaism and the land use acts of their environment is relevant to in enlightening the land use acts in the topic of Africa. Nowadays, people don't value land again as much in the past few decades. Often we experience bush burning that destroys the ecosystem and the biodiversity that dwell on the land. Toxic and harmful substances are often deposited in the water that also destroys biodiversity in the water. We often experience airborne diseases, cancer and the contamination of the atmospheric layer as a result of the release of carbon-monoxide, drinking and smoking of contaminated substances. In Africa, most people don't use experts to control oil spillage and sewages perhaps because of cost involvement but the implication is the adverse effect on our health.

It is unfortunate that the government in some of the times have failed in their roles and responsibilities in curbing the excesses of the people in the land use acts in Africa. Sad enough, some of the government and political officials enrich themselves by carrying substances that are very harmful to the health of the populace. Imagine the use of chemicals to in the river just to kill or catch fishes. The methods of preservation of the food substances through the use of chemicals also have their adverse effects on our health. Many innocent and ignorant people have been killed through food poisoning because of carelessness.

This study is saying that the contemporary African political leaders and religious organizations should learn a lot from Judaism, the religion of the Ancient people of Israel and the usage of their environment by ensuring that our land in Africa is properly managed in order to get in return, a desirable sustainable growth and development of our economy. The *Torah* taught against wastage and destruction of land. It also emphasized that the primary duty of man is to work or till the land and also care for it. Africans should avoid over usage of their land which has tremendous adverse effect in reducing the quality of agricultural produce. They should do this by allowing the land to rest or go fallow for a period of seven years as instructed in the Mosaic Law, but where there is scarcity of land for agricultural purposes, then shifting cultivation should be encouraged.

Conclusion

From the exploratory study of Judaism and environment, using the biblical passages of Genesis 2:15; Deuteronomy 20:19 – 20 and Leviticus 25:2 – 7 as references, we have been able to establish, according to Mosaic Laws that: God created man and put him in the garden for the purpose of working and caring for it in the same way that God brought the Ancient People of Israel to be settled in the Promised Land to also work and care for it. They were instructed to avoid wastage and destruction because God hates it and that they should also allow the land that they are using for agricultural purposes to rest for a period of seven years in order to retain its nutrients and improve productivity. Similarly, religious and political leaders in the tropic of Africa are called upon to arise and protect their land to avoid wastage, destruction, deforestation, desert encroaching and the killings of biodiversity both on the land and in the water. The land should be allowed to rest for about seven years but where there is scarcity of land, shifting cultivation should be encouraged. They are to practice the instructions of God through Moses, his servant so that they can have improved sustainable growth and development of their economy in Africa.

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