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Genesis 23 and African Burial Traditions: A Theological Reflection on Faith, Culture, and Death

Genèse 23 et les Traditions Funéraires Africaines : Une Réflexion Théologique sur la Foi, La Culture et la Mort

Julius Ndishua[1] and Felix Nfor[2]

Abstract

This article examines Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machelah in Genesis 23 and explores its implications for African Christian burial practices. Death is a defining moment in both biblical narrative and African worldview. In many African societies, burial is not merely a disposal of the body but a major cultural, spiritual, and communal event. This paper addresses the tension many African Christians face between traditional burial customs and biblical teaching. From an archaeological perspective and using a comparative theological approach, the paper analyses the significance of Machpelah as Abraham's first legal possession in the Promised Land and as an expression of covenant faith. The researchers argue that Genesis 23 provides a biblical framework for honoring the dead without resorting to ancestral veneration or syncretistic practices. The findings reveal that Abraham's actions model lawful engagement with local culture, faith in God's promises, and dignified burial practices rooted in hope. The paper recommends that the African Church can contextualise burial customs while maintaining biblical fidelity and a Christ-centred hope in the resurrection.

Key Words: Abraham, African church, burial practices, Machpelah, Genesis 23

Résumé

Cet article examine l'achat par Abraham de la caverne de Macpéla dans Genèse 23 et explore ses implications pour les pratiques funéraires chrétiennes africaines. La mort constitue un moment déterminant tant dans le récit biblique que dans la vision africaine du monde. Dans de nombreuses sociétés africaines, l'inhumation ne consiste pas simplement à disposer d'un corps, mais représente un événement culturel, spirituel et communautaire majeur. Cette étude aborde la tension à laquelle de nombreux chrétiens africains sont confrontés entre les coutumes funéraires traditionnelles et l'enseignement biblique. À partir d'une perspective archéologique et selon une approche théologique comparative, elle analyse la signification de Macpéla comme première possession légale d'Abraham en Terre promise et comme expression de sa foi en l'alliance. Les chercheurs soutiennent que Genèse 23 offre un cadre biblique permettant d'honorer les morts sans recourir à la vénération des ancêtres ni à des pratiques syncrétistes. Les résultats révèlent que les actions d'Abraham constituent un modèle d'interaction respectueuse et légitime avec la culture locale, de foi dans les promesses de Dieu et de pratiques funéraires dignes, enracinées dans l'espérance. L'article recommande que l'Église africaine contextualise les coutumes funéraires

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Mots-clés : Abraham, église Africaine, pratiques funéraires, Macpéla, Genèse 23

Introduction

Abraham's purchase of Machpelah, as narrated in Genesis 23, stands as an essential narrative in biblical tradition and affirms, through archaeological discoveries during the Patriarchal era such as the Nuzi and Mari tablets, the significance of burial practices and ancestral heritage in ancient Near Eastern times.[3] In some African cultures, burial customs are linked to thoughtful, spiritual, communal, and familial meanings that always serve as a liaison between the living and the departed. John Mbiti affirms that death is not death; it lives on in our memories and in the rituals we perform for the ancestors.[4] Mbiti emphasises the relationship between the living and the ancestors in African cultures, highlighting the spiritual and communal significance of burial customs. Christians in Africa today have often been faced with the critical dilemma in which burial rites that are traditionally machinated to ancestral veneration stand in opposition to biblical teachings on death, resurrection, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. That leaves many believers confused about how honouring the dead can be done without compromising the gospel. This paper examines the convergence between the burial practices of Abraham in Machpelah and the present cultural context of Africa, offering lessons that African Christians today can learn from them. Precisely, it explores the Bible account of Machpelah, contrasting it with African burial traditions, bringing out theological and pragmatic views in contextualising the context of faith and culture.

Historical and literary context of Genesis 23

Genesis 23 occupies a central place in the Patriarchal chronicles as the first account of Abraham's purchase of the land in Canaan, thereby bringing the divine promise into fulfilment. This chapter is a historical reflection on the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age Near Eastern customs concerning death and burial, as well as the transfer of property, specifically the negotiation protocols found in Hittite and Mari texts. Gordon J. Wenham avows that the setting at Hebron, known in the other sources as Kiriath-Arba, situates the event within a region that later becomes central to Judahite identity and Davidic history.[5] The detailed account of the purchase of the cave of Machpelah reveals the importance of legal witnesses and the nature of public transactions in ancient Semitic societies, in which land transactions were to be validated at the city gate. Literary investigation reveals that the account is structured around repeated dialogue and bargaining, which aim to legitimise Abraham's status as an alien resident who will eventually own the land. Gordon argues that the use of precise weights ("four hundred shekels of silver") and the naming of witnesses align with ancient Near Eastern legal documentation practices.[6] The theological implication of the burial of Sarah in the Promised Land pledges that God's covenant will definitely be fulfilled despite the patriarch's present foreign status. This chapter also provides a sharp contrast with surrounding Canaanite funeral practices and emphasises family tombs that eventually became sacred sites for succeeding patriarchs. Redaction critics affirm that this text preserves early

[3] Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible-A Socio-Literary Introduction* (London: Fortress Press, 1987), 170-171.

[4] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Press, 1970), 25.

[5] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Book,1994), 333.

[6] Gordon, 335.

tradition while feeding into the larger priestly concern for boundaries, genealogy, and sacred space.[7] One will therefore conclude that Genesis 23 reveals both historical facts about why Machpelah became the burial site for Abraham and his family and why Israel took ownership of the land.

Biblical Context of Machpelah

According to Genesis 23:19, Machpelah was a cave in Hebron with profound biblical significance because it was the burial site of the patriarchs and matriarchs, intricately associated with themes of family, promise and land. John H. Walton affirms that Machpelah was the burial place of the patriarchs and their wives, symbolising the fulfilment of God's promise of the land to Abraham's descendants.[8] Walton admits that Machpelah was a burial site for both the patriarchs and the matriarchs. Victor P. Hamilton opines that the purchase of the field and cave at Machpelah is a significant event in the life of Abraham, marking his first acquisition of land in Canaan. [9] Hamilton's affirmation points to Genesis 23, which tells of how Abraham bought the land in Machpelah after his wife, Sarah, died in Hebron. When that happened, Abraham negotiated for a burial plot, since he was a sojourner, and it was important for him to have a place of his own to conform to the people's burial customs. Gordon J. Wenham notes that Abraham's negotiation with the Hittites over the cave of Machpelah is a model of diplomatic skill and respect for local custom.[10] So Abraham secured the cave as a burial site, and according to Genesis 23:17-20, he paid 400 shekels for both the field and the cave. G Ch. Aalders affirms that the cave of Machpelah was to become the family grave, a place of rest for the patriarchs and their wives.[11] In light of the Genesis account, specifically Genesis 23:19, the first burial there is that of the matriarch, Sarah. It is still on this site where Abraham (Gen. 25:9-10), Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 35:27-29; 49:31), Jacob (Gen. 49:29-33), and Leah (Gen. 49:31) were buried.

This burial of both key patriarchs and matriarchs (Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah) in Machpelah reveals family or ancestral ties that symbolise continuity and emphasise the importance of ancestral worship. Wenham again affirms that the cave of Machpelah as a family burial site reinforces the bond between the generations of Abraham's family.[12] The lineage's continuity is revealed at this burial site. Aside from the family lineage seen, this purchase of Machpelah is also significant, as it tangibly links to God's promise to give this land to Abraham's future generation or descendants. Derek Kidner avows that Abraham's bargaining with the Hittites shows his shrewdness in securing the land as a possession for his descendants.[13] His emphasis is that the descendants of Abraham will inherit this land in the future. In the words of Bruce K. Waltke, Machpelah becomes the ancestral tomb, linking the patriarchs and emphasising the continuity of the covenant family.[14] Kenneth A. Matthew also attests to the truth that Abraham's purchase of the field in Machpelah points to God's covenant, noting that the purchase of Machpelah is a sign of Abraham's faith in God's promise that the land will be his descendants'

[7] Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlunger, *Goddesses,and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Mineapolis: Fotress Press, 1998), 214-216.

[8] John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,2001), 123.

[9] Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapter 18-50, New International Commentary on the Old Testamen*t (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 132.

[10] Gordon, 129.

[11] G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis: Bible Student's Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 243.

[12] Wenham, 131.

[13] Derek Kidner, *Genesis: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1967), 159.

[14] Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 279.

possession.[15] This burial site reveals the enduring nature of God's covenant with the patriarch Abraham and his descendants, emphasising the promise, inheritance and continuity. Allen P. Ross insists that the burial of the patriarchs in Machpelah underscores the permanence of God's covenant promises, linking the past with future generations.[16] Ross argues that this Machpelah, as a burial site for the patriarchs, served as a guarantor of its belonging to Abraham's descendants. Concurring with this assertion, F.F. Bruce opines that the cave of Machpelah became the family burial place, symbolising the sure promise of the land for Abraham's seed.[17] It signifies a physical link to the past and reiterates Israel's identity and its claims to the land. T. Desmond Alexander confirms that Machpelah anchors Israel's claim to the land, connecting them to their ancestors and to God's ancient promises.[18] In alliance with Alexander, J.G. McKinley contends that the purchase of Machpelah as a burial site linked Israel's past with their future claims to Canaan.[19] So, their point is more about the connection that Machpelah, as a burial site, gives to those who will inherit the land in the future. So, Abraham's purchase of Machpelah stands as a concrete tie to God's promise and covenant of the land to future generations, symbolising the enduring nature of God's covenant and reinforcing Israel's identity and its claims to the land. Through Machpelah, the ancestral burial site, Israel's connection to its past and prospective heritage is sure.

African Burial Practices

Burial practices in Africa are exceptionally diverse. The diversity of burial practices in Africa reflects the continent's vast cultural, ethnic, and religious tapestry. An in-depth look must consider cultural significance, rituals and customs, symbolisms and some regional examples. Burial practices in Africa have significant cultural significance, including ancestral veneration. Most African cultures accept that the dead continue to influence the living, which necessitates reverential burial and ongoing rituals. Mbiti asserts that in many African societies, the dead are believed to continue to play an active role in the lives of the living, necessitating rituals to maintain their influence and appease their spirits.[20] Mbiti adds that the ancestors' influence over death, stating that the living-dead are believed to remain members of their families and continue to exercise influence among their living kin.[21] Mbiti's view aligns with that of E. Bolaji Idowu, who also affirms that ancestors are believed to maintain an active interest in their descendants' affairs.[22] Their emphasis on the influence of the living-dead on the living from different parts of Africa shows that this belief runs through the African religious beliefs. Besides the significance noted above, burials in Africa also signify community involvement. It serves as a communal event and reinforces communal ties and collective grief. Katy Moran attests that funerals are significant events that reinforce community ties and provide a platform for collective mourning and support.[23] During funerals, people come together, underscoring the communal nature of the African world. It is important to note that funerals in Africa also reflect the deceased's social status, which is

[15] Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis: 11:27-50:26, New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 318.

[16] Allen. P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Press, 1998), 418.

[17] F.F. Bruce, *The New Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 1970), 89.

[18] T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promise Land* (Grand Rapids: Baker Press, 2002), 127.

[19] J. G. McKinley, "Machpelah, " in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday Press, 1991), 464.

[20] Mbiti, 8.

[21] John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1991), 83.

[22] E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1973), 184.

[23] Katy Moran, "Funeral and the Community," *African Studies Review 54 no. 2* (2011): 123.

determined by age, title, or achievement. J. S. Eades notes that in most African societies, funerals reflect the deceased's social status, with the scale and grandeur of the ceremony often indicating the person's standing in the community.[24] The point is that age, titles, and achievements play a significant role in burial practices in Africa.

Rituals and customs also characterise burial ceremonies in Africa. These rituals are based on the deceased's social status. Mbiti attest to this when he says that the rites and ceremonies associated with death and burial are among the most elaborate and meaningful in African traditional religion.[25] K. Opoku validates the practice of ritual in African burial when he affirms that African burial ceremonies are characterised by a complex array of rituals and customs, which serve to honour the deceased, facilitate their transition and reinforce community bonds.[26] These rituals may include the adornment of the deceased with specific clothing, jewellery, or status symbols. In some of these rituals, burial location is also involved, as grave sites sometimes vary in West Africa. In the North West Region of Cameroon, the burial sites of fons and sub-chiefs are known to only a few people within the sacred *ngumba* cults. These same rituals and customs also involve funeral ceremonies that range from day-long events with music, dances, and feasting. Post-burial rituals are also among the customs, such as periodic ceremonies, that honour the dead and ensure a smooth transition into the afterlife.

Also, among the African burial practices, there is the aspect of symbols. Symbols play a significant role in African burial practices. Idowu again notes that symbols play a crucial role in African burial practices, conveying meaning and significance that transcend verbal expression.[27] In agreement with Idowu, Mbiti argues that symbols and symbolic actions are integral to African burial rites, often representing concepts such as life, death, and the afterlife.[28] Some actions have multiple meanings, such as orientation and positioning. Some African cultures believe that burial positions, such as facing a specific direction, have spiritual significance. Opoku affirms that the direction in which the body is laid to rest often carries spiritual significance, reflecting beliefs about the afterlife and the deceased's journey.[29]

Kofi Asante of Ghana reports that among the Akan people, the deceased is often buried in a seated position, facing the rising sun, symbolising a new dawn and the expectation of resurrection.[30] On the other hand, Rowland Abiodun also notes that the Yoruba bury their dead with specific orientations, often facing the Ife, the sacred ancestral home, to facilitate the deceased's journey to the afterlife.[31] Bethwell Ogot reports that, among the Luo people of Kenya, it is customary to bury the dead in a sitting position, facing Lake Victoria, a site of great cultural and spiritual significance.[32] Sally Falk Moore concurs with the foregoing and adds that the Chagga people of Tanzania position the deceased's body to face Mount Kilimanjaro, a revered symbol of spiritual connection and ancestral heritage.[33] Axel-Ivar Berglund affirms that in some South

[24] J. S. Eades, "Funerals and Social Change in Ghana," *African Affairs* 91, no. 363 (1992): 261–277.

[25] Mbiti, 119.

[26] K. Opoku, "Death and Immortality in African Religion," *African Culture:The Past and Present* (1985): 123.

[27] Idowu, 189.

[28] Mbiti, 121.

[29] Opoku, 126.

[30] Kofi Asante, *The Akan People* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1995), 87.

[31] Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Culture* (Ibadan: Bookcraft Press, 2014), 145.

[32] Bethwell Ogot, *The Luo* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967), 125.

[33] Sally Falk Moore, *Social Facts and Fabrications: "Customary" Law on Kilimanjaro, 1880-1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 215.

African communities, the deceased is buried in a fetal position, facing east, symbolising rebirth and connection to ancestors.[34] David Lan adds that the Shona bury their dead on family land, with specific orientations that reflect ancestral ties and spiritual connections.[35] These examples from across African cultures reveal how burial practices reflect cultural, spiritual, and geographical contexts. It is safe to conclude that these burial practices emphasise universal themes such as rebirth, ancestral connections, and a spiritual journey.

From the foregoing analysis, there is a difference between the biblical promise and the ancestral veneration. The biblical promise focuses on God's covenant with individuals or communities, emphasising faith, salvation, and a direct relationship with God, as in the Abrahamic Covenant in Christianity. Ancestral veneration, on the other hand, emphasises honour and connection with ancestors, seeking their guidance or blessing, which is common in African cultures. That reveals two distinct approaches to spirituality and life after death.

Lessons for African Christians

The purchase of Machpelah and the burial of Sarah underscore the importance of honouring one's ancestors and cultural inheritance. The Church in Africa has always faced the self-evident truth that reconciling its faith with certain traditional practices is necessary. It is important to note that there are key considerations that, if taken into account, will serve as a lesson for the Church in Africa in better living out its faith. These include the need to be contextual, to have respect for heritage, and to learn to dialogue and be discerning. Knowing where Christianity can be interwoven with African cultures is important. Contextualisation involves Christians learning to integrate their beliefs with cultural practices, making faith more relatable and relevant to African cultures. Like Lamin Sanneh rightly notes, the Gospel is not meant to destroy cultures but to transform them from within.[36] Sanneh emphasises the need to contextualise faith within local cultures, without compromising faith. Sanneh's view is an uncompromised truth, but only when contextualising faith does not contradict the Bible.

Another lesson African Christians should learn is to respect heritage. Mbiti again avows that in Africa, the individual is because of the community, and the community is because of the individual.[37] His emphasis is on the communal nature of African societies. Desmond Tutu adds that to be human is to belong to the whole community and to participate in its life.[38] Tutu highlights the relatedness of individuals and the African community. In African cultures, traditional values such as communalism, respect for elders, and honour for ancestors are integral to their beliefs. Christians in Africa can find a way to appreciate these values while still maintaining their faith.

Again, Christians in Africa should learn to engage in dialogue and discernment. African Christianity should engage critically with African cultural practices and seek to harmonise faith and cultural identity without compromising the core of the Christian faith. Kwame Bediako affirms that Christianity in Africa is not a foreign implant but a fulfilment of the deep-seated traditional

[34] Axel-Ivar Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1989), 185.

[35] David Lan, *Gains and Losses: A Story of Zimbabwean Shona Society* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985), 47.

[36] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on the Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 29.

[37] Mbiti, 108.

[38] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (London: Rider Press, 1999), 35.

aspirations.[39] His emphasis is that African heritage is seen as preparation for the Gospel. That means understanding the cultural context, identifying potential conflicts, and exploring authentic ways to live out faith.

Another lesson evident is that God's promises are also tied to concrete symbols. The field of Machpelah serves more as a concrete symbol of the promise to Abraham, which illustrates that physical symbols can anchor faith and identity.

Conclusion

Genesis 23 demonstrates that burial is not merely a cultural activity, but a theological act rooted in covenant faith. Abraham's purchase of Machpelah was an expression of confidence in God's promise despite his status as a stranger in the land. For the African Church, this narrative provides a framework for honouring the dead while rejecting practices that compromise biblical faith. Christian burial should reflect dignity, communal solidarity, and power. Thus, Genesis 23 offers a model for contextualised burial practices that are both culturally meaningful and theologically faithful.

[39] Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 432.

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