

Conflict over Water in Genesis 26:12-33: Implications for the Church in Sub-Sahara African Relation to Support for the Millennium Development Goals.

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Abstract

This paper sees a similarity between the promise to provide a better life to Abraham's descendants and the promise of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to address the challenges facing the world. Drawing from the patriarchal experiences in Biblical times with water scarcity situations and the attendant conflict potential, this paper surveys welfare issues connected with water scarcity in the Old Testament with parallels in Africa. Although water is the most abundant resource on earth, its diminishing state in usable form poses a continuous challenge to large populations in the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, exposing those affected to certain vulnerabilities. The paper argues that a careful examination of the Millennium Development Goals shows the strategic importance of water in achieving them in varying capacities. Specifically, water is needed to reduce poverty, reduce hunger, achieve food security (Goal 1), and to achieve environmental sustainability (Goal 7). The paper submits that the Church in Africa must contribute to the achievement of the MDGs, failure of which will jeopardize the realization of the goals and by extension affect the ministry of the Church negatively.

Keywords: Water Scarcity, Conflict, Church, sub-Sahara Africa, Millennium Development Goals.

1. Introduction

At the turn of the millennium in the year 2000, the United Nations convened the Millennium Summit and pledged to achieve eight specific goals for the world by the year 2015. The nations of the world then committed themselves to: 1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2) achieve universal primary education; 3) promote gender equality and empower women; 4) reduce child mortality; 5) improve maternal health; 6) reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; 7) ensure environmental sustainability; 8) and develop a global partnership for development. A careful examination of the Millennium Development Goals MDGs will show the strategic importance of water in achieving them in varying capacities. Specifically, water is needed to reduce poverty and achieve food security which will reduce hunger (Goal 1). Adequate water is also needed to achieve environmental sustainability (Goal 7). In the opening scene of Mazrui's (1986) documentary, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, the following statement is recorded: "In the beginning was water, and the water was of God, and the water was God." This expression underscores a principle that water was, and still is an important element in the creation of the world and its sustenance. Human activity on earth enhanced by the presence of water and a dignified human existence is threatened when there is a lack of sufficient quantity of it. Could this provide a hint on why there was so much contention over access to water between the patriarchal figures with their host communities in the Biblical account of Genesis 26:12-33? In what ways can parallels be found with the situation in contemporary sub-Sahara Africa? Are the threats diminishing or increasing? What effects will water scarcity and conflict over it have on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in Africa? How can the church in Africa help the situation? This paper attempts to find an explanation to these questions and address the challenges that must be met in order to enhance access to water in sub-Sahara Africa. To achieve this, the paper is presented in five parts. The first serves as the introduction. The second part discusses instances of water scarcity in the Biblical times and how the people responded to it. The third part carries out an exegesis of the passage Genesis 26:12-33 in relation to conflict relationships over water scarcity. The fourth part identifies certain conflict situations over water scarcity in Africa. The fifth part discourses the MDGs as a promise to the World, the fifth part highlights the role the church in Africa needs to play in helping to achieve the MDGs and reduce conflict. The sixth and last part forms the conclusion.

2. Water Scarcity in Patriarchal Times

Water, is one of the most important and necessary elements in the physical universe. The earliest account of the nature of the earth in the Bible reveals that water was the first thing the earth was made of (Gen.1:1). From the biblical view, water was planned to play a central role for life and activity on earth thus the creation of the earth out of water. In the first human dwelling place in the Garden of Eden, a river flowed out of it to water earth and became the source of other great surface rivers that made water available in usable form in the earth (Gen 2:10).

2.1 Abraham Faces Water Scarcity

The first mention of water scarcity situation in the Bible was when the Patriarch Abraham experienced a severe famine that occurred in Canaan, the land which God promised him. That led to his first sojourn into Egypt which was watered by the Nile. Water was definitely a major part of the livestock support. After leaving Egypt, scarcity of grazing land, directly related to inadequate water resources, caused skirmishes between Abraham's and Lot's herdsmen which was settled by their separating after Lot chose the well-watered plains of the Jordan (Genesis 12: 10,11: 13:5-11). In Genesis 21:22-34, water rights was a major reason for a covenantal relationship between Abimelech, Philistine King of Gerar and Abraham.

2.2 The Children of Israel Face Water Scarcity

In the first place, it was a water scarcity situation, a famine, which made the children of Israel to migrate from Canaan to Egypt where there was an abundance of grain. Years later when they left Egypt, they travelled to Canaan through the wilderness. On several occasions they were overcome by thirst because there was no water. The importance of water rights is further underscored when Israel needed to ask permission to pass through Edom's territory (Deut 5:5-6), promising not to drink from Edom's wells (Num 20:17). The same privilege was sought from Sihon, king of Heshbon (Num 21:21-22). In the life of the Israelites water became critical for their settlements. People settled where a source of water was available for a sustainable period. Shortages of water, inadequate access and inequitable allocation of water are usually described as "crisis" situations (Brown, 2001 pp 17-22; Gleick, 1993 pp 79-112). According to Nwaogazie (2006, pp 3-4), "...man's encounter with abundance, scarcity, poor quality and reticulation of water had been a recurring phenomenon since the creation of the world." Water shall feature prominently in the final restoration of the earth. (Rev 22:1-2; 17). The emphasis cannot be clearer.

3. Exegesis of Genesis 26:12-33

The following is a study of the selected portion of study which examines specific encounters that ensued while dealing with water scarcity. Isaac was at the center of it as he contended with his neighbors over rights to water sources.

3.1 General Background

This analysis takes the scriptural text at face value, an approach that is close to the Canonical approach to scripture stipulated by Childs (1995 pp 293-301) where the final form of the canon is accepted "as is." The literary and structural unity of the Pentateuch as a whole and of Genesis in particular, is accepted in the consideration of this text (Archer, 1985 pp 89-189; Clines, 1997 p 7; and Garret 1991, pp.51-54). The patriarchs were real people who lived and moved in the early second millennium BC (Mendenhall, 1965, pp. 36-37). Some have suggested that Gen 26:1-33 functions as a "flashback" on the story of Gen 12:10-20 and 21:22-34 (Nichol, 1996, pp 330-338). The structure of Gen 26:1-33 could be built around how Yahweh made certain promises to Isaac (verses 2-5, 24). These promises are not easily fulfilled as they are followed by threats which then get resolved. Genesis 26:2-5 promises the blessings of land, progeny, and the blessing of the nations, made to Isaac (Nichol, 1996, p. 339).

3.2 The Identity of the Source of Conflict

The source of water that brought about conflict in this Isaac story is *b'ēr*. It is a feminine noun which occurs with the meaning "well, pit, natural spring" thirty-eight (38) times in the OT (Even-Shoshan, 1997, p. 146). It is suggested to be a possible derivative from the verb *bā'ar* meaning "declare, make plain," though connection is uncertain (Lewis, 1980, p.87). "This verb occurs only in the Piel stem. It describes writing on tablets of stone that is made clear and distinct (Deut 27:8) or some writing upon tablets which is legible at a hurried glance (Hab 2:2)" (Lewis, 1980, p. 87). This noun *bā'ar* is related as cognates and likely co-derivatives with masculine nouns *bō'r* and *bōr* both referring to "cistern, pit, well" even though they are often dug in rock for storing water in the rainy season for use in the long dry seasons characteristic of the dry climate of Palestine. A flowing well was called "living water" or "fresh water." A dug well could be protected with a stone covering (Gen 29:2ff); and could become a hiding place (2 Sam 17:18-21 *b'ēr*. also refers to slime or bitumen pit (Gen 14:10) and the pit as a place of destruction (Psalm 55:23, 24; 69:15,16).

3.3 The Location of the Water Sources

At least four geographical locations got their names based on the presence of wells *b'ēr*. The first is a yet unidentified particular site between Kadesh and Bered in Gen 16:14- *b'ēr laHayrō'i* called "Beer-lahai-roi" meaning "well of the Living One who sees me!" The place takes its name from the encounter of Hagar with the Angel of the Lord when she ran away from her mistress, exclaiming "You are the God who sees" (Gen 16:13). Isaac was located there later (Gen 25:11). The second spot with a derivative name from *b'ar* "well" is *b'ēr šebā'*. The two other place names from *b'ēr* are "Beer," an oasis rest in desert during the Exodus, a city west of Hebron (Num 21:16) and *b'ēr elīm*, called Beer-elim, that is "well of God," a well in the south of Moab (Isa 15:8). Gerar and Beer-Sheba are the most important locations in Isaac's movement in this narrative. The other places

mentioned were mere “stopping places along the way between these two, except for a somewhat enigmatic reference to ‘the land’ and a brief reference to Egypt, both found at the beginning of the story (Nichol, 1996, p.353). Gerar was likely situated on the coastal plain, south of Gaza and some distance west of Beer-Sheba (Simons, 1959, pp. 217-218; Aharoni, 1956, pp. 24-36). When Isaac arrived at Beer-Sheba, he had returned to “the land” he had left at the beginning of the story.

Because pastoralism is an adaptation to environmental as well as political conditions the patriarchs were more pastoralists than sedentary people whose relations and “pattern of behavior were shaped by a marginal environment” (Matthews, 1986, p.119; Alon and Levy, 1983, pp. 105-107). The stories in Genesis 21 and 26 place great emphasis on continuity of water rights which are “of extreme importance to the pastoralist and held as a tribal right to be issued only to other members of the tribe or to sworn allies” (Pastner, 1971, pp. 285-288). Within the text of Gen 26:12-33, at least seven wells were referred to. The wells earlier dug by Abraham that Isaac renovated were at least two in number. Perhaps, in Matthews’ (1983, p. 119) opinion, these older wells did not contain enough water to meet the increased household, agricultural, and pastoral needs of Isaac. Five new wells were dug by Isaac’s servants and were called Esek, Sitnah, Rehoboth, Beersheba, and Shebah (Genesis 26: 19-33).

3.4 The Cause of the Conflict

Water conflict commences in Gen 26: 15, 18 when Abraham’s wells were sealed up by the Gerar Philistines. These wells are “plural” even though the context of Abraham’s story does not tell of the specific wells he built. In Gen 26:15 *wkolhab^oert* which means “for all of the well.” And the verb which describes the action of the Philistines is *waymal^oum* which means “they had filled them.” This verb begins with a w> [w] which is a particle conjunction, waw consecutive; and it is Piel imperfect 3rd person masculine plural from the root *ml^o* “to fill up.” This verb contains a 3rd person masculine plural suffix “them” which refers to the wells of Abraham which they stopped. In Gen 26:18, reference is made to plural wells dug by Abraham with the use of the noun common feminine plural construct *b^oerot*. Hence, there must be at least two wells dug by Abraham which the Philistines covered up! Matthews (1983, p.119) argues that the dispute with Isaac in Gen 26:20 were with the “herdsmen of Gerar” showing that they were located in the “grazing areas rather than near the village fields.” However, Isaac does both pastoral and agricultural farming according to Gen 26:12-14. He might have practiced some form of irrigation for his farming, an engagement “in an economically integrated situation” (Matthews, 1983, p.123, and Frick, 1977, p. 239). His prosperity and privileged status (Gen 26:11) earned jealousy and envy from the locals. Three different times, Isaac dug new wells which were seized by Gerar tribe as a way of proving and protecting “their previously held title to the land. These seizures had then ceased when Isaac’s group moved beyond the established boundaries of Abimelech’s sphere of influence” (Matthews, 1983, p.124). This reflects the importance of water for food, security, and economic welfare.

4. Conflict over Water in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest number of water-stressed countries of any region in the world (OECD, 2008). A report by the UNICEF (2012) shows that, well in advance of the 2015 deadline, some regions of the world like Latin America, the Caribbeans, Northern Africa, and large parts of Asia have met 90% or more of their target for access to water. However, only 61 per cent of the people in sub-Saharan Africa have access to improved water supply sources in comparison. It is quite discouraging furthermore, as the report reveals, that over 40 per cent of all people globally who lack access to drinking water live in sub-Saharan African countries, many of whom predominated in the list of the least developed countries and human development indicators. According to Edjang (2003:5), these countries are now singled out as being among the MDG’s worst performers. Sub-Sahara Africa is already plagued by decades of desertification. The challenges are worsening as the rains, areas suitable for growing food, and crop yields shrink. The situation of water scarcity would likely exacerbate other latent dissatisfactions that will trigger conflict.

Competition for access to scarce water resources has become a cause of regular conflict in many parts of Africa. Cases of such disputes have been recorded in different parts of Africa. This paper outlines a few selected cases that occurred since the 2000, the year that marks the beginning of the MDGs.

Table1. Conflicts over Water in Africa since the Millennium Declaration in Year 2000 up to 2012.

Year	Country	Nature of the Conflict
2012	Kenya	Violence and deaths occur in disputes over access to water in the poorest slums around Nairobi, Kenya.
2012	Sudan/South Sudan	Violence breaks out at water points in the Jamam refugee camp in South Sudan. It is reported that as many as 10 refugees die every day because of water shortages at refugee camps in South Sudan.
2012	Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt	Information is leaked about an alleged secret plan by Egypt to attack the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) under construction which would reduce flows into Egyptian territory.
2012	Mali, Burkina-Faso	Villagers from Mali and nomadic Fulani herders from Burkina Faso kill at least 30 people, after an earlier agreement to share water and pasture land was revoked.
2012	Mali/Mauritania	Protests and violence over water shortages occurred in the capital of Mauritania due to pressure on supplies by over 70,000 Malian refugees were seeking asylum in Mauritania.
2012	Somalia	Following a dispute over the ownership of new water wells between two clans in the Lower Jubba region of south Somalia, at least three people and some wounded.
2012	Uganda, Kenya	Violence ensued between Uganda and Kenya after Kenyan herdsmen cross the border seeking water and pasture.
2012	South Africa	Protesters in poor communities of Cape Town, South Africa riot over inadequate water and power.
2009	Ethiopia	Ethiopian Somalis attack over ownership of a new borehole being drilled on the disputed border between them. Some were killed.
2008	Nigeria	A protest over the price of water in Nyanya, Abuja, Nigeria resulted in violence, including the beating of water vendors.
2008	Kenya	Fighting over boreholes in drought-hit northern Kenya kills at least four people as competition for water grows.
2007	Burkina-Faso, Ghana, and Cote d'Ivoire	Declining rainfall has led to growing fights between animal herders and farmers with competing needs.
2006	Kenya	More than 20 people were killed in fighting in a violent dispute between Kikuyu farmers and Maasai herders over grazing and water. Maasai herdsmen accused a local Kikuyu politician of diverting a river to irrigate his farm.
2006	Ethiopia	At least 12 people died and over 20 were wounded in clashes over competition for water and pasture in the Somali border region.
2006	Ethiopia/Kenya	At least 40 people died in Kenya and Ethiopia in continuing clashes over water, livestock, and grazing land.
2004	South Africa	Poor delivery of water and sanitation services in Phumelela Township leads to several months of protests where some people were injured.
2004	Ethiopia	At least 250 people were killed and many more injured in clashes over water wells and pastoral lands as a result of a three year drought. Villagers call it the "War of the Well" and describe "well warlords, well widows, and well warriors."
2001	Kenya	At least 130 people are killed in a string of clashes between Pokomo farmers and Orma, semi-nomadic cattle herders over access to land and river water.
2000	Ethiopia	One man stabbed to death during fight over clean water during famine in Ethiopia
2000	Kenya	A clash between villagers and thirsty monkeys left eight apes dead and ten villagers wounded. The duel started after water tankers brought water to a drought-stricken area and monkeys desperate for water attacked the villagers.

The Pacific Institute (2012). Water Conflict Chronology List.<http://www.worldwater.org/conflict/list/>

5. The Promises of God and the Promise of the Millennium Development Goals

God's promises in the Bible are the pillars on which faith rests. Commitment to His promises is driven by his concern for the poor and vulnerable in the world. Faith communities like the church should be part of the realization of God's promises to humanity. The covenant God made with Abraham was based on a promise to provide a better life for him and his descendants in the future (see Gen 9:11; 12:1-3).

5.1 The Millennium Development Goals

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are an expression of the desire of the international community since the year 2000 to address the challenges facing the world. According to the United Nations (UN, 2000:11), the (MDGs) were articulated based on the values of the Millennium Declaration stated thus: "We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected. We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want." The MDGs, according to Ban Ki-Moon (2010), may be regarded as a promise by the international community to make the world a better place to live for everyone especially the poor and vulnerable. Failure to deliver that promise must not be an option because, "billions of people are looking to the international community to realize the great vision embodied in the Millennium Declaration. Let us keep that promise."

5.2 Implications for the Church

The church in Africa must be interested in the MDGs because firstly, God Himself is after the wellbeing of His creatures, a principle which the MDGs seem to subscribe to. Secondly, failure to achieve the MDGs will adversely affect the ministry of the church. When poverty, sickness, and conflict devastate the people, the church becomes threatened. Thirdly, when members spend more time looking for food and water, it affects timely attendance of worship programs and affects the quality of contributions made by them to meet the needs of others.

5.3 What Role the Church in sub-Sahara Africa Must Play

The church must recognize that she has a social responsibility to the communities within which she ministers and must work towards actualizing that mandate in very practical ways. In view of the aforementioned, we give the following recommendations for consideration to help in actualizing God's promise to their communities. We recommend thus:

- i. At the global and regional levels, the Church should not stand aloof but must identify and show keen interest in those programs of international and regional organizations such as the United Nations and the African Union which are tailored for the socio-economic wellbeing of the people so they can find areas of partnering with them for the good of the people.
- ii. The church may also serve as a pressure or advocacy group by calling the attention of the various governments to the plight of the people and encouraging them to carry out their responsibilities to the people whom they govern by allocating more resources into fighting poverty and hunger in their countries.
- iii. The church must provide succor to those who are already directly affected by water scarcity as they provide wells or boreholes in some of the affected communities, provision that will reduce their difficulties.
- iv. The church should provide immediate relief to those who have lost property, their means of livelihood, or have been displaced by conflicts over water.
- v. The church should put up a mechanism for peace-building in communities that are most susceptible to water scarcity and prone to conflict situations.
- vi. The church may court the goodwill of international humanitarian and welfare agencies so they can construct sustainable water projects and provide training in the judicious use of water for both domestic and agricultural purposes.
- vii. The church must teach members the importance of stewardship of the earth. Members should be encouraged to desist from pollution of water sources and the indiscriminate destruction of the vegetation, practices that may be harmful to the environment as they compromise the quantity and quality of water available for use.

With all these, one little bit after the other, one life at a time, the church will be a part of the realization of the Millennium Development Goals in sub-Sahara Africa by making water available and reducing conflict. By so doing, the church will make the world a better place to live in.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined the importance of water for the sustenance of life generally. Water has an important economic, health, agricultural, peace and security roles. The patriarchal stories helped to demonstrate the conflict that water scarcity engenders in various communities. Human security, food security, and economic

survival of Africa are tied to the availability of water for domestic and agricultural use. The eradication of poverty and developmental progress toward the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) depends on fair and equitable access to water. This paper calls for the church in Africa to join in practical ways the pursuit for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by supporting water provision initiatives. Adequate and safe water must be provided for all in order to ensure sufficient conditions for security, environmental sustainability, and the eradication of poverty.

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