

CHAPTER FIVE

ON BEING A NEIGHBOUR IN A NEIGHBOURHOOD: AN EXPOSITORY READING OF PASSAGES IN GENESIS AND LUKE

Jotham Maza Kangdim
Department of Religion and Philosophy
University of Jos, Nigeria

This chapter presents an exposition of related passages that depict the character of a neighbour in a neighbourhood in the books of Genesis and Luke, which describes our experience of Prof. Danny McCain in the Nigerian neighbourhood. I am indebted to Prof. McCain for many reasons, some of which are personal and essentially relational, which I perceive resulted due to God's eternal providence, since what I would mention shortly wouldn't have happened if God had not destined this man with a rare relational gift had not made his appearance and domiciled himself in the Department of Religious Studies. If not for the singular assistance we received from Skip (SEGOBE), through the good connections of Prof. McCain, the present level of the Ngas Bible Translation, would not have been achieved and for a whole year (2006-2007), I worked as a Research Fellow at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem through the good offices and personal contributions and involvement of Prof. McCain. I posed this question to him: After reviewing your engagements in society since arriving at the shores of Nigeria, they are by no means few, and they arose through the quest to render unqualified and demonstrable services through initiatives and a lifetime of creative works in the areas of academics, spirituality and philanthropy. These have resulted in achievements, which are legion. These are indeed monumental and breath-taking to say the least, but out of all these, which one do you think gives you a greater sense of accomplishment and satisfaction? His response was not only instant, and

simple but unambiguous. ‘Preaching’ he said, with a soft smile. I have seen in him the model of a preacher fitting the expectation and credentials of the apostle Paul. Prof. McCain is truly a Preacher of Righteousness for our time and season. In my mind, Prof. McCain can easily pass as a preacher *per excellence*.

Key words: Neighbour, neighbourhood, Abraham, Abimelech, Sarah, the Good Samaritan

Introduction

Over time I have had time to observe events around me and to carefully think through them. This contribution is coming as an outcome of my reflections and personal thoughts, and analysis of the happenings in our present day generation. In my estimation Nigeria is a nation, which is fast getting contaminated and rotting away in terms of the gradual, yet steady fall in moral and ethical standards. It is a fast decaying society, where its moral and spiritual conditions are spiralling dangerously to self-destruction. This is happening, despite the ever growing features of religiosity among the population. What is emerging as a dominant feature of the fabric of our society is that of self-centredness, which is paving way for greed, while greed is breeding enough germs to share among desperation, uncertainty and anxiety, which could lead to a gradual shrinking of the capacity of our self-worth and self-esteem. The end product if not halted is the imminent depreciation of our value system, which would leave our societies with the sense of emptiness.

To be sure, the state of greed and self-centredness in Nigeria has given rise to the current reign of injustice, wholesale corruption and impunity, by the powers that be. This has attained such an alarming and unimaginable level and magnitude to the extent that it is hardly possible to think of how many Nigerians really and truly understand and appreciate our togetherness and brotherliness. We seem to have lost the meaning of the critical fact that we are actually neighbours living within a neighbourhood.¹⁸⁴

The focus of this chapter is to present some thoughts on what it entails to be a Neighbour in a neighbourhood using some selected

¹⁸⁴ In order to avoid making redundant comments, we shall be utilizing the phrases ‘Neighbour and Neighbourhood interchangeably, and within context.

passages in both the Old and New Testaments (Gen. 4:1-11; 12:1-13; 20:1-16; Gen. 23: 3-20; Lk 10. 27-37). We seek to demonstrate that from the perspective of the Bible, there are two broad perspectives in the consideration of who the neighbour is, and the expectations regarding his role within the neighbourhood. While the Old Testament has a more generalised view of the neighbour, to mean the person who is closest to another person by physical presence and proximity to the extent they could relate to each other. The posture of the New Testament, through the enduring example of Jesus (the parable of the Good Samaritan – Lk 10:27-37) does not contradict this general understanding, but goes further to explain the fuller and ultimate meaning, to the effect that while nearness is important in neighbourhood considerations, it demands more. It is more of living within a neighbourhood that members recognize and accept their roles, to mean that they are in a functional relationship with each other. The neighbour looks within his neighbourhood and sensing that there is need for him to offer some kind of assistance, he, out of his volition, willingly steps in at the appropriate moment of the need of neighbour to offer such an assistance. It can be the other way round, the neighbour realizing that he has a need first explores possibilities within his neighbourhood for solutions.

In this chapter, my intention is to employ the selected texts, through the expository approach, for the spiritual uplifting of the general Christian public. We shall seek to achieve this through laying emphasize on the theme: *Neighbour in the Neighbourhood*. For the present we bemoan the fact that the nation, Nigeria having joined the other nations within the global village in the 21st century, has nothing much to show as a nation, whose members are flourishing among their pairs within the community of nations. This is simply because despite the orchestrated claims of our religiosity, issues of crime, nepotism, impunity, injustice and divisive tendencies currently reigned supreme in the body polity, to the extent that we no longer see why we exist together within the nation.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ By this we are simply referring to the public demonstration of unacceptable attitudes of and behaviours of the generality of the Nigerian populace, which is far less than commensurate and clearly contradictory to the religious credentials, which our public utterances seem to convey.

Issues of the blatant abuse of power by a clique, marginalization, corruption in high places, insecurity, the neglect of certain parts of the nation, absence of the rule of law appear to be on the rise. Evidence of this is the present clamour for restructuring of the Nigerian State, which is being conversed by different shades of opinion and from different quarters. It is a further pointer to the dysfunctional and fragile nature of the fabric of society, to the extent that we no longer see the corporate and oneness, which brought the founding fathers of the Nigerian State together, to agree to bring Nigeria into existence.¹⁸⁶

Thus, to describe the scene of Nigeria's plummeting and collapsing moral and ethical values is no easy task, not on account of the fact that they are not known, but essentially because they are legion, and incredibly ridiculous to recount in the space of this chapter, yet it is an issue of serious concern. It is not only a contradiction of the principles of Nigeria being the *assumed* watch dog of the neighbour and our neighbourhood, but the denial of the fact that as Africans we have a cultural heritage, which is meant to be the envy of the other continents. As a matter of fact, John S. Mbiti, re-echoed and exemplifies this unique African heritage when says: 'I am because we are and we are because I am'.¹⁸⁷ This is the true meaning of the principles of life and human existence. The proper place to expend life and the gifts that God provides continually is to expend them in forging active human relationships. To live in active relationships means to live serving as good neighbour to a brother in a community and neighbourhood setting.

¹⁸⁶ If one is opportune to view this site <https://www.naija.ng/tag/calls-for-restructuring-in-nigeria.html>, and indeed many others, one would be surprise as to the diversity of the views on restructuring Nigeria. One would equally be convinced beyond doubt concerning the enormity of our divisiveness, and the clear lack of any strong cord, which would continue hold this nation together for long. It is quite frightening. No wonder the Ooni of Ife summarized it by saying that 'Nigeria is sitting on a keg of gunpowder, (<https://www.naija.ng/...nigeria-sitting-a-keg-gunpowder-ooni-ife.html#1154262>).

¹⁸⁷ John S. Mbiti, *African Traditional Religion and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969).

Who is a Neighbour?

We wish to look at the neighbour not from an intellectual sense, but with the understanding of a neighbour within the practical and functional sense, which presents two senses. The first is the sense of a person living a place or location along with others. The other sense is to see an individual living not only in a sense of being in the position of proximity to others, but more to the extent, which someone existing within a circle of a living relationship (friendship), and could offer a kind of support, service or relief, or friendship to others when the need arises.¹⁸⁸ Thus a neighbour is one who lives within a neighbourhood with other neighbours.

The Making of Neighbours and Neighbourhoods: How does a neighbourhood come into being and why a neighbourhood? Since a neighbourhood consists of neighbours who come together to form a neighbourhood, a neighbourhood springs up because of the general understanding of the togetherness of human being. I wish to make a categorical statement that there are several ways in which neighbours and neighbourhoods come into being, this notwithstanding, in practice human beings belong together for the purposes of working together in order to meet needs of one another. Neighbours sacrifice their individuality for the general good of the neighbourhood, and willingly partner with other neighbours to actualize the needs and aspirations of the life in the neighbourhood.

Secondly, the composition of neighbours and neighbourhoods is through the amalgamation of individuals and groups. When individuals converge within a given space, and constitute themselves into a settlement, a neighbourhood springs up immediately. From these individual settlements, communities come into being. It is from these communities that villages, towns and cities are made. As communities and villages come into existence, certain forms of services naturally follow in response to the needs of the human beings who are found within it. As such, for a neighbourhood to become functional it must possess essentially certain developmental infrastructures and services. These infrastructural (social amenities) facilities and services include, schools, courts, hospitals, markets, roads, provision of good and secure

¹⁸⁸ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/neighbour>.

source of water supply. Others include of necessity, the availability of a good criminal justice system, financial institutions (banks), and other recreational facilities.¹⁸⁹

Understanding of Neighbour and Neighbourhood rom the Biblical Perspective

Having considered this form of societal existence from a general point of view, we shall now turn to look at the same issue from a slightly different angle, namely, the perspective of the Bible, which be extension flows into the context of Christianity.

An Insight into Eden - The First Biblical Neighbourhood (Gen. 4. 1-16): We would begin by peering through what took place at Eden the first Biblical neighbourhood. Eden came into existence after the creation (Gen. 4. 1-16). This neighbourhood was inhabited exclusively by the members of the first family. It consisted of a single family, the family of Adam. Members included, Adam and his wife Eve, and their first two children, Cain and Abel. Although it was the first family, and were therefore expected to set the pace and the tone for perfection, as their legacy would serve as the perfect example and the model of a goodly neighbourhood, it turned out that the opposite was the case, as life within this neighbourhood was not only dangerous, but ended in a fiasco, disappointment and a near disaster, even in the estimation of its initiator, God. This happened despite the fact that the children had viable and decent professions: Abel engaged himself in animal husbandry, while Cain was an agriculturalist.

The Bible described him as one who worked the soil (Gen. 4.2). We assume that his type of agriculture was the conventional type, nevertheless, this agricultural practice afforded him the opportunity to excel in his chosen profession. However, for reasons, which the Bible did not clearly say, his demonstration of stewardship was called to

¹⁸⁹ It is worthy to note that the absence and or the availability (as the case may be), of a police station, or courts, and the presence of other military and security outfits and personnel could be serious determining factors in the formulation and composition of neighbourhoods as well as determining the quality of neighbourhoods. They equally serve as indicators of the reasons for the attraction or otherwise of people to a particular environments and neighbourhoods.

question as his first act of worship was not accepted nor appreciated by God, being the one who provided them with the level playing ground to display integrity in service, within this neighbourhood.¹⁹⁰ We may say in all probability, that God being all knowing, was fully aware of the circumstances surrounding the motive and the deep thoughts behind the actions of these two brothers, Cain and Abel. We could further infer that Cain's offer was highly motivated by reasons, which border around greed and self-interest, hence God's lack of interest in his offering, but looked at that of Abel with favour, since his was with a purer motive. Either way, the resultant effect spelt disaster for the neighbours in the neighbourhood. That neighbourhood was visited by a tragedy, the first murder case in God's hither-to ordered and good creation. Adam and Eve lost Abel.

God's Expectations of a Neighbourhood: While it was within the confines of divine will to posit creation and to place humankind at its centre, being its benefactor and custodian, it was also original in his intention for the human being to live in it as neighbours in a community, which was not only to be peaceful, harmonious, but also secure. Each of the dwellers within the neighbourhood were to see themselves as members of the same family and fellowship. Under this arrangement, each person was assumed to be conducting himself with the sense of freedom to his wellbeing and with the dignity or his self-worth. A sense of belonging and oneness of purpose were also added variables of this neighbourhood. As a matter of course, each person was supposed to be enjoying and sharing from the comfort and support, which every person was willing and ready to offer and or receive, as the case may be. In short, within this knit neighbourhood, the occupants were fully aware that the provision of the care and welfare for each of them was their

¹⁹⁰ We must observe here that the writer of this portion of scripture has not demonstrated any clear reason, upon which we could base or justify God's preference for the offering made by Abel over that of Cain. Conservative scholarship sometimes think that Abel's gift was accepted because of God preference of blood (animal) sacrifice over grain sacrifice. We find this too weak an argument. This is because in the absence of any legislation over such matters at that time means that to draw a definitive conclusion over it is neither safe nor proper theologizing.

responsibility. This is implied in the question posed to him by God: “Where is Abel your brother?” And in the response of Cain, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:8-9). In my estimation, the instant response was more of an acceptance of guilt, in the sense that having committed the offence, he had a written script and was merely waiting for the question to be thrown, hence his putting up a frantic, but all the same, a feeble defence. It was therefore more of a response out of a guilty stricken conscience, as they were meant to be good neighbours, therefore keepers of the interests and welfare of each other.

Abraham becomes a Sojourner in the Neighbourhood of Gerar (Gen. 20: 1-22)

Abraham was a Hebrew, whom *Yahweh* first identified within the environment at Ur in Chaldea and placed ahead of his generation to be used and to serve as an inspiration to his generation, specifically and ultimately to all humanity in a world serially threatened by despair. This was the journey, which ignited the fire and set-off a chain of activities, which were to have far reaching implications. The recorded account in this chapter (Gen. 20) represents the singular decision of Abraham to shift his base and environment to a different location. The Bible remarks that this episode took place not long after ‘*these events.*’ Which events? This must be referring to the things recorded in chapters 18 and 19, in which a promise for a son to be born for Abraham directly through Sarah was communicated through the three strange visitors, (possibly some Angelic beings) (Gen. 18:10), and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah through the raining of Sulphur from heaven upon its inhabitants Genesis 19. Abraham in response to this, and probably for other reasons, as well, decided to shift his base and sojourned within the neighbourhood of Gerar.¹⁹¹ “From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar” (Gen. 20:1-2).

¹⁹¹ Bible commentators think that the movements of Abraham himself, an Aramean, fit neatly and beautifully with the tradition of the general movements of people of his day, and as confirmed by the wordings of Deuteronomy, *A wandering Aramean was my father* (Deut. 26:5).

As a result of Abraham's change environment, he set in motion a chain of related activities.¹⁹² It first resulted in the change of the status of Abraham. In his new environment he became a *sojourner*, or a visitor or a pilgrim in the first instance, all other implications came later.¹⁹³

The text identifies Gerar as a site within the region of the Negev. This places Gerar in a neighbourhood in the southern part of the country of Israel. It is located between Kadesh and Shu. Further information concerning the location of Gerar, indicates that it was also called Arabia Petraea.¹⁹⁴ At this time Petraea was under Abimelech,¹⁹⁵ the king of the Philistines, (Gen. 20:1, 3).

Abraham Moves to Gerar

Why did Abraham decided to quit his Canaanite location and to sojourn in the environment of Gerar among the Philistines? It is worth saying that the description of Abraham as a sojourners fits with the general description of his lifestyle. Before this incident the nature of Abraham's life could not be described as one who lived a sedentary form of life. To the contrary, a sedentary life was the complete opposite of Abraham life and pre-occupation. The Abraham narratives set him in the series of Patriarchs whose life experiences are preserved in the Pentateuchal

¹⁹² All translations agree that the drama started the series of activities, resulting to claims and counter claims took place when Abraham decided to quit residing in his old location to a new one. This is to be considered as a serious step in the life of the patriarch, because he was not moving temporarily with a possibility to return to the same spot at a later date. It was a decision, which has the understanding of permanency, therefore all its implications need to be considered.

¹⁹³ It is possible for someone to change an earlier intention from a temporary resident to a permanent one, depending on the conditions one finds within the neighbourhood.

¹⁹⁴ Gerar was one of the major cities of the Philistines. It is now called *Khirbet-el-Gerar*, i.e., the ruins of Gerar.

¹⁹⁵ The name Abimelech probably means '*father of a king*' or '*my father is king*'. It has been suggested that this name may have been a royal title rather than the personal name, since in the title of Ps 34, we find it applied to the king of Gath, elsewhere known by his personal name Achish (1 Sam. 27:2).

corpus.¹⁹⁶ The writer of the book of Genesis further links him with the tradition of migrations (Gen. 11-14), starting from Ur, the home of his ancestral heritage. Furthermore, the accounts of the patriarchs, especially fit authentically in the milieu of the second millennium, particularly the general features of the migrations of the people of the Ancient Near East (ANE), during the second half of the second millennium.¹⁹⁷ The Biblical text traces him as moving from his original home in Ur of Chaldea, in Mesopotamia to Haran. And from there he moved to several other locations before settling for a while in Canaan. But we must ask: why would this man whom we would later associate with a life of piety and holiness always be on the move? What was it that was driving him from one location to the other? The answer is not far-fetched. The Abraham narratives identify him as a pastoralist, or shepherding. This requires him to always be on the move as he tends his flocks. We therefore assume that he was doing so in search of an ideal environment, which would support this kind of life and profession, shepherding. This fits the description given him by Calvin's Complete Commentary.¹⁹⁸

Specific Clues: Although this was the general picture of the lifestyle of the man, was this the specific reason why he moved to Gerar? From the text itself, there is no singular reason, which clearly explains why the Patriarch Abraham¹⁹⁹ decided to move to a new environment.²⁰⁰ Since

¹⁹⁶ The Bible preserves three names as the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

¹⁹⁷ John Bright, *A History and Religion of Israel* (Philadelphia, 1981), WEB, 6th Aug., 2018.

¹⁹⁸ John Calvin, *Calvin's Complete Commentary on the Bible*, Kindle Edition, Vol. 1, Web, 7th Aug., 2018.

¹⁹⁹ The name Abraham has a shorter form Abram. In the holy writ, this variant is found only in the following passages (Gen. 11:26-17:4), while its extended version is the option found elsewhere in the OT, with the exception of 1 Chronicles 1:27 and Nehemiah 9:7. It is believed that the etymology of the word Abram may have been lost in the course of time, but its central sense, which perhaps means "the father is exalted" still remains. It is worthy to observe that the two names have the same root of the sense of fatherhood. Both names - Abraham and Abimelech were meant to symbolize fatherhood, which have an extended sense of care. It is the neighbour in the neighbourhood who needs care and who must also provide care.

the text is silent about it an avalanche of suggestions have flooded the discussions associated with the event, some of which are plausible, while some are inconceivable or not so rational. Below are some, which we have chronicled and put forward.

Anxiety over the Non-Fulfilment and Non-Attainment of a Lifetime Dream (highly speculative): This suggestion is coming on account of my background as an African. In this regard we wish to provide a fresh dimension and input to this on-going discussion. What could be on the mind of a man like Abraham, which could have been so strong a motivation for his departure, if he were an African, and if the event had taken place within an African setting?²⁰¹

We need to appreciate the fact that although Abraham was at that time not without a child, and therefore not completely without anyone to inherit his vast estate, he was still anxious and nursing the possibility that Sarah, his preferred and legitimate wife would achieve this for him. Within the context of the special invitation Abraham had received from God, (Gen. 12:3-4), even though Ishmael was there, his inability to own a child through Sarah was still a serious psychological trauma for him.²⁰² The tragedy was, for both of them, physical and psychological. Sarah was barren and age was not on her side. The same could be said regarding Abraham, who was already a desperate man, (Gen. 15; 16). The desperation of both of them was therefore understandable. Both felt the need to look elsewhere, at a fresh location, for some means of restoration through soliciting the assistance of medicine man elsewhere,

²⁰⁰ Silent though, it was recorded after the chain of events, which took place as recorded in Genesis 18-19.

²⁰¹ As an African, childlessness would have presented a strong motivation and encouragement.

²⁰² In the case in question, by the provisions of the customs and traditions of the land, at this material time, even though the child of the promise was yet to come, Abraham had full rights and privileges on Ishmael from Sarah's maid, Hagar, who was his legitimate son. He could look to him as the one to inherit his estate in case of any eventuality, especially if at the end of his sojourn on earth, no any other child came.

someone who could revive and restore Sarah's fertility? A shift of settlement to Gerar was yet an open possibility.²⁰³

Childlessness from Sarah could still be a great temptation for Abraham. Was this the result of punishment or chastisement from God?²⁰⁴ Many Africans could have attributed it to a misfortune caused by the casting of some spells on them, from the ancestral spirits or from the divinities, or the gods, for sins either of the couples themselves or those of the immediate or extended family.²⁰⁵

Another likely reason was that probably, Abraham did so in response to the demands of his profession, (cf., Gen. 13:5ff). Was the present location still inadequate to meet his needs? As a shepherd, he needed to look around his immediate and wider environment for the best available grazing grounds for his flocks. As we had maintained before, at an earlier date he left Canaan for Egypt, it was for reason of the crushing effects of the drought, which had engulfed the region of Canaan, "Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe" (Gen. 12:10-11).²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Among many traditional Africans if married couples remain childless for many years after their marriage, and if they were experiencing pre-mature deaths of their children it was never considered as normal. To the contrary, it was normal to attribute this to some inherited curse from one's ancestors, or from the schemes of demonic forces and agents who peddle bad omens and misfortunes on families.

²⁰⁴ Childlessness among couples in the Ancient Near East (ANE) was considered a curse from God. Cf., John Bright, *A History and Religion of Israel* (Philadelphia, 1981), WEB, 6th Aug., 2018.

²⁰⁵ It may well be that after the several consultations, and attempts to appease the perceived forces fail to produce or achieve the desired (positive) result, God may be approached immediately. If this also fail, they may still have a last resort, they may be advised to consider moving farther away from the immediate vicinity. Relocating to another part of the village or town is usually a ready option. Sometimes, such couples may even choose to migrate to another part country altogether.

²⁰⁶ Some scholars think that this may not necessarily have been a fresh incident, but may well have been a re-duplication of the episode earlier recorded in Genesis 12:11-12. As a matter of fact, this is the argument which higher critical scholarship, propounded under the influence of the thoughts of

A Threatening Draught? Since the general environment was prone to periodic draughts, it may well be that he had to move in the face of another impending draught. Plausible as this may be, it is still a weak argument. This is still based on the fact of the silence of the text on it. Surely the writer wouldn't have forgotten to provide a justifiable explanation to accompany important event such as this. It would amount to uncritical thinking on our part to assume that he was compelled to shift base from Canaan to the location in question, Gerar, due to similar reasons, which caused him to do so in the case of his movement to Egypt as mentioned in Genesis 12, therefore we need not press it too far.

This being the case, and since the reason why he moved is not stated clearly, given the type and nature of his lifestyle, Abraham was already exposed to, it was not totally strange that the narratives associated him with another migration. Abraham's new destination was Gerar.

Abraham's Sin and the Effect of Abraham's Actions: It is natural to expect that the decision of Abraham was to lead to other chain of events, with varying degree of consequences upon himself and others around him. It therefore needs our recollection to mention the fact that while this was happening our mind recalls the reasons, advanced by Abraham in his first attempted swap saga with the Pharaoh of Egypt (Gen. 12:10ff). On that previous occasion Abraham thought that on account of Sarah's beauty, the godless Pharaoh might kill him and snatch her. Would we then be right to think that Abraham was still nursing the same fears, and was therefore being influenced by the same thoughts? Let us consider this reason in its context and merit.

It is an undeniable fact that at this time Sarah's age was well beyond the range of ninety (90), yet probably carrying the pregnancy, which later produced Isaac. What would the beauty and attraction of a pregnant woman, whose years have gone beyond 90 be like? Could we still insist that Abraham still feared for his life on account of Sarah's beauty, as was the case when he attempted to trade her while sojourning in

Graf-wellhausen's hypothesis, as captured in his *Prolegomena*. This publication came in 1878, when Julius Wellhausen published his *Geschichte Israel*, Bd 1; his second edition was printed with the title, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, translated as *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, in 1883, WEB 9th Aug., 2018.

Egypt?²⁰⁷ Thus, while not dismissing it, we must insist that this need not be pressed further. Having said this, we must quickly return to our story and to review some opinions canvassed in connection with Abraham's movement to Gerar.

The Hostility in the Neighbourhood: One of such is the suggestion that Abraham was so deeply depressed and devastated by the events, which had taken place within his immediate neighbourhood, which he believed had negatively affected Lot his Nephew. He was therefore *living with the melancholy prospect of*²⁰⁸ the fact that two previously prosperous cities now lie in a heap of ruins, and the thought of the fate, uncertainty or catastrophe, which had befallen his nephew Lot and his family. With these thoughts, Abraham could hardly summon any courage, which would have served as an encouragement for him to contemplate continuous living there. Indeed Abraham did not imagine himself living with the possibility of continuing to dwell within the sight of this place was too difficult to fathom.²⁰⁹ If the immediate vicinity of Canaan, (Sodom and Gomorrah) spelt doom for him, then to a right thinking person, the most practical thing to do was to move very far away from that spot of evil, which he thought had swallowed up his nephew, Lot, the least, not discounting the possibility that he too could also fall victim of God's righteous wrath.

Whatever was the actual reason, we cannot say for sure, but one thing we are sure of was that Abraham was fleeing from a neighbourhood and an environment, which he perceived was no longer friendly, habitable and accommodating. His was probably not for a journey in search for good pasture land for his livestock, but his desire was to move into an environment, in which would be to him a safer haven. If Abraham was fleeing for a hostile neighbourhood for Gerar, did he find in Gerar a truly a place of refuge, and therefore a safer Neighbourhood? It would appear that the initial advantages, and potentials, which it possessed turned out not to be too different from the

²⁰⁷ If this was a strong possibility why is the text silent?

²⁰⁸ *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, PC Study Bible, Electronic Database. © 2006, Biblesoft Version 5.

²⁰⁹ *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, Electronic Database, 2006 Biblesoft.

unhospitable appearance of his original neighbourhood, the land of Canaan.

Initially Abraham found Gerar a good replacement or substitute for Canaan, but not for too long. But one nagging question in all these is, why was he easily accepted and accommodated? It is interesting to note that at both environments, Egypt and Gerar, he was given a good welcome, why? We shall look at this issue strictly within the context of his new environment at Gerar.

Abimelech wanted to Boast His Profile: Why did Abimelech easily fall into the cheap scheme and trap of Abraham? Some thoughts have been advanced, which tend to suggest that Abimelech saw in it a possibility, which he could cash in, so as to meet the aspiration of his vision and mission for the kingdom, and to also boast and bolster his personal image as the king to the Philistines.

This thought is championed by Adam Clarke, when he says that Abimelech's motive to take Sarah to become his wife may have been considerably inspired by both military and political considerations. Clarke insists that Abimelech was desirous to forge an alliance with Abraham, who was a man of considerable means. By this time the authentic testimonies of the personal accomplishments of Abraham, which are near legendary will have gone the rounds.²¹⁰

The domain of Abimelech was in all probability a relatively small kingdom, in which case, if he is able to strike a deal with a wealthy and powerful chieftain like Abraham, his reputation among his pairs would also rise considerably. Furthermore, if we go back to memory lane, we may quickly recall the encounter between Abraham and the four confederate Canaanite kings (Gen. 14:14ff).²¹¹ In the encounter, the alliance was roundly defeated by Abraham. These were the circumstances in which both Abraham and Abimelech found themselves. To Abimelech it was not just enough but sufficient grounds to establish "to his credit, and cause his friendship to be courted; and what more effectual means could Abimelech use in reference to this than the taking of- Sarah, who he understood was Abraham's sister, to be his concubine

²¹⁰ *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, Electronic Database 2006, Biblesoft.

²¹¹ The narrative (Gen14:14) shows that Abraham's harem was by no means small. He could marshal an army of 300 men at short notice.

or second wife, which in those times had no kind of disgrace attached to it?"²¹² For Abraham his life and estate would be secured. We think that at this point both of them thought it was a good deal.

Fallout from Abraham's Pretensions

To be sure, Abraham's decision for his swap saga, and the later response from Abimelech had a variety of implications on the morality and ethical standards of both Abraham and Abimelech. It is evident that it probably led to a near eclipse of truth and the installation of falsehood. In verse 2^b, Abraham said of Sarah, *She is my sister*. This phrase, *She is my sister* introduces a moral issue into the narrative. It represents another indication of the thought of negativism associated with Abraham, a man believed to be a witness and testimony of the model of faith. The text does not immediately present the reason behind Abraham's statement until we get to verse 11, where Abraham justified his position. Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place" (Gen. 20:11). This contains several implications, especially when viewed in conjunction with the reason behind it. While Abraham wanted to escape with his skin unhurt, he in turn exposed Sarah to the whims and caprices of a heathen nation, thought to possess no fear of God. Hence, he traded his convenience at the price of the welfare of his wife.²¹³

The first observation to make is that this was not the first time Abraham was swapping the position of his wife. It would be recalled that it was not the first time Abraham had sojourned in a foreign land and he was making the same decision. When confronted with a similar challenge earlier while in Egypt. As a result of the devastating draught in Canaan he had to move and take refuge under the protection of the Pharaoh. In an elaborate preparation and connivance with Sarah, Abraham had asked of Sarah to tell the Egyptians that she was his sister, so that his life would be spared.²¹⁴ This being the case, we may conclude

²¹² *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, Electronic Database, 2006, Biblesoft.

²¹³ F. B. Meyer, *Electronic Database*, 2006, Biblesoft.

²¹⁴ The full text of this premeditated crime of Abraham, with the tacit connivance and approval of Sarah is here presented: "Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife,

quickly that Abraham was treading within a familiar ground as a perpetual liar. The reasons why he was not reprimanded in his earlier at the early stage of his lying tendency is not clear.²¹⁵ We may assume that since he was given a part, rather than being seriously scolded and reprimanded gave him the feeling that somehow he had a license as well as a warrant to sin and to continue to live in sin, hence, his readiness to engage in yet another spiritually costly adventure.²¹⁶

From the text in question, we must accepted that his action amounted to sin, although this was not pointed clearly to him. Abraham's sin is a repeated sin. In Genesis 12:10ff he had deceived the Egyptian Pharaoh, claiming that Sarah was his sister and the consequences on Pharaoh were devastating. Pharaoh and his household were visited with serious diseases (Gen 12:17). Although the type of the sickness is not mentioned, it was serious enough for Pharaoh to feel its effect, hence his decision to hurriedly return Sarah back to Abraham.

Although this second time his sin was not recounted, we cannot close our eyes to the reality of his actions. At this second time Abraham cannot be passed as a first offender. We hasten to add that since he is committing this same sin twice, the second act must be considered to be much greater than the first. At the first act, he narrowly escaped, but this second time he must be charged with the sins of lying, negligence and presumption. All the same. Even at this second time Abraham was still counting on God's providence, he being a man who is in a covenant relationship with him. The Ngas would say that Abraham was behaving as a *dyem rit*, or a *dyem yil*, meaning that he was a son whom the gods have blessed. Among the Ngas, if the gods pronounce their blessing on

"I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake." (Gen 12:10-13).

²¹⁵ When in a dream, the sin of the Pharaoh of Egypt was told to him, he quickly returned Sarah back to Abraham, (Gen. 12:17-20).

²¹⁶ For someone to be truly free from the trapping influence and the scourge of sin, such a sin must be accepted, confessed and forgiveness sought. There is no indication in the text in question that Abraham realized his sin, much less confessing it. This may well have been a good reason why he could stage a similar claim.

someone, he remains blessed, and this blessing cannot be withdrawn, whatever his later actions. We are tempted to think along the same lines, that since Abraham had entered into this covenant relationship with God he presumed that he would not be found in the wrong, or that he cannot be held responsible for his actions.

Secondly, we must not escape charging Abraham with the sin of lack of trust and faith in God.²¹⁷ A point to note is that although Abraham was a giant of faith, the Bible reminds us that sin is inherent in all human beings (Jn 1:8). If no human being is without sin, then, even such a pillar of faith like Abraham was capable of committing sin, and it would be misleading to think that Abraham did not commit any sin after he entered into this covenant relationship with Yahweh. Abraham, however, relied on the forgiving nature of God.

This may well serve as a lesson for all humanity that is confronted with sin and its consequences. Grievous as Abraham's sin was, God looked upon him with favour, and did not hold him to account for it. He was forgiven and absolved, and was made the instrument, which God would deploy for Abimelech's salvation. He was to pray for Abimelech so that he would be fully restored (Gen. 20:7). This was based purely on God's mercy, grace and favour. The same applies to all believers and non-believers alike. Today, all sinful people can approach the throne of grace and be absolved from the penalty of their atrocities, if they truly repent and ask for his forgiveness.

It is worth noting that at this time many months have passed since the three men promised Sarah that she would be with child within the year. It is to be assumed that at this time Sarah was not just pregnant, but probably nearing the time to put to bed. This was to be the child to confirm God's promises to him, yet it was at this critical time that he chose not only to betray and distrust God's earlier pronouncements, but missed this rare opportunity to receive God's blessings of being in a covenant relationship. As he moved from a safe zone to Gerar, he would have continued to count on God's capacity to protect him, even among hostile neighbours in a hostile neighbourhood. Abraham truly missed the mark (sin). He failed to trust God to preserve his life and that of his wife.

²¹⁷ It is interesting to note that this giant of faith is here being charged with the sin of faithlessness.

This is a direct failure, as he missed the mark in the straight-forward path of duty.²¹⁸

All the same, Abraham's conduct was not only condemnable, but definitely and, decidedly cowardly, and carried the risk of tempering with the virtue of his wife, Sarah as well as putting the purity of the promised seed in jeopardy.²¹⁹

As a man who carried the flag of Yahweh's goodwill for humanity (Gen 12:3-4), Abraham's attitude was also dishonouring to God's name. His thoughts assume that God would fail in his ability and capacity to protect him to uphold the dignity and integrity expected in a husband and wife relationship.

Although as we maintained elsewhere, Abraham must have been thoroughly disturbed by the horrible events, which took place within his immediate neighbourhood, as a result of which, he fled to where he thought was a safer neighbourhood, yet the extent to which his actions took him had conclusions, which were too far reaching. That he almost lost possession of his wife was probably a bargain, which he was scarcely ready for. He forgot that so long as man sojourns in this world, he is a sojourner among ferocious neighbour, and no neighbourhood is rid of them. He was confronted immediately with the age long truth that man is never safe anywhere in the world. Job was to later learn this bitter truth, as he pronounced: "I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil" (Job 3:26).

Furthermore, in Abraham's action we may well discern the sin of 'presumption.' The Hausa word for it is '*zatto*'. The Ngas call it '*ka be – may be*'. To presume is to take a course of action as a consequence of a prior action, which one is not confirmed. Among both the Ngas and the Hausas, the sin of '*ka be – zatto*' respectively is a grave sin, as it is capable of creating a chain of activities, which may produce other negative results, including defilement, destroying something as retaliation, telling a lie to counter an action, and even murder. In this case Abraham took for granted that Abimelech, the king of Gerar, and

²¹⁸ A. Fuller, PC Study Bible, Version 5, Electronic Database, 2006, Biblesoft.

²¹⁹ F. B. Meyer, PC Study Bible, Version 5, Electronic Database, 2006, Biblesoft.

his potential host community were wicked and inconsiderate people.²²⁰ Consequently, Abraham gave Abimelech a bad name, and simply waited to crucify him, but in doing so he created an opportunity, which brought him closer to the path of the temptation, which has the capacity to control our later actions.²²¹

Abimelech immediately dispatched his men to bring her in. Abimelech sent and took Sarah - (Gen. 20:2^b). If what Abraham was seeking to achieve by a change of environment (neighbourhood), from Canaan, to live among the Philistines, was safety and to be in a better and more secure neighbourhood, with better and more helpful neighbours, he did not achieve it. He was disappointed almost immediately. As a matter of fact, if Abraham had not prepared himself for it he would probably have taken the next available flight back to Canaan, if there was to have been one at that time.

Although the text did not reveal how long Abraham was in the land before Abimelech sent for Sarah, we must assume that Gerar being a small town, it wouldn't have taken a long time before the presence of a new arrival, such as Abraham would be noticed and for the news to get to the ears of the king. So Sarah must have spent some nights in the harem of Abimelech.

Gen 20:14-16 – “Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. ... And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you." ... To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. These verses display the remorseful attitude of Abimelech, and shows that he was fully aware of the implications of his actions, especially concerning the sin of adultery, which he would have succeeded in committing if he had had actually had sexual intercourse (slept) with Sarah.

Abraham on his part did not even consider the possibility, that the king might simply take Sarah to be his wife and forcefully have sex with her, thereby violating such connubial rights related to and limited to husband and wife relationship. He supposed that in a town such as

²²⁰ To be fair to Abraham, this was the general attitude and pattern of behaviour often associated with despots of his time.

²²¹ F. B. Meyer, *Commentary on Genesis*, PC Study Bible, Version 5, Electronic Database, 2006, Biblesoft.

Gerar, which was devoid of any knowledge or fear of God, their religious values and moral standards, were so low such that upon the king setting his eyes on his wife, his immediate thought would be to kill him so that he would have her as his wife. In the words of J. Lathrop, “Abraham...seems not to have entertained the least suspicion that they would insult the honour of his family, either by rape or seduction. His apprehension was that they would kill him for his wife's sake.”²²²

The Nature of Abimelech’s Sin, his Response and Lessons

These three items are not treated in water-tight compartments. Although Abimelech attempted to prove his innocence before God, it was sin all the same.

We could say that Abimelech’s sin, however, was unconsciously committed. It wasn’t a wilful sin. This is supported by Abimelech’s exemplary character, which the account describes. His exemplary character in the leadership styles, which is contrary to what we see on a daily basis being displayed in this 21st century Nigeria is a thing of envy and worthy of note, and could even serve as a model for leaders today, who are accustomed to treating their subjects with ignominy, arrogance and impunity.²²³

Abimelech more Righteous than Abraham: As the events, following the swap saga continued to progress, it turned out that Abimelech, the king of the Philistines was more morally upright than Abraham the acclaimed father of faith. In the ensuing drama, the identity of the deciding card had already been exposed. Sarah was taken as wife to Abimelech. This step was definitely a move, which was capable of truncating the entire salvation history inaugurated and instituted when Abraham responded to God’s invitation. If Abraham’s scheme had taken full effect, it would have had far reaching implications for Abraham, the Hebrew nation and to Christianity. Anyway, God who is all knowing, and whose sovereignty and supremacy was fully in-charge, and did not allow the matter to go out of hand. It is as he chose to act that we could

²²² J. Lathrop, *Commentary on Genesis*, PC Study Bible, Version 5, Electronic Database., 2006, Biblesoft

²²³ *The Pulpit Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, PC Study Bible, Electronic Database, 2006, 8th Aug., 2018

discern that Abimelech, was able to prove Abraham wrong. His moral standards turned out to be higher than those of Abraham.

In verse 3, God decided to utilize the general and universal mode of communication to disclose his mind and intentions to Abimelech. Using the mode of 'dream' he said to Abraham: *Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife.*" (Gen. 20:3^b). The NIV puts it more graphically, *You are as good as dead* (v. 3). Although the statement is placed in the emphatic, it could be associated with all prophetic declarations, which always leaves room for the human element, which is an appropriate response.²²⁴ It was all the same strong warning to Abimelech, strong enough to move him to action.

Abimelech set out first to prove his innocence by posing a question to God: *Lord, will you kill an innocent people?*²²⁵ Abimelech recognised and referred to God here as *Lord*. This is a good and clear example of the fact of the universal understanding and acceptance of the concept of God outside Israel. He then goes on to declare his innocence and the innocence of his people. Although God had said that Abimelech was the target of his wrath, Abimelech recognized that if anything should happen to him, the effect would extend to all the people of his kingdom.

Whether Abraham's line of defence was flimsy or strong is not important to me. The fact is that as a man of honour and integrity, he did

²²⁴ Inherent in the usual prophetic declarations, were provisions and stylistic devices, which accompany their pronouncements, which if taken on the face value would show that God's statements went with finality, but when viewed within context, there is always room for God to withhold, rescind or postpone judgment. This is not necessarily a reversal or a change of heart, by Yahweh, but an indication that God is a loving and forgiving God, who does not just punish for the sake of it. He punishes if there is arrogance, pride, and wilful rejection of God's offer of forgiveness. Once there is no indication of acceptance of guilt and no intention to seek for forgiveness punishment is executed. For example, when God wanted to punish the inhabitants of Nineveh, his words through the Prophet Jonah were clear: *Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!* (Jonah 3:4). This was flat, direct, non-ambiguous and unequivocal, yet when the king and his subjects repented, God rescinded his judgment. The same was true in the case of Abimelech.

²²⁵ Other translations prefer 'nation' for people, NIV.

not contradict himself. As a matter of fact Abraham in the next verse (v. 13) went beyond merely confirming what had taken place between him and Abimelech, but disclosed, probably to the astonishment of Abimelech, that she was indeed his wife. This was his statement: *Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife* (12^b). With this disclosure Sarah was indeed Abraham's sister, which among many African societies, such as the Ngas, Mupun, Miship, and Ron, traditions and customs prohibit him from taking her as his wife, and Sarah couldn't have become his wife. Yet as he explained under the customs, traditions, practices and usages known and practiced by the inhabitants of the Ancient Near East (ANE), although Sarah was his sister, she could still be his wife. This is similar among the Fulani ethnic nationality of Central and West Africa.

Furthermore, as if this was not shocking enough, he went on to disclose to the hearing of Abimelech, whose turbulent mind was yet to settle by another more controversial admission. He says: "And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother." (v.13).

Here is a clear statement, which confirms the fact that in the ANE belief in predestination is very strong. This is similar to what the Hausa of Nigeria call '*kadara*.' That the entire life of a man is all divinely programmed (God being the programmer), such that man is merely playing to the gallery. Abraham's statement, *And when God had me wander from my father's household,...* was to the effect that it was God who caused him to respond to the migratory life, which has become his characteristic. The Hausa man would say, *Allah ya jarabce ni na kasance mai kai da kawowa* (It is God who caused me to become a wanderer). In his capacity as a wanderer, Abraham had concluded, rightly or wrongly, that in the course of his movements he could encounter hostile people, or get to points when his life could be threatened or be in some kind of danger on account of Sarah, his wife, so he had concluded this loose arrangement of swapping or switching with her, (which amounts to falsehood) in case such a possibility arises (Gen. 20:12-13).

Abimelech's Prompt Response (Gen. 20:15-17)

From the positive side, we can also learn some lessons from Abimelech, especially his prompt response in dealing with his sin. When confronted with the reality of his action, which amounted to both the sin of omission and commission, he was swift in responding to it. God had directed him to return the man's wife to him, and to go to him for special intercessory prayers, which he obliged. His desire was not necessarily to explain away his actions (Gen. 20:6), but to ensure the return of normalcy in his family.

The Pulpit Commentary summarized the views of several scholars on this, as they pointed to some implications behind Abimelech's responses at this critical moment.²²⁶ Many viewed this as serving the following purposes: As Abimelech was sending the gifts he referred to Abraham not as Sarah's husband, but her brother – v. 16 and the gift to him was more of a propitiatory offering, so that Abraham would overlook the offence. He posits that: it was meant “to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated” (Gen. 20:16).²²⁷ This explains why when Abimelech was asked to return the man's wife to him, he did not only return her for the sake of fulfilling all righteousness, so to say, but to prove both his innocence as well as the innocence of Sarah. Abimelech knowing the legal provision rolled out this elaborate compensatory scheme to Abraham to cover for general and special damages, which he accepted his action might have caused the couples. His restitution involved, both the return of Sarah back to Abraham, and also the repayment in the form of *sheep and cattle and male and female slaves*, v. 14. In addition, Abraham was free to settle in any part of his territory. He said to Abraham, “... My land is before you; live wherever you like.” (vv. 14, 15). Note the similarity of this offer with that of Zacchaeus at the point of his conversion and subsequent repentance. This was the declaration by Zacchaeus, “...Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my

²²⁶ *The Pulpit Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, PC Study Bible, Electronic Database, 2006, 8th Aug., 2018

²²⁷ *The Pulpit Commentary on the Book of Genesis* presents this as reflecting the views of commentators like Chrysostom, Gesenius, Furst, Knobel, Delitzsch, Keil, Murphy.

possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” (Luke 19:8).

Abimelech refers to Abraham here as Sarah’s brother. Von Rad things that by doing this “he avoids compromising Abraham. Abimelech does everything to demonstrate Abraham’s and Sarah’s honourableness...”²²⁸ His aim was to set things right with her, since he is truly her brother. The ESV renders the gift clearly as *a thousand pieces of silver*. It is to be noted that although a specific number is given, it does not necessarily follow that the exact weight of each piece is known.

Some Legal Provisions Concerning the violation of Connubial Rights

One of the crimes against Abimelech, which seems to apply to most cultures is the crime of adultery. Adultery involves a condition, under which a married man could go and violate the privacy and dignity of the marital bed of another man, by having sexual intercourse with another man’s wife. Lathrop thinks that throughout human history, this form of crime has universal application, as it is condemnable and punishable under many legal provisions of most nations.²²⁹ Citing, for example, the ancient laws of Draco and Solon, Lathrop insists that once a suspecting husband of an adulteress, discovers that his wife is guilty of adultery, he may take any action, which might result to killing both the woman and the man instantly.²³⁰ If, on the other hand, he decides to be mild and magnanimous on them both the criminals, he may openly disgrace them by exposing their crime to the general public. This would make them very uncomfortable in the community, such that they may even choose to relocate to another environment altogether.²³¹

²²⁸United Bible Societies, (UBS), *Old Testament Handbook Series*, 1978-2004, 8th Aug., 2018, PC Study Bible Version 5, Viewed 7th Aug., 2018.

²²⁹ J. Lathrop, PC Study Bible Version 5, Electronic Database, 2006, Biblesoft, Viewed, Aug., 2018.

²³⁰ Among the Ngas, adultery is called *tallit* and it is punished by banishment from the community, if the offence was committed with the wife of his father, brother, or someone within the same clan.

²³¹ J. Lathrop, Electronic Database.

The provisions of the holy writ would appear close to the above. Under the Mosaic legal provisions,²³² adultery was completely forbidden (Exo. 20:14; Deut. 5:8). It falls under the apodictic laws.²³³ Utilizing this provision, the two culprits were to face the penalty. The death penalty awaits both guilty parties, namely the adulterer and the adulteress (Lev. 20:10).²³⁴

Since this was such a serious crime, which carried such a very heavy penalty, (the taking of life), we are at a lost as to why Abraham treated the issue lightly, and by so doing exposed not only Abimelech, but his entire household to the possibility of complicity in such a heinous crime?²³⁵

To be light on Abraham, we could argue that since Abraham was a pacesetter of his age and time (the first Patriarch), it may well be that he had not a clear understanding of the total picture or the scope of the consequences of his action, yet we cannot truly let go of Abraham on such a ground. This is because Abraham was not a first timer in this type of action. His action is therefore still held with high suspicion. At the earlier stage, while sojourning in Egypt he enticed the Pharaoh of Egypt, with the same pretentious assertions, producing similar results. Rather, God placed the destiny of the Pharaoh in the hands of Abraham and was directed to go to him for prayers. Thus, Abraham was given the opportunity not of confessing to a wrong, but the privilege to pray for

²³² The first five books of the Bible are regarded as the book of the law. Traditionally it is believed that it was Moses who wrote the entire five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

²³³ The apodictic laws are the laws, which come with the force of the 'You shall not ...' phrases.

²³⁴ Under this provision, there were further grounds to explore before the crime is established. In the Gospels, especially as the issue was presented before Jesus, the general understanding among the Jew was that they were to be put to death through stoning. However, according to the rabbis (Siphra' ad loc.; Sanhedhrin 52 b), it is was to be done through strangulation. Cf., *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, PC Study Bible Version 5, Electronic Database, 2006, Biblesoft, Viewed 8th Aug., 2018.

²³⁵ When God wanted to execute judgment, he did not punish Abimelech and his immediate family alone, but the punishment was extended to the entire inhabitants living within his household, namely the female slaves of his household (Gen. 20:16-17).

the life of the Pharaoh so that God might forgive him and he be released from the curse associated with the crime, (Gen. 12:10-20). This notwithstanding, the man whose actions reveal more of the desire for reconciliation is Abimelech. He took the pains to extend the *olive leaf* to his neighbour, Abraham.²³⁶

Abimelech's Peaceful Disposition and Approach Ensured Peaceful Resolution of Conflict

There is no doubt that the situation presented in this text was capable of creating a crisis between Abraham and Abimelech. However, the peaceful and non-belligerent disposition of Abimelech, especially, his desire to sue for peace, even when he was the one clearly wronged is a confirmation of scripture.

What we may say as we draw some lessons from this verse is to the effect that it may be difficult to come out with the exact sense of this difficult passage, yet the intentions of Abimelech could not have been uncertain. To be sure, his intentions were clear. He was simply trying to say to all who knew them that, it was his intention to publicly demonstrate as a way of proving their innocence and mind, that within the period of Sarah stayed within his harem (household) there was not marital relationship between them. He wanted the gifts to serve either as atonement, or as a cover of veil.²³⁷

When all is said and done, all that Abimelech was attempting to do was to seek to correct the perceived wrong he had committed so that his image in the neighbourhood as well as his relationship with his

²³⁶ Among the Ngas of Nigeria, the sign of leaves in the hands of women at the theatre was a signal for the desire for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. When a conflict seems to be protracted and so beyond solution, especially when such conflict has resulted in heavy losses in lives and properties, the women (from any side of the conflict) upon observing this, would come out brandishing branches of leaves feverishly, in front of the combatants, and uttering not words. As soon as the fighters on both sides of the conflict notice the women with the leaves, they would shout out to their fellows, *mat dan yim! mat dan yim!! mat dan yim!!!* And they would put down their weapons, signalling that time has come for the warriors to stop fighting. Once fighting stops, the elders would step in and begin the process of finding a lasting peace.

²³⁷ *The Pulpit Commentary*, Electronic Database. 2006, Biblesoft, Viewed, 8th Aug., 2018.

neighbour would not continue to be tainted, but rather, it should improve or change for the better. Abimelech at this point of his desire to seek to make peace with his neighbour did not consider his status as the king, but acted to get rid of the sin around him.

The writer of the book of proverbs says that a gentle response brings calmness to the violent mind. In his words, *A soft (gentle-NIV) answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.* (Prov. 15:1). In Abimelech's response we could see not only honesty of intentions, but also gentleness, maturity and integrity. These are qualities expected from a good neighbour to a neighbour in a neighbourhood. Rather than responding harshly, which was a characteristic of responses expected from despotic kings to their subjects, Abimelech the aggrieved travelled an extra mile to sue for peace with the perceived aggressor (Abraham).²³⁸ Abimelech by so doing acted the role of a good neighbour to a neighbour within the neighbourhood. What his neighbour wanted was the reassurance of his safety, and he was willing to give him just that. Paul had hinted to this type of gesture, when he says: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:14-18).

Learning from Abimelech's Step of Faith vv. 14ff

In Nigeria today the cases of impunity and high handedness are ever on the increase among both political as well as religious leaders. Coming to the community of family levels, there are many neighbours in

²³⁸ It is my firm belief that if Abraham had not been deceptive in his postulations, Abimelech wouldn't have been tempted to bring in Sarah as his wife. After all, polygamy was not an issue in the days of Abraham, and also among the Philistines. It was therefore the least thought on the mind of Abimelech that by marrying Sarah he was committing any crime. Yet when he was reminded of this possibility he took the path of making peace, which was the most needed thing at that time.

neighbourhoods²³⁹ who are not on talking terms with themselves, due to perceived wrongs committed against each other. This is often so because each of the aggrieved parties is not ready to sue for peace. It is always a tit-for-tar approach, which ultimately yields nothing positive. The end product is that for long peace has eluded such neighbourhoods. The legacy from the experiences of this Abimelech–Abraham case could go a long way in laying some foundations for good neighbourly relationships.

The Story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:27-37)

Having utilized several examples of the expectation of the life of a neighbour within a neighbourhood, it is my desire to also consider a familiar account of the story of the Good Samaritan, which seeks to exemplify the character of good neighbourliness in the man from Samaria.

To be sure, within the biblical context, however, the story assumes and adds to the understanding, when apart from the above sense of seeing a neighbour in relation to proximity of closeness to another person, it conveys the sense that a neighbour is that person who because of his concern to the person who due to his proximity to the other, he is willing to offer some kind of help, when there was need for it. These presentations follow and agree with the sense, taught by Jesus Christ in the well-known story of the Sermon on the Mount, on loving one's neighbour as one's self, (Matt. 5:43), which the apostle Paul later amplified, when he emphasized that the neighbour's interest is always protected, within the context of Christian love, insisting that *Love does no harm to its neighbour* ... (Rom. 13:10), as well as the narrative of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10. 27-37).²⁴⁰

It is well to dwell and develop a little on the story of the Good Samaritan, especially the underlying reason, why Jesus used the parable. Whatever the lawyer had in mind, for all we know was different from what Jesus had in telling the story. To the twenty first century Christian

²³⁹ The crisis situations we are facing in Nigeria, and which are on a daily increase are not just against individuals, but have extended their tentacles to engulf groups, entire communities and ethnic nationalities. None of the sides in these conflicts are willing to adopt the path of peaceful resolution, such as that of Abimelech and Abraham.

²⁴⁰ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/neighbour>.

like many of us, the story is well rehearsed by way of its details, as we can recite the parable by heart, yet when it comes to recounting the meaning behind it, particularly from the perspective of Jesus, there may be uncertainties, and it might even be a little confusing.

In this narrative, there may be three possible people who fit the credentials of being a neighbour. The first could well be the traveller who set out from Jerusalem intending to get down to Jericho. The narrator recounts that in the course of the journey he found himself among some armed bandits, who stripped him of his clothes, beat and abandoned him, thinking that he was already dead (Lk 10. 30). In this sense he is the neighbour, and therefore the object, who attracted the attention of the passers-by. He was the one whom the three characters, the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan, saw lying helpless on the ground, in great pains and therefore in great need, yet related to him in different ways. Jesus saw who answered the description of being the neighbour differently. Jesus ultimately identified one of the passers-by, the Samaritan, who was with the help the man needed at the moment and during the hour of his desperation as fitting his meaning and qualifications of who the true neighbour should be, (Lk 10:36-37). He left his audience (the lawyer) with the challenge to go and do likewise. Jesus directed him to go and be a good neighbour to the brother.²⁴¹

This same directive is what society needs. That we as Nigerians, irrespective of ethnic nationality, economic or social status, or religion, what we need is a strong Neighbourhood Policy or code of ethics, to guide people in their daily inter-personal and inter-communal relationships.

Conclusion

From this brief presentation, our effort in this section is to state that it is often very tempting to wish our troubles away or imagine that somehow we could get rid of them magically, or that somehow, we could mystically fly away from them, or to even employ human devices as an attempt to be rid of them. Abraham's tricks and devices did not prevent him from facing the reality when he found himself within the neighbourhood of the Philistines. Deducing from Abraham-Abimelech situation and that of the Good Samaritan, what we seek to express is the

²⁴¹ Crossway, 2006, 264.

fact that fleeing from the gravity of our situation is not the best way of solving our problems. Rather, we are called upon to stay with our problems, by asking for assistance from Yahweh, who is the closest neighbour in our neighbourhood to help us work to transform our difficult situations into something better than we might have ever imagined.

Bibliography

- Adam Clarke's *Commentary on the Old Testament*. PC Study Bible Version 5, Electronic Database, 2006.
- Aharoni, Y., *The Land of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979.
- Batto, Bernard F. *Myth in the Hebrew Bible*. DePauw University, 1979.
- Bendor, S. *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel*. Jerusalem: Simor, 1996.
- Bright, J. *A History and Religion of Israel*. Philadelphia, 1981.
- Calvin, J. *Calvin's Complete Commentary on the Bible*. Kindle Edition, Vol. 1.
- Chacour, E. *Blood Brothers*. Chosen Books, 1984.
- Cook, S. L. *The Social Roots of Biblical Yahwism*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004.
- Coote, R. B. and K. W. Whitelam. *The Emergence of Early Israel in Historical Perspective*. Sheffield: Almond Press, 1987.
- de Vaux, R. *Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973.
- Eckstein, Yechiel. *Holyland Moments*. <http://www.ifcj.org>.
- Esler, P. F., ed. *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in its Social Context*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.
- Faust, A., "From Regional Power to Peaceful Neighbour: Philistia in the Iron I-II Transition," *IEJ* 63 (2013).
- Gower, R. *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*. Chicago: Moody Press,
- Graf-wellhaußen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israel's*. Translated as *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, in 1883.

Harold C., and Gordon S. S. A., eds. *Religion and Peace Building*. New York Press, 2004.

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20180321/hello-mi-neighbour-were-all-world-serve>Published

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/neighbour>.

<https://www.naija.ng/...nigeria-sitting-a-keg-gunpowder-ooni-ife.html#1154262>).

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, *Abimelech*, B. Eerdmans Pub., PC Study Bible Version 5, Electronic Database, 2006.

Karl E. N., Aldershot. *God, Human Nature, and Education for peace: New Approaches to Moral and Religious Maturity*. Burlington, 2003.

Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Hendrickson Pub., PC Study Bible Version 5, Electronic Database, 2006, Biblesoft.

Lathrop, J. *Commentary of Genesis*. PC Study Bible Version 5, Electronic Database, 2006, Biblesoft.

Matthews, V. H. and Moyer, J.C. *The Old Testament, Text and Context*. Peabody MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1997.

Mayers, R. E-Sword, *The Sword of the Lord With an Edge*. 2017.

Mbiti, J. S. *African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*. Heinemann, 1969.

Meyer, F. B., *Commentary on Genesis*. PC Study Bible, Version 5, Electronic Database, 2006, Biblesoft.

Parker, J. *The People's Bible, The Pulpit Commentary on the On the Old Testament*. PC Study Bible, Electronic Database.

The Preacher's Complete Homiletical Commentary. E-Sword, Rick Meyers, 2017.

The Pulpit Commentary on the Old Testament. Electronic Database. 2006, Biblesoft.

United Bible Societies, (UBS). *Old Testament Handbook Series*. 1978-2004, 8th Aug., 2018.

van der Jagt, K. *Anthropological Approaches to the Interpretation of the Bible*. New York: United Bible Societies, 2002.

*On Being a Neighbour in a Neighbourhood: An Expository
Reading of Passages in Genesis and Luke*

van der Toorn, K. ed. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*.
Leiden: Brill, 1999.