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A sociotheological interpretation of Genesis 50:25 in a Zimbabwean context

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Migration to foreign lands is as old as the biblical stories of Abraham leaving his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans to go to a land that God was to show him. Concomitant with migration, however, is the possibility of death in the new habitat and oftentimes important decisions are made on how to fund the funerals. In the case of Zimbabwean diasporas, this has seen the rise in popularity of funeral insurance companies such as Diaspora Insurance and the GoFundMe initiatives. While the issue of funding funerals appears to be the primary thing that people are seized with when a funeral strikes, the most salient aspects would be issues of religion and culture. This article endeavours to show how, despite the challenging economic environment, the costly repatriation of dead relatives can best be appreciated through a sociotheological interpretation of Genesis 50:25. In other words, Genesis 50:25 can be used as a mirror to understand the value people place on issues of religion and culture. It is thus my argument that the religious background of the actors as well as their socio-cultural setting are critical in making important decisions regarding the place of interment as well as influencing the funding logistics to take the corpse to the desired resting place.

Contribution: As the death toll continues to rise of diasporas who would have gone offshore in search of a reprieve from the economic challenges that have become almost an indelible mark of Zimbabwe, issues around the values of traditional religion and culture continue to come to the fore. This research adds a voice to the ongoing religious and political dialogue in Zimbabwe in so far as it seeks to explain and understand the underlying reasons behind the costly repatriation of deceased relatives through a sociotheological reading of Genesis 50:25.

Keywords: culture; death; diaspora; Genesis 50:25; migration; religion; sociotheology; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

With the economy and life standards in Zimbabwe hardly promising to get any better, exit to offshore lands in search of a reprieve from the economic challenges and better living standards is a decision one can hardly counsel a friend or family member against. In this way, many have come to join the bandwagon of diasporas who left Zimbabwe. Migrations during this so-called 'New Dispensation' era under Mnangagwa (Mpofu 2023) add a layer to the different phases of migrations that have been witnessed in Zimbabwe. Makina and Kanyenze (2010) distinguish at least five phases of migration in Zimbabwe from the colonial era to the period under Robert Mugabe. While these migrations are defined by Zimbos (slang used to refer to Zimbabweans) as leaving behind their ancestral lands, one salient feature characterising such migrations is death in the diaspora and the concerted effort to repatriate the remains back to the ancestral lands. Though it initially appeared a must to leave one's ancestral lands, at death, it becomes another must to return to one's once abandoned ancestral lands. Whether it may mean a return to a *dongo* (abandoned and dilapidated rural homestead) or just grassland with standing house foundations, the fact would be one has been repatriated to a point where one can connect with ancestors where the *rukuvhute* (umbilical cord) was buried. In traditional culture, failure to connect with one's ancestors at death is dreaded and may bring some misfortune not only upon the deceased soul but also on the living hence all the effort to meet whatever costs of repatriation. The importance placed by Zimbabweans on connecting a deceased member with his or her ancestors is an age-old customary practice that can also be traced to the ancient Jewish religion. It has stood the test of time and as such can only be better understood and appreciated when looked at from that angle of history among the Israelites. Thus, the article endeavours to show how the costly repatriation of dead relatives can best be appreciated through a sociotheological interpretation of Genesis

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50:25 and by so doing adding a voice to the ongoing religious and political dialogue in Zimbabwe. To meet this objective, this article begins by defining what sociotheological interpretation is all about and then goes on to apply this to Genesis 50:25 and finally assesses how this text can help shed light on the costly repatriation of deceased relatives by Zimbabweans.

Understanding sociotheology

The role or significance that religion plays in the social imagination of people across different cultures of the world has often been misunderstood and underrated. While there is a need to give credit to classical sociologists such as Emile Durkheim ([1912] 1915), Max Weber ([1905] 2002, [1915] 1951) and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels ([1939] 1846) for pioneering religious ideas and behaviour in their writings, these pioneers generally tended to be reductionist and unappreciative of the unique nature of religion. This is even so in our own times where a deliberate effort has been made to sideline the traditional curriculum and emphasise teaching Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects that are now known popularly by the acronym 'STEM' (Chitate 2016). As a result of the STEM revolution, promoted curricula now are those whose analytic paradigms result in the quantification of almost everything and are accepted only as valid hypotheses which can be classified into statistically verifiable data. Disciplines such as religion or theology, that do not fit into this economic model are increasingly being marginalised and this has resulted in students at the tertiary level in Zimbabwe shunning theology or religious studies as areas of study. At the global level also, all attention is being paid to Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant & Time-bound (SMART) plans of action. The Sendai Framework, for example, is one such plan of action by the United Nations which takes only into consideration hypotheses that can be statistically verified (UNDRR 2015). There is a growing wilful sidelining of religion and a refusal to see it at all, yet religion is the cog around which almost everything we do in society revolves. It is on this basis that this article calls for a serious appreciation of an alternative way of looking at religious phenomena which Robert Roland first dubbed as 'sociotheology' (Roland cited in Juergensmeyer 2013:940). Simply put, sociotheology is all about taking seriously the religious dimension of social reality. It is not just studying religious things, but the way social reality is perceived from a religious frame of reference (Juergensmeyer 2013:940).

The kind of scholarly engagement that studied not only religious phenomena but took seriously the religious dimensions of social reality was pioneered by sociologists such as Peter Berger in *The Construction of Reality* (1967) and *The Sacred Canopy* (1970) as well as Robert Bellah in such works like *Beyond Belief* (1970). Ever since then, there has been a renewed interest in studying religious activities and institutions not as subjects of studies that fit into the conventional quantitative social science paradigms. Many have managed to defy the temptation to go by such models to understand the religious dimension of social perceptions and explore religious worldviews. They pose qualitative questions that help them to appreciate the insiders' perspective on religion without being judgemental. The 'sociotheological turn', as observed by Juergensmeyer (2013:944) implies a correspondence between social studies and religious thinking and stands as an alternative to more positivist approaches to analysing social phenomena related to religion. This has not just been an American phenomenon; scholars from other parts of the world have written works that fit well into this approach, which can be termed contemporary sociotheology. Sociologists such as Richard Madden, who has written on religion in contemporary China; Jacob Olupona, who focusses on religion in Africa; Saad Ibrahim, who directs his attention to the Islamic world and T.N. Madan, who writes on religion in India, all contribute to the study of religion in diverse contexts (Juergensmeyer 2013). On the Zimbabwean terrain, we have scholars such as Machoko in *Religion and Interconnection with Zimbabwe: A Case Study of Zimbabwean Diasporic Canadians* (2013); Mafuriranwa in *Interfacing Religion, Spirituality and Social Work* (2021); Togarasei, Chitando and Bishau (eds.) in *Religion and Social Marginalization in Zimbabwe* (2020) and many more.

To understand well where sociotheology is coming from, it is important to recall that theology was once regarded as the queen of all sciences during the early modern period only to be dislodged from its position in the latter part of the modern era. Factors contributing to its derision ranged from its own limitations to general negative perceptions about it. The manner in which theology was practised then signalled its impending doom: it had only one religious tradition as its frame of reference, theologians of the time often ignored the social context in which the ideas they studied emerged and were cultivated and lastly, theology asserted normative truth claims about its analyses (Sheikh 2015). This was later coupled with a secularisation narrative that presented faith as not congruent with science, hence something to be shunned.

Now, given the sociotheological turn, there is a growing trend to use a different analytic approach to what theologians were doing. Instead of just using one religious tradition as 'the' only frame of reference, social analysis is now being applied to any religious tradition or worldview. Proponents of sociotheology bracket truth claims asserted by either analysts themselves involved in the study or by the subjects of the study, and they take into serious consideration the location in which a worldview or tradition emerges as well as the social consequences of a particular way of thinking about social reality. The whole aim behind it would be to try and understand the reasoning behind the truth claims and not to verify them (Sheikh 2015). Basically, one can say that sociotheology hinges on the realisation that much of the phenomena that people call religion are related to other aspects of society. This ranges from economic to political issues and even to matters of social identity. Thus, sociotheology does not find itself limited to a study of religion alone as if religion were a separate cluster of ideas and practices relating to notions of transcendence and spiritual transformation that were unaffected by other aspects of both public and private life (Juergensmeyer 2013:945).

Because social analysis can be applied to any religious tradition or worldview, it is thus possible to apply it to biblical studies too as the Bible is an anthology of different worldviews. The patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, for example, shared a worldview that was so different from the prophet Amos or any of the prophets. Now, given that the patriarchs practiced religion in relation to other aspects of their own society, it is important to understand how they integrated these religious practices with the social realities of their day. In relation to the area of study in this article (Gn 50:25), it would be important to see how the cultural practice of repatriation of the remains of a deceased one was influenced also by certain religious convictions. The same could be said with diasporic Zimbabweans, it would be almost difficult to fathom why family members and all other concerned members of the society would pour in thousands of dollars and engage in all the cumbersome and time-consuming processes to repatriate a deceased relative unless one were to use sociotheological interpretational lens. Given that repatriation of a deceased person's remains is not a recent phenomenon but dates back to ancient biblical culture, Genesis 50:25 serves as a fitting passage to understand the value people place on issues of religion and culture. With the theoretical framework having been clearly articulated, it is important therefore to begin with a literary appreciation of this text at hand (Gn 50:25). It is only after a fuller grasp of the story that one can intelligibly apply sociotheology lens to it.

'Carry my bones with you' – Genesis 50:25

Having lived at least up to the age of 110 (Gn 22a:26a), Joseph knew that his time to leave this world was near. He also knew that his brothers and their descendants would feel insecure if they remained in Egypt after his death so he assured them: 'God will surely take care of you and lead you out as he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (Gn 50:24, The African Bible). The climax of Joseph's preparation for his own death is reflected in the following verse – 25 when he put the sons of Israel under oath: 'When God takes care of you, **you must bring my bones up with you** from this place' (emphasis mine). At least two considerations need to be made if we are possibly to understand the imperative nature of Joseph's last wish. The first consideration is that Joseph clearly viewed his stay in Egypt as a time of mission and had not adopted Egypt as his home (Assohoto & Ngewa 2006:84). The second thing to bear in mind is what had happened with his own father, Jacob. Realising that death was nigh also, Jacob had made Joseph swear that he would not let him be buried in Egypt (Gn 47:29) but rather be buried with his fathers in a family burial plot in Canaan bought by Abraham from Ephron, the Hittite as a burial ground. It is in this place that we learn Abraham buried his wife Sarah, and that Isaac and Rebekah, as well as Leah, were also interred here (49:31). To ensure that his last wish was adhered to, Jacob had repeated this instruction to all his sons (Gn 49:29–32).

Sociotheological interpretation of Genesis 50:25

Both incidents, that of Jacob as well as that of Joseph, are a testimony that the religious background of the actors as well as their socio-cultural setting are critical in making important decisions regarding the place of interment as well as influence the logistics to take the remains to their desired place of resting. In the foregoing stories, one can observe at least two levels of actors whose religious background and socio-cultural settings influence the critical decisions they take. On the first level, we have Jacob who chose not to be buried in a foreign land except the land where he called it a home, Canaan. Canaan was the ancestral land, which would make him feel at one with his progenitors. With respect to his father's last wish, we see Joseph first asking for leave from Pharaoh (Gn 50:5) and taking with him the embalmed body of Jacob his father to Canaan for burial. The second level is that of Joseph himself. Just as his father had chosen to be buried in the ancestral lands, so too was with him. With religious zeal, Joseph's preserved remains were taken along by Moses when the sons and daughters of Israel finally left Egypt (Ex13:19).

To appreciate more the 'carry my bones with you/bury me with my fathers' mantra, it is essential to interrogate the religious motivations and socio-cultural values that informed repatriations in ancient Israel. This can only be achieved if we look at the whole phenomenon of burials as perceived in ancient Israel before the influence of Greek culture.

Burial in the family tomb

As in the rest of the Ancient Near East, the Hebrews attached great importance to a decent burial. In addition to a decent burial, they attached much value also to interment among one's people. Hebrew burial practices in general reflect the common human desire to maintain some contact with one's people even after death. Not only do we have the case of Jacob requesting 'bury me with my fathers' (Gn 49:29) and Joseph demanding that the sons of Israel should take his bones with them when they leave Egypt (50:25) but later in the history of Israel, we see the aged Barzillai refusing to go with David and requesting rather: 'Please let your servant go back to die in his own city by the tomb of his father and mother' (2 Sm 19:38, The African Bible). Expressing almost the same sentiments, we find the exiled Nehemiah having a nostalgic reference to Jerusalem as 'the city of my ancestors' and he pleads with King Artaxerxes to rebuild it (Neh 2:5).

The common burial practice among the ancient Hebrews, whether it was of a repatriated corpse or not, was that after all the mourning rituals were over, a funeral procession would make its way to the family tomb which was usually located outside the limits of human habitations to avoid tomb defilement. As is the norm even today, friends and neighbours would accompany the deceased person to his or her final resting place. What is unique, however, with ancient Hebrews was the existence of professional mourners who

took the lead, making the air resound with their shrieks and lamentations. In the case of Jacob's death and burial which has earlier been alluded to, we hear:

> So Joseph left to bury his father; and with him went all of Pharaoh's officials who were senior members of his court and all the other dignitaries of Egypt, as well as Joseph's household and his father's household … Chariots, too, and charioteers went up with him; it was a very large retinue … they held a very great solemn memorial service and Joseph observed seven days of mourning his father. (Gn 50:7–10 [The African Bible])

Upon arrival at the family tomb, participants in the procession made way for members of the immediate family to take the body into the family tomb. Based on an archaeological dig by Ehud Netzer on a Jewish tomb of the early Roman period, the family tomb had a 'mourning closure around the entrance to the tomb which had rows of bench seats where participants could seat themselves for eulogies, public lamentation and deposition' (Netzer cited in McCane 2003).

Inside the tomb itself, as argued by McCane (2003), there was a burial chamber with a 'central pit'. This pit was basically a depression carved into the floor possibly to allow for freedom of movement by those who were performing tasks inside the tomb. Just above the central pit were niches or shelves which carved into the walls of the chamber and into which corpses were placed. One type of these burial niches was the loculus niche, in which the body was positioned perpendicular to the wall so that just the head or the feet were visible. An alternative design was known as the arcosolium niche, and it consisted of a large, open shelf that was cut into the tomb wall in the shape of an arch, wide enough for the corpse to be placed parallel to the wall. It was in either of these shelves or niches that immediate members of the family laid to rest their deceased relative. Personal belongings of the deceased were placed in the tomb alongside the body, and this included such things as jewellery, combs and sandals.

Besides burial in the tomb shelves, there were also other locations where a corpse could be laid to rest. There were instances whereby the central pit was used as a burial place. Serving also as places of repository were artfully constructed and ornamented free-standing burial containers such as sarcophagi or wooden coffins. Much depended on the socio-economic class and willingness of a given family to choose what it could afford. When the burial rites were over, the mouth of the tomb was usually covered with a large circular stone and the stone could further be secured by sealing it. Sealing helped minimise the chances of tampering with the family tomb.

Second burial – 'Gathered to his fathers'

A year following the initial burial, ancient Hebrews conducted another burial ceremony during which the bones of the deceased relative were collected for a second burial. A period lasting up to a year was given to allow complete decomposition of the flesh. In attendance during this second burial ceremony were strictly immediate family members, and the ceremony took place entirely within the confines of the family tomb.

Archaeological excavations of early Roman Palestine tombs have managed to shed some light on what transpired in these tombs during the second burial. What has been noted is the presence of lamps and bottles of perfume in these tombs to indicate perhaps that family members needed some light as they performed their tasks and might have needed some perfume to relieve their noses as chances were that there was more than one corpse in the tomb which could have been in different states of decomposition (McCane 2003). The Hebrew purity belief that vessels which had come into contact with the dead had contracted ritual impurity may explain why these used lamps and perfume bottles were abandoned in the tombs.

The deceased's bones were ritually collected and piled in one place together with the bones of the other deceased family members. According to McCane (2003), archaeological excavations bring to light that the bones of all the deceased members were piled together on one side of a roughly circular underground tomb which later evolved into the Israelite 'bench tomb' by Iron Age II. Once the bones of the deceased individual were piled in a common heap along with the bones of progenitors and other deceased members of the family lineage, then it meant his or her individual identity was rendered completely indistinguishable as it dissolved into the ancestral collective of the other deceased family members. Such a submersion into the ancestral collective at the second burial finds an echo in the oft-recurring biblical expression: 'he slept and was gathered to this fathers' (Gn 25:8; 49:33; 2 Ki 16:20; 2 Chr 21:1; 32:33).

Subsequent developments to Hebrew burials

While submersion into the ancestral collective was the dominant burial pattern among the Hebrews in the period prior to early Roman Palestine, the latter saw the emergence of a new secondary burial pattern whereby an individual's bones were not mixed up with those of other deceased members but were rather collected into an ossuary. These were small chests in which the bones of the dead were placed. Unlike the collective secondary burial whereby individual identity got blurred into the ancestral collective, burial in an ossuary helped preserve individual identity. It is important, however, to note that there is no unanimity among scholars as to what led to this shift from collective to individual secondary burial. One most probable reason may have to do with the rise of the Greek concept of individuation as opined by Steven Fine. Basing his argument on the economic and cultural factors of the time, Fine postulates that the prosperity of Jerusalem under Herod the Great along with the developing notions of the individual's place within the family unit helped provide the Hebrews with the means and motive to begin practising a pattern of secondary burial that sought to preserve individual identity (Fine cited in McCane 2003:44). While some

Hebrews resisted contamination of their cultural practices, the winds of change because of Hellenism were albeit visible. As a result, most Hebrews to one degree or another had become Hellenised in most areas of their lives and their death rituals were not spared. Changes were not only irresistible but had come to outgrow the private domain. Primary burial in a Hellenistic form of tomb architecture – the loculus niche soon became a welcome development among the Hebrews in Palestine (McCane 2003). At the same time, primary burial in a sarcophagus saw its rate increase among the Hebrews. Not to be missed also among the Hebrews at this period was the carrying into practice of the Greco-Roman custom of putting a coin in the mouth of a deceased person, a practice that had originated in the belief in the need to pay Charon, the ferryman across the river Styx.

Contact between the living and the living dead

Irrespective of whether the second burial involved the gathering of one's bones with those of the other deceased members or burial in an individual ossuary, what appears primary to the Hebrews was that the dead were not gone forever. In the language of Mbiti (1969), the Hebrews believed in the world of the 'living dead'. As affirmed also by Block-Smith (1992:127), the dead in the eyes of the Hebrews were empowered upon death or assumed post-mortem powers which made them 'divine beings'. They, for example, laid claim to the patrimony, counselled descendants and invoked fertility for their offspring. As was in real life, there continued to be a symbiotic relationship between the living and their deceased relatives. Despite the popular belief that the dead were ritually impure and later legislation against consultation of the dead by the Deuteronomist and Priestly redactors, it remained a common practice among the Hebrews to bring food to their dead ones. The presence of cooking pots in excavated tombs of early Roman Palestine should not be taken as a mere common customary burial practice which lacked significance in the lived realities of the time. As aptly put by McCane (2003:51), 'The cult of the dead belonged to a set of behaviours that had long been customary and conventional'.

The practice of bringing food to one's deceased family members had the effect of preserving relationships beyond death. Such could not have been achieved if interment had happened in a foreign land hence the desire to be buried among one's people. This underscores the importance of repatriation of deceased relatives. Death and burial in a foreign land would simply have meant a complete severance of relationships, akin to the dreaded thought of being left unburied among the ancient Hebrews. The Hebrews attached so much value to proper interment among one's people and anything short of this was dreaded for it amounted to being forgotten in perpetuity. Having used sociotheology to interpret Genesis 50:25, it is now important to see how this passage opens a window to appreciate the phenomenon of repatriations in Zimbabwe.

Relevance of the sociotheological interpretation of Genesis 50:25 in the Zimbabwean context

The foregoing findings resulting from a sociotheological interpretation to Genesis 50:25 are particularly relevant to Zimbabwe as it is to other parts of Africa. Although the Hebrew practice of repatriating the remains of Joseph (Gn 50:25) originally demonstrates how ancient Hebrews perceived social reality from a religious frame of reference – attaching so great importance to a decent burial as well as placing much value to interment among one's people; the passage can be used as a mirror to understand the central role of religion in people's social lives especially in Zimbabwe and how this religious background is critical in making important decisions regarding the place of interment. As more Zimbabweans have exited the country so also has been the rise in deaths in the diaspora and the consequent efforts to repatriate them no matter how costly it may be. This has also seen the rise of new ways to help with repatriation like Diaspora Insurance and GoFundMe initiatives (Sango 2023). Behind it all, religion remains the frame of reference.

The urge to bring or be buried back home

The desire to be buried back home somehow finds a ring in the song 'Ndofamba neDiaspora' by Viomak. In this musical piece, Viomak touches on the experience of uprooted identity by Zimbos in the diaspora and how they look forward to an eventual return to what they hold as their real home, Zimbabwe. This finds expression in the lyrics (Viomak Music 2006):

> Canada handi musha, America handi musha
>
> Britain handi musha, Makumbo enyoka….
>
> Zimbabwe ndiwo musha, Zimbabwe ndiwo musha
>
> Zimbabwe ndiwo musha, Ndiwo musha mukuru.
>
> Kudiaspora handi kwedu, Kudiaspora handi kwedu
>
> Kudiaspora handi kwedu, Handi kwedu,musasa
>
> [Canada is not home, America is not home
>
> Britain is not home, they are just illusory (legs of a snake)
>
> Zimbabwe is the true home, the real home that accommodates us all.
>
> The Diaspora is not our home; it is only temporal shelter].

The song by Viomak underscores an important cognitive idea in the minds of most Zimbabwean diasporas, namely: the insider's perception of social reality from a religious frame of reference. Except perhaps for those who were born in their diaspora which they now perceive as their own home, most Zimbabweans are aware that it is only by a return home, whether dead or alive that they can recover their full identity as persons. These sentiments are not unique to Zimbabweans but are shared by other African migrants wherever they find themselves. Remarking on this shared desire, Fakim (2015) observes that the desire to be buried in the place where one

was born is strong for many first African migrants in the United Kingdom. Writing about the experiences of Nadia Elbhiri who fulfilled her father's request to be buried in Morocco, his home country, she notes: 'London was always his home, but Morocco was always in his heart'. Elbhiri's father is not the only one who expressed the desire to be buried back home; evidence from Moroccan embassy officials points to the fact that almost 95% of the first-generation Moroccan migrants in Britain are buried in Morocco (Fakim 2015). From an African sense thus, true personhood as it were can only be realised among your own and not in a foreign land. It is, as observed by Mokgoro (1998), characterised by group solidarity, conformity, compassion, respect, humanistic orientation and collective unity.

Given that full identity becomes realisable only among your own, the repatriation of a deceased person becomes more meaningful and critical. As observed by Hungwe (2021), repatriation of a corpse and burial among one's own people offers a decent send-off to the deceased as well as an affirmation of belonging to the kin group. The gravesite and its accessibility allow the kin members the opportunity to perform necessary rituals at any given time, something which is unimageable when burial is carried out in a foreign land.

It needs to be noted, however, that repatriation is not homogenous for all Zimbos who pass away in the diaspora. Because of financial constraints, some families may end up interring their deceased ones in their places of death, that is the diaspora. This is also common among some Christian believers who directly interpret such passages as Ecclesiastes 9:5 that 'the dead do not know anything'. Benchmarking their faith practice on such a verse, they see no reason to repatriate a body back home. For those, however, who feel the need to repatriate but owing to some financial challenges beyond their means to overcome, there is a customary practice of carrying the soil or stone from the tomb of the deceased person back home where a ritual ceremony is conducted to re-bury the loved one. To perform this burial by proxy, a senior member of the family would take soil or stone from the grave and tie it in a black cloth. Upon arrival in Zimbabwe, the black cloth would be buried together with a black goat after it had been slaughtered thus ensuring a physical point that would be used for ritual purposes by close relatives (Bullock 1927:272; Gelfand 1959:196).

As seen from the sociotheological interpretation of Genesis 50:25 that the dead, in the eyes of the Hebrews, were empowered upon death or assumed post-mortem powers, and so also is the perception of the dead among indigenous Zimbabwean peoples. For them, the dead assume post-mortem powers which make them ana *sekuru vari kumhepo* 'divine beings'. They, too, lay claim to the patrimony, counsel descendants and invoke fertility for their offspring in exchange for libations that they get from the living. In Zimbabwe, as in other parts of the African continent, the living live in relation to the world of the dead and together with the dead they constitute the social world (Lee & Vaughan 2008:341). Such a communion between the dead and the living can only happen in setups where the dead are interred among their own and not when they are buried in the diaspora.

Conclusion

This article examined how Genesis 50:25 mirrors the religio-customary practice by Zimbabweans, in particular, and peoples in other parts of Africa, of repatriating deceased relatives from the diaspora back to their ancestral lands. The key findings of this research article are that ancient Hebrews perceived social reality from a religious frame of reference, and this was seen for example in their attaching so great importance to a decent burial as well as placing so much value to interment among one's people. In their eyes, the dead were not cut from their living members and upon death they assumed post-mortem powers which enabled them to lay claim to the patrimony, counsel descendants and invoke fertility for their offspring in exchange for libations of food they got from the living. These sociotheological observations are of relevance to Zimbabwe as it is to other parts of Africa as they help to appreciate why family members and all other concerned members of the society would pour in thousands of dollars and engage in all the cumbersome and time-consuming processes to repatriate a deceased relative. Though some may fail to repatriate loved ones because of financial constraints, they fulfil the religious longing felt by many to be buried among one's own, through burial by proxy. Thus, no matter how people may try to underrate religion or try to refuse to see it at all, the foregoing discussion has underscored an important reality that religion is the cog around which almost everything we do in society revolves. These findings have great implications for the ongoing attempts at a STEM revolution and the adoption of SMART-based action plans. Though proponents of STEM and SMART action plans may want to interpret social realities differently, it is my argument that religion played, plays and shall continue to play a critical role in how society interprets social realities. While science is critical in its own respect, it should be noted, however, that science does not give answers to everything. There are certain voids that can best be filled only by appeal to religion whether in its rudimentary or refined form.

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Author's contributions

C.M. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at https://www.newzimbabwe.com/migration-and-death-in-foreign-lands/, https://www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/what-sendai-framework and http://viomakcharitymusic.com/music/82lyrics.html

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