

## “[B]ury me with my fathers:” Seeking the Pastoral Relevance of Genesis 49:29 in the Nigerian Context

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### Abstract

*Jacob’s instruction to his children in Genesis 49:29 to bury him in Canaan finds relevance in Nigeria in the context of the importance attached to burial on ancestral land. In Nigeria, when it became unlawful to bury in residential areas, the emphasis shifted away from the ancestral land to burial in one’s country home. Hence, employing narrative analysis and the descriptive approach, the article examines the pastoral relevance of the text in contemporary Nigeria relative to burial on ancestral land. It finds that burial on ancestral land in ancient Israel and Nigeria served some socio-cultural purposes. In both contexts, the practice signifies that the deceased has died a good death. Burial sites are also a basis for asserting land rights, identity and belonging. The existence of the deceased’s tombs on the family land reflects the belief in an existing relationship between a people and their ancestors. The work concludes that while many aspects of the burial customs are no more relevant for contemporary Nigerian Christians, burying on the ancestral land still has socio-cultural values, such as inculcating regard for one’s community of origin, the need for regular reunion with relatives, and the importance of acceptable character. Therefore, in contemporary Nigeria, Genesis 49:29 is an appropriate passage for teaching these precepts during Christian burial services.*

**Keywords:** Jacob’s burial; Israelite burial customs; Ancestral veneration; Nigerian Christians and burial in the country home; Burial and character

### Introduction

Jacob had earlier moved from Canaan to Egypt with his entire family following the sojourn in Egypt of Joseph, his beloved son. In Genesis 49, as Jacob’s life draws to an end, he gathers his sons and blesses them each in turn. In verse 29, Jacob gives his children the instruction to “bury me with my fathers” in the land of Canaan. He identifies specifically the cave at Machpelah near Mamre, which has been purchased by his grandfather Abraham (cf. Gn. 23) as the place he is to be buried. In this cave, which Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite, Abraham himself was buried with his wife Sarah (Gn. 25:10). There Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and Jacob’s wife, Leah, were also buried (49:31). Jacob’s wish to be buried on his ancestral land is echoed in Joseph’s instruction in 50:25 to his fellow Israelites to carry his bones to Canaan when he died. It is noteworthy that Joseph’s instruction to move his bones to Canaan relates to the tradition of second burial, which also became an interesting part of the burial customs in Israel. Thus, as a clear expression of solidarity, both patriarchs desire “to be laid at rest among their own people” (Lunn 2008:168). The wish of both father and son here depicts the importance attached to burial on ancestral land in ancient Near Eastern culture. It is

in this respect that the text is relevant in Nigeria, as in Africa at large, where burial on one's ancestral land is an important aspect of the culture of most ethnic groups. Komakech (2016:27) rightly observes that in most African societies, "for burials to be considered proper the dead are supposed to be buried in their ancestral land". In fact, until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria "buried their dead indoors" (Adeboye 2016:3) underneath the bedroom floor or the veranda of the deceased. Up until today, it is a "common sight to see graves inside the houses or specifically" at the verandas in many Yoruba communities (Adebusuyi et al. 2012). However, due to modern concerns for environmental sanitation in Nigeria, the custom of burial in residential areas has been relatively de-emphasised, especially in towns and cities, which is indicated in the establishment of cemeteries in most places. Usually, a cemetery is situated outside the town, where deceased inhabitants are buried irrespective of their ancestral clans. This development, however, has only shifted the emphasis away from the ancestral land to one's place of origin. Hence, in place of the ancestral land, most Nigerians aspire to be buried in their communities of origin. Nonetheless, in view of modernisation and the influence of Christianity, some Nigerian Christians no longer attach any importance to where they are buried. In other words, while many Nigerians resident in the cities "give a directive where they should be buried when they die" (Adebusuyi et al. 2012), there are some who do not leave such instruction, and others who actually state that they do not mind where they are buried. The aim of this article, therefore, is to examine the pastoral relevance of Genesis 49:29 in contemporary Nigeria relative to burial on ancestral land. In other words, if there are any socio-cultural values in the custom of burial on ancestral land in contemporary Nigeria, then the pastoral significance of the text in Nigeria resides in employing it to encourage such values.

It is noteworthy that from the nineteenth century onwards, "mainline critical scholarship" has rejected the claim of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, thereby attributing the composition of Genesis to three main Pentateuchal sources, namely the Jahwistic, Elohist, and Priestly sources (Wenham 1994:55; cf. Block 2001:387). The Albright school held the conservative view that the patriarchal narratives were based on historically reliable traditions, identifying a 'patriarchal period' of Israelite history, dated "generally between 1800 and 1200 BCE" (Lombaard 2014:2; cf. Albright 1957:241; 1963:5; Bright 1981:67–102). Critical scholarship, however, views these stories as concerned largely with private affairs, with only "a few references to public events ... none of [which] corresponds to a known event of general history" (McCarter 2008:1; cf. Gunkel 1901:1). The implication is that it is hardly possible to fix the historical context of these stories. To this end, many consider the personalities mentioned in Genesis 12–50 as "less accessible as historical individuals" than as eponymous beings from whom the names of later Israelite groups derived (McCarter 2008:2). This would mean that the narrative of the burial of Jacob in Genesis 49 is of little historical importance. In spite of this, however, today many still believe that the patriarchal narratives "provide helpful information that enriches our understanding" of the time and period of the individuals mentioned in them (Longman & Dillard 2006:52). Hence, "it does not follow that Genesis 12–50 has no value" in the study of Israelite prehistory (McCarter 2008:7). Based on the belief that Old Testament (OT) traditions, such as the patriarchal narratives, offer useful information on ancient Israel's past, some scholars have adopted for their

study methods that depart from historical-critical studies; that is, "strategies of interpretation according to which [a] book is meaningful regardless of its pre-history and authorship" (Anderson 2001:16). Such methods come under what Longman and Dillard (2006:169) call the modern literary approach, which emphasises the literary quality of the biblical narrative, paying little "attention to questions of historical reference." The purpose of modern literary criticism resides in the application of the text to the reader's life and circumstance. According to Mann (2011:8), applying the text to the present time is seen already in the activities of the Deuteronomistic Historians (Dtr.), the "writers, editors and redactors [who gave] shape to the past in literary form... in order to speak to the present."

To this end, this article applies narrative reading, a method under the modern literary approach, to the study of Genesis 49:29 in the Nigerian context. As expressed by Oosthuizen (1994:85), narrative reading does not question the text for its historical veracity but rather "invites the reader to explore the dimensions of the narrative" in its final form. The significance of the narrative approach, therefore, is that it engages the text in its canonical form, the thrust of which is an "attempt to harmonise the findings of historical criticism on the one hand and the needs of [modern] believers ... on the other hand" (Kruger 1994:183). In line with the concern for modern believers' needs, Cranford (2002:159) states that narrative criticism focuses "on the narrative flow of ideas in the text," exploring its possible impact on the reader. Applying narrative criticism, therefore, the pastoral relevance of Genesis 49:29 in the Nigerian context can be assessed irrespective of the historical context of the text. For the study of burial on ancestral land in Nigeria, the article employs the descriptive method, which, as used here, simply means to "describe a phenomenon and its characteristics" (Nassaji 2015:130). Sequentially, the work examines Genesis 49:29 in the context of Israelite burial customs, the relevance of the passage in the Nigerian context, and its pastoral relevance in contemporary Nigeria.

### **Genesis 49:29 in the context of Israelite burial customs**

While scholars have not agreed on the actual historical context implied in the patriarchal narratives, some have suggested that the stories of the burial of Jacob and Joseph on their ancestral lands resonate with "premonarchic interment practices [of] patrilineal burial" in a tomb located on the deceased's family's land in ancient Israel (Bloch-Smith 2018:371). The OT reports many instances of this practice. For example, Joshua was buried on his inheritance in Ephraim (Jos. 24:30), just as Eleazar the son of Aaron was laid to rest on the land allotted to Phinehas his son, also in Ephraim (24:33). Other instances during the pre-monarchic period relate to those of Gideon and Samson, who were interred in their fathers' tombs (Judg. 8:32; 16:31). The importance attached by the Israelites to "the family vault where their ancestors were buried" (Burger 1992:111) is seen in the exilic period when Nehemiah refers to Judah as "the place of my fathers' tombs" (2:3, 5).

Archaeology has confirmed burial sites in Palestine, some of which are most probably reminiscent of the cave at Machpelah in structure and in terms of having been used for family burials. Many excavations indicate that such structures were in use throughout the history of Palestine "from the Chalcolithic era through the Bronze and Iron periods up to Hellenistic and Roman times" (Burger 1992:108). Burger (1992:109) states that in the Bronze Age (3150–1200 BCE), also identified by archaeologists as the

Canaanite period, “people buried their dead in ... natural caves.” This same fact is buttressed by Rosik (2006:4): excavations have shown that in the Early Bronze Age, generations of one clan were buried “in the same tomb which was [an] artificial or natural cave,” with one cave accommodating burials ranging from a few individuals to about two hundred. For example, 40 individuals have been identified inside “the small chamber at Dan” (Rosik 2006:9). The author clarifies that this practice represents a repeated use of the same cave rather than one single interment (Rosik 2006:4), such that some burial sites have been found to have been used for centuries. Examples of these are the burial caves excavated at the foot of Mount Ebal in Shechem, which had been “in use for more than 4000 years” (Burger 1992:108). Bloch-Smith (2018:366) explains a natural cave thus:

A cave tomb utilized natural fissures within the rock that might be enlarged as needed. To create a chamber tomb, the fissure or cave was shaped into a quadrilateral room. Adding benches around the periphery of the chamber produced a bench tomb. [There could be] [s]tone carved or constructed waist-high benches along the sides and back of the chamber. (cf. Burger 1992:109)

Rosik (2006:10) adds that, deliberately shaped in this way, each rock-hewn tomb had “a small opening closed by a large stone” (cf. Kenyon 1960:4). It is believed that the use of bench tombs first appeared in the fourteenth to twelfth century BCE in coastal and Shephelah areas, and that “highland Judahites likely adopted” the practice from these places (Bloch-Smith 2018:366). Similar structures belonging to this period, identified by the Bedouin as *nawamis*, have been located in several places in the Sinai Peninsula. Since they usually occur in clusters, it is suggested that these structures possibly indicate “social ties between families” (Burger 1992:107). By the eighth century, the three types of burial, that is, cave, chamber, and bench tombs, occurred either separately or together, “usually cluster[ing] in a rock outcrop proximate to a settlement” (Bloch-Smith 2018:366). Thus, the Israelites might have inherited from the Canaanites the practice of placing their burial places immediately outside the city walls, of course with the exception of the kings’ tombs built “inside the City of David,” that is Jerusalem (Rosik 2006:11; cf. I Ki. 2:10; Neh. 3:16). As expressed by Bloch-Smith (2018:366), eighth century Judahites continued the practice of multiple burials in cave tombs, chamber tombs, and bench tombs “naturally formed or hewn room(s) in the rock”.

From the Bronze to the Iron Ages, caves “hewn in the bedrock” have been discovered in places like Jericho, Ai, Azor, Shechem, and Tel el-Far’ah in the northern Negev (Rosik 2006:9). Bloch-Smith (2018:374) may, therefore, be correct when she suggests that the cave of Machpelah most probably “modeled the biblical ideal of patrilineal generations buried together on family-owned land”. Nonetheless, it must be mentioned that other types of burial structures were in use in the Palestinian territory. For instance, three forms of tombs were found at Azor and at Tel Zedor. One is the simple grave commonly dug into the ground. Another is a tomb “shaped as rectangular cist,” while the third is a coffin created from two large storage jars by breaking their necks and joining the two (Rosik 2006:10).

Joseph’s instruction to carry his bones to Canaan for reburial is possibly a pointer to a form of secondary burial as an important aspect of later Israelite burial customs. That

the family vaults were used continually over the generations meant that the bones of formerly buried individuals had to be moved elsewhere to allow space for new burials (Burger 1992:111). This need must have led to the creation of the ossuary in form of “a sunken pit or a small side chamber” (Rosik 2006:11). According to Burger (1992:108), ossuaries were of varied forms and sizes, but “usually rectangular” in shape. Bloch-Smith (2018:374) states that most “documented bench tombs housed primary and secondary burials.” For instance, excavations on the coastal plain of Israel yielded examples of “ossuaries containing disjointed bones” (Burger 1992:108). This practice of “secondary burial” seems to be reflected in the OT idea of the deceased being “gathered to his fathers” (Rosik 2006:11; cf. 2 Ki. 22:20; etc.).

In ancient Near Eastern culture, the custom of burying the deceased with “his fathers in the family tomb” served several purposes (Burger 1992:121). In the first place, several biblical texts indicate that burial in the family tomb “signified a good death” and burial outside the family land a bad one, sometimes considered a punishment from Yahweh (Bloch-Smith 2018:371). Such was the case of the prophet from Judah who was buried in Bethel “as a punishment” for disobeying the divine command not to eat or drink in Bethel (Stavrakopoulou 2007:8; cf. 1 Ki. 13:21–22). Also relevant here is the narrative of the 80-year-old Barzillai from Gilead, who turned down David’s offer to stay at the royal house, preferring instead to die and be buried near the graves of his father and mother (2 Sm. 19:37). Thus, in ancient Israel, one of the signs that one had died a good death was that they were “properly buried in one’s own land” (Spronk 2004:992). That ancient Israelites aspired to be buried on their own land implies that a burial site was also an indicator of where one belonged as well as land ownership. In other words, if the deceased was interred in a particular place, that place belonged to him/her and he/she belonged there. As succinctly expressed by Stavrakopoulou (2007:1), for the Israelites the family tomb served “to mark the boundary of a given place or to signal possession or ownership of a territory”. The OT reflects severally on the importance of family land and its boundaries. Proverbs 22:27–28, for instance, warns against removing the ancient landmarks or selling the ancestral estate. In Deuteronomy 19:14, it is prohibited to remove a neighbour’s boundaries, and 27:17 places a curse upon anyone who defies this instruction. The importance attached to family land is clearly shown in Naboth’s refusal to sell his land to King Ahab. “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers,” Naboth answered Ahab (1 Ki. 21:3). The Hebrew term אֲבֹתַי נַחֲלָה (lit. the inheritance of my fathers) often translated as “my fathers’ inheritance” is perhaps better rendered as “ancestral inheritance” (Ademiluka 2022:3; cf. the New Revised Standard Version, NRSV), inheritance being the expression usually employed for land in the Hebrew Bible (Ndekha 2013:39). Hence, the term refers properly to ancestral land. Other texts depict that “territorial boundaries might be marked by graves”. For example, Joshua was buried on the boundary of his ancestral land, as already mentioned. Similarly, in Joshua 7:24–26, Achan’s burial is said to be at the Valley of Achor, which elsewhere is “situated on the boundary between Benjamin and Judah” (Stavrakopoulou 2007:2; cf. Jos. 15:7).

Moreover, since death was seen as being gathered to one’s ancestors, burial on one’s ancestral land served as an indication of the strong familial bond between the living and the dead. Spronk (2004:991) states that aside from being named together in the genealogy, the proper way to be united with one’s ancestors was to be “buried in the

family tomb". Thus, there existed a correlation between graves and ancestor veneration in this ancient culture with its "perceptions of the continued [presence] of the dead ... with the family household" (Stavrakopoulou 2007:1). Writing on burying on the ancestral land amongst later generations of Jews, Grabell (2017:4) opines that the practice highlights for them the importance of keeping "their families together in life and death". In other words, death did not sever domestic relationships but only changed the nature of the interaction between members of the family. The ancestors were perceived as playing the role of guardians and protectors towards the living family members. Hence, in ancient thought, ancestral tombs functioned as "physical markers of the continued existence and permanent presence" of the dead with the living (Stavrakopoulou 2007:1). As expressed by Spronk (2004:991), burial in the family tomb gave assurance to the living of the unity of the past, present and future generations of the family. In Bloch-Smith's (2018:371) summary, the custom of burial on ancestral land in ancient Israel affirms a correlation between burial sites, "family connections, and attachment to land".

It is in regard to the purposes served by burial in the family tomb that the OT practice finds relevance in Nigeria as in Africa as a whole. Hence, the next section examines the relevance of Genesis 49:29 in the Nigerian context.

### **The relevance of Genesis 49:29 in the Nigerian context**

In Africa, while the various ethnic groups have varied burial rites, it is a general practice to bury the dead on ancestral land. Hence, Biwul (2014:21) asserts that in Africa generally "the dead are not buried away from their land of ancestry". As in ancient Israel, in the belief of most African peoples, for burial to be considered proper the deceased must "be buried in their ancestral land" (Ibrahim 2022:2). In some communities, for example amongst the Miship people of northern Nigeria, burying someone outside his/her<sup>1</sup> land of origin amounts to "hatred and rejection for the dead by the family and community" (Biwul 2014:22). For the Yoruba, to bury outside the family land "appears like throwing away ... the person totally" (Izunwa 2016:134).

As in Israel, the custom of burial on ancestral land in Africa, particularly Nigeria, serves socio-cultural purposes. If burial outside one's ancestral land implies hatred for or rejection of the deceased, then burial in one's own place signifies a good death as well as proper and acceptable burial. But more importantly, the practice is closely bound with issues of land tenure and the identity of the deceased. Through burial on family land, the deceased is identified with his/her burial site as his/her place of origin. Hence, in Nigeria, as in most parts of Africa, burial location is "the basis for asserting land rights, origin, identity, and belonging" (Komakech 2016:27). In some places, the proof that one belongs to a given community is being able to point to one's father's tomb on the ancestral land; inability to identify it in this way means that one does not belong to that community (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh (2000:435). In Nigeria particularly, there have been instances where corpses have been denied burial "on the excuse that they were non-indigenes" of the communities where they were to be buried (Edem 2019). Thus, in such

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that while in some Yoruba communities the corpse of a married woman must be returned to her patrilineal family, in most places it is buried on her husband's family land or in his place of origin. This means that in either case, wherever a married woman is buried is her own land.

communities "a grave is a memory... and it depicts a sense of ... belonging" (Komakech 2016:27). As Ibrahim (2022:8) puts it, for the Yoruba, for example, a burial site serves as a "historical place to both the present and the unborn generations" because people's memory is recalled every time they see their forebears' burial ground. In this way, burial site and land ownership are critically interwoven! If one's family has no land, one does not have a place of his/her own where to be buried. To this end,

In Nigeria [amongst the Miship, for instance,] land is a critical commodity. A people without ancestral land is a people without roots, identity, and essence. [It] gives a person his or her stamp of identity, sense of belonging and recognition in society". (Biwul 2014:21)

Similar to ancient Israelite thought, burying the dead on the family land amongst the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria reflects belief in ancestors. Writing on this ethnic group, Nwala (1985:41) sates that for Africans death does not end life but represents merely a dissolution of the flesh. Hence, death does not sever the relationship of the deceased with the family but rather extends it "to the great beyond" (Eze 2018:61). Burying the dead at home or on their family land, therefore, is "a way of keeping the deceased as members of the family" (Adebusuyi et al. 2012). It indicates that both the dead and the living are one, and the deceased are not "forgotten after the burial" (Adebusuyi et al. 2012) but continue to be seen as "invisibly present among their family members" (Kunhiyop 2012:213). With this belief, burial at home or on the ancestral land guaranteed that the burial sites of the "deceased were within easy reach for regular contact" (Adeboye 2016:5). It also ensures that the deceased "live among their people and to avoid any severance of [the] communal relatedness" (Biwul 2014:22). Thus, amongst many Nigerian ethnic groups there is a strong "belief in [the] existing relationship between the living and the ancestral spirit world" (Biwul 2014:22). It is believed that a deceased person joins the ancestors once given proper burial, the most important aspect of which is to be buried on the ancestral land. The dead person is at rest only when properly buried, and it is only then that his/her "spirit is believed to have joined the ancestors" (Komakech 2016:27). Opoku (1978:135) attests to the "widespread belief in Africa that proper burial rites and ceremonies" must be performed before the spirit of a dead person is able to join the ancestral world.

It is also commonly believed, on the other hand, that if an old person is not accorded a decent burial, he/she is unhappy with the family, so his/her spirit is forced to wander about and may harm the relatives for such a negligence (Izunwa 2016:129). In Igbo traditional thought, if improperly buried, the spirit of an elderly person "would be unhappy and would probably return as [an] evil spirit for vengeance" (Izunwa 2016:129). Such spirits may inflict the living members of the family "with terrible punishments" such as death, sicknesses, stagnation and other misfortunes (Ofor 2022:143; cf. Sibani & Ehisienmen 2020:154).

However, when given proper burial on the ancestral land, the deceased become ancestors and are "considered essential to the living society" in several ways (Komakech 2016:28). Firstly, the ancestors are regarded as the roots from whom the living derived their being. Hence, it is the ancestors that enable them to "define themselves in time and space ... within ... a human group" (Elli 1993:154). The ancestors are also regarded as

playing certain roles in terms of exercising “control and oversight” over those they have left behind (Biwul 2014:23). It is believed that the ancestors “control [the] domestic productivity, luck, wealth, and fertility” of their living family members (Komakech 2016:28). To discharge this function, “they may reveal themselves in dreams or appear” in other ways to their living relatives to give information or warning (Opoku 1978:137). Burying the deceased on the family land, therefore, enhances this mutual relationship, thereby enabling the ancestors to perform their roles towards the living. As Biwul (2014:22) puts it, the practice of burial on the ancestral land ensures the nearness of the spirits of the ancestors to the living “for easy access and interface” (Biwul 2014:23). It is also assumed that the nearness of the deceased to the family enables those alive to discharge their traditional responsibility towards the ancestors. This has to do with cultural practices and rituals of “communicating with ancestors and paying respect” to them (Komakech 2016:28). For instance, the Mupun of northern Nigeria perform rituals towards their departed souls by invoking their spirits “collectively during sacrifices, prayers and offerings” (Danfulani & Dadok 2012:200). The blessings of the ancestors to the living are assured if the latter perform the required rituals, but they may visit the living with misfortunes if they fail in this regard, as earlier mentioned (Komakech 2016:28).

No doubt, most of these practices and avoidances are things of the past, especially for Christians. Nonetheless, there are socio-cultural values derivable from them, which are invaluable for Christian living. To this end, the next section assesses the pastoral relevance of the study in contemporary Nigeria.

### **The pastoral relevance of burying the dead on the ancestral land in Nigeria**

The study of burial on the ancestral land in ancient Israel and Nigeria indicates that some socio-cultural values can be deduced from the practice, which can be of some pastoral relevance in contemporary Nigeria. This proposition resonates with Izunwa’s (2016:143) recommendation to Nigerian churches to study the burial rites in the various cultures in the country with a view to isolating their “neutral and positive elements for inculturation.” When this is done, the church in Nigeria will be following the example of the Malagasy Roman Catholic Church in Madagascar, which already incorporates burial on the ancestral land into its doctrines, utilising the text of Jacob’s death and burial as its biblical foundation (Razafindrakoto 2006:459). In the first place, burial on ancestral land enhances the African idea of belongingness; that is, the fact that one must necessarily identify with a particular place as one’s community of origin. This is seen in the fact that usually when someone dies, his/her people do not bury him/her in just any place. Rather, it is recognised that the deceased came from a particular place and belonged to a particular people. The deceased is buried in his/her place of origin by his/her own kin and kindred, thereby “marking their identity” with the dead and reaffirming their continued relationship with him/her (Eze 2018:67). In this way, burial on the family land in contemporary Nigeria enhances the African expression of family bond (Ayodele 2016:117); or, as expressed by Shipton (2007:173), the “relative worth ... of people and of the bonds between them.” Burial on the ancestral land or in the country home of the deceased not only serves as a reminder that one is part of a group of people, but also gives opportunity for reunion amongst relatives. In the words of Izunwa (2016:142), burials, especially when done in the country home of the deceased,



“constitute the most effective event of re-union for the African peoples” because usually relatives and friends of the dead person go home for the occasion. Thus, in the communal experience of individual death, “individuality and communality are being reconciled” (Izunwa 2016:142).

Most importantly, from the pastoral perspective, the need to bury someone in his/her own place of origin and amongst his/her own people has implications for character. In traditional African society, apart from the purposes already discussed, burial rituals “served the function of inculcating good” character in the indigenes of a community (Nwokoha 2020:77). Amongst the Igbo, for instance, bad death sometimes has to do with bad behaviour on the part of the deceased. Nwokoha (2020:69) explains that in the past certain burial rituals were reserved for people considered to be of good character in society. This means that persons of bad character were denied certain burial rites, or certain objects were put on their graves “as a mark of rejection” by the community (Nwokoha 2020:69). Amongst the Ngwa extraction of the Igbo, this is a way of showing that the soil “rejects people that have questionable character” (Amaechi 2013). In modern Nigeria, apart from physically rejecting a corpse, there are other ways of indicating non-acceptance of the body of a person of bad character. For instance, his/her own people, who are supposed to bury the corpse, may refuse to turn up for the burial ceremony. This means that the time of being buried in one’s place may be a time of reckoning; that is, a time of “recounting the achievements” of the deceased for the community or denying him/her of burial on account of his/her bad character (Eze 2018:67). Hence, Nwokoha (2020:76) rightly notes that “burial rites and rituals are not all about the dead”.

[R]ather, they go a long way to remind the living on the need to embrace good moral behaviour. This is because the denial of the deceased of some rites and rituals is a frustrating ... experience to the family, kindred and friends of the deceased. This is also a warning and a lesson to the indigenes of the community who may be living immorally like the deceased. (Nwokoha 2020:76)

Thus, the pastoral relevance of Genesis 49:29 in contemporary Nigeria resides in the values attached to being identified with a particular place and people. The practice also offers opportunities of reunion for the relatives of the deceased. Most importantly, the aspiration to be buried in one’s own homeland precipitates good character, as rejection by the community would bring shame on one’s relations. These precepts, amongst others, can be derived from the text and taught to people during Christian burial services.

## **Conclusion**

Jacob’s instruction to his children while in Egypt to bury him in Canaan resonates with the importance attached to burial on ancestral land in ancient Israel. It is from this perspective that Genesis 49:29 is relevant in Nigeria, where, amongst most ethnic groups, for burials to be considered proper the deceased must be buried on their ancestral land. When it became unlawful to bury in residential areas, with the establishment of public cemeteries, the emphasis shifted away from ancestral land to one’s community of origin. In both ancient Israel and Nigeria, the custom of burial on the family land serves some socio-cultural purposes. Apart from the practice signifying that the deceased had

died a good death, burial location is the basis for asserting land rights, identity and belonging. It also reflects the belief in existing relationships between a people and their ancestors. The ancestors are believed to be in control of the varied aspects of life of the living members of their families, including fertility and productivity. With the nearness of the ancestors' burial sites to their families, the living is able to discharge their traditional responsibilities towards them in the form of occasional rituals. Of course, many aspects of the burial customs may not be relevant in modern times, especially for Christians. Nonetheless, they contain some socio-cultural values that are of pastoral significance. First, burial on the ancestral land reflects the values attached to being identified with a particular place and people. Burial in the country home of the deceased offers opportunities of reunion for the relatives of the deceased. And, most importantly, the practice precipitates good character. In Nigeria, therefore, Genesis 49:29 would be an appropriate text for inculcating these precepts in Christians during burial services.

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