
A Contextual Reading of Avad and Shamarin Genesis 2:15 within Environmental Protection and Degradation

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Abstract

The article examined the concept of avad and shamarin Genesis 2:15 within the context of environmental protection and degradation. There has been gross misconception, misunderstanding and misinterpretation among scholars and laity as to the actual meaning of avad and shamar. Some scholars like Allen Ross (124) interpreted avad as a form of worship and not to cultivate the earth, while Von rad opined that the concept refers to serving and protecting the earth in a pristine state (75). In the contemporary times some Christians see the ethic of work as a result of the fallen nature of man in Genesis 3. The objective of this article is to argue that work is not as a result of the fall rather it is a gift from God to mankind be used in cultivating and keeping the earth as intended by the creator. In order to achieve the above objective the following methods were used; Exegetical, Textual (Inter-Intra), historical and hermeneutical principles. It was discovered that avad and shamar was initiated by God and not a resultant effect from the fall. Therefore, the study recommends that both the church and the society should embrace the concept of avad and shamar in the light of keeping and protecting the earth from being degraded and destroyed.

Keywords: Exegesis, creation, care, protection, environment, intertextual

Introduction

The interpretation of Genesis 2:15 is a major bone of contention among critical scholars. This debate revolves around the intended meaning of the Hebrew phrase *le-avdahulshamrah* which is translated "to till and to keep it" in the text under study. As a result of their debates, diverse set of ideas have developed. The phrase *le-avdah* 'to till' from the root word *avad* 'to work' or 'to serve' as the major issue in the text. Scholars like Walter Brueggemann connect the idea with working as to 'till the ground' from agricultural Perspective (46). For Claus Westermann *avad* and *shamar* translated to work which applies to all facets of human vocation in general, regarding it as an essential part of being human and without it life would not be worthy of being human (220-221). However, Allen Ross interprets *avad* to serve as a form of worship in contrast to agricultural interpretation as posited by Brueggemann. Ross further opines and

gives an extended commentary of avadin the context to serve God, depicting Adam was placed in the garden only to serve God and not otherwise.

It is interesting to note that the scripture clearly unveils the original plan of God for man from the beginning was perfectly good for it is far beyond human intelligent design. God in his providential care made sufficient provisions for man before he was created. Not only was provision made for man before he was created; He also provided water (Genesis 1:9) for man, birds, land and sea animals to quench their thirst and to sustain them (Genesis 1:20, 21); He further provided grasses and plants of different kinds for man and animals to be sustained. Last of all, man was given dominion to take charge of all creatures including land and everything on it. However, lack of proper interpretation and understanding of the scripture made many to abandon this obligation of avad and shamar which is rendered 'to work' and 'to care' for the earth. Therefore, from the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 from an agricultural perspective suggests the fact that avad and shamar are enshrined in 'to work' because God is seen as the initiator of work. The man who has no idea how these things were created was asked to freely take charge of his environment. By this implication man is seen as a steward and will be answerable to the creator.

Genre of the Text

Genre are quiet instructive tools in determining the inherent meaning of a text, for it gives the form of literature within the pericopy of the text. It also informs how a literary piece of writing ought to be translated and interpreted. In this text the genre of Gen 2:15 is a narrative account within the framework of divine imperative.

Exegesis of Genesis 2:15

Hebrew Text

וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּשְׁמְרוּ אֹתוֹ בְּגֶדֶת עֵדֶן וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לַאֲדָמָה עֲבֹד וְשָׁמַר אֶת־הָאָרֶץ

Translation of the Hebrew Text

“And the Lord God took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to keep it” (mine translation).

In exegeting the text under investigation two important key words must be understood within the context of its historical and narrative account—avdah 'to work it,' and ulshamrah 'and to keep it' the Hebrew form of the former word is a qal-infinitive construct of the third person feminine, the verb is derived from the root word avad which could mean 'to labour,' or 'to work:' or 'to serve'. but in the absolute form the verb could also mean 'to till the ground.' The preposition le 'to' is a directional preposition and the suffixed hu (third person feminine singular) are actually pointing towards the garden as direct object (Wigram 887). The second word is ulshamrah 'and to keep it.' This verb is a qal-infinitive construct of the third person feminine singular, from the root word shamar which has more than one sense; it could mean 'to keep,' 'to watch,' 'to preserve' 'to have charge of' (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1036). In other context it could mean 'property in trust,' 'to tend flock,' 'to guard,' 'to keep watch' etc.

Exegetical and Grammatical issues

Two major views are paramount to this phrase le avdah ulshamrah 'to till it and to look after it' in

Genesis 2:15. First, the intended meaning is viewed by Ross to mean Adam was intended primarily to worship in the Garden of Eden and not mainly to cultivate it (Ross 124). The second view is advocated by vonRadthat, “God charged Adam with serving and protecting the earth to keep it in a pristine state” (Rad 75).

However, a close examination of the text in the preceding verse-8, reveals that the phrase *le-avdahulshamrah* 'to till it' and 'to look after it' in verse 15 cannot be exempted from the agricultural interpretation. Even though there is no record in the text indicating or demonstrating Adam doing the work of tilling the ground but we can consciously see the implicit meaning through the preceding verse, 5 “...and there was no man to work the ground (NIV).” This portray the fact that man's responsibility was defined and determined by God.

In connection to 'worship,' the research agrees that the verb *avad* has a sense of serving. This can clearly be seen when the verb is nominalized to *eved* meaning 'slave' or 'servant', which in real sense denotes the idea of 'serving'. In this text the obligation given to man -*shamar* 'to look after' is clearly an act of service to God in light of the cultural mandate of man's sense of responsibility as a steward and to give account of his stewardship to his creator.

Avad and *shamar*; 'to serve' and 'to protect' are possible meanings of the Hebrew words in Genesis 2:15. However, they are primary meanings, particularly in an agricultural perspective. Supporters of this translation tend to interpret the text according to their desired theology rather than constructive theology on the basis of the text. Viewing human dominion as inherently negative and contrary to the divinely intended humanity-creation relationship, they argue that man was designed to “serve” the creation and “protect” it by keeping it in a pristine state (Ross 120). The phrase is not only used in this passage. Intratextual studies reveals that other places in the Old Testament have similar rendering. For example in Genesis 30:31 where Jacob demanded from Laban says 'If you will do this for me, I will again pasture your flock and keep it: which gives the sense of tending and caring for the sheep.’’

This research is not ignorant of the views of other scholars in the likes of Bruce Waltke, who contends that work is a gift and not a punishment for sin. For even before the Fall, humanity had duties to perform. He continues elsewhere in the Pentateuch that the expression 'to keep' describes the activity of priests. The term further entails guarding the garden against Satan's encroachment (Genesis 3:1-5) (87). As priests and guardians of the garden, Waltke posits that Adam and Eve lost the sense of *shamar* by not adhering to the obligation of protecting and keeping the garden. Similarly, Walter Brueggemann also suggests that the word *avad* and *shamar* “to till' and 'to keep' may suggest a gardener or a herder, because from the beginning the human creature is called, given a vocation and expectation to share in God's work (46). Claus Westermann elaborating on Brueggemann's view opines that “work is regarded in Genesis 2:15b as an essential part of being human and life without work would not be worthy of a human being” (220-221). He further cites B. Jacob in his work “that every human occupation shares in some ways in this tilling and keeping.” (221). This view has positively affected all human activities and vocation, depicting the root sense of *avad* and *shamar* which is 'to serve' and 'to protect.'

Supporting the above discourse Gerhard Von Rad also views the phrase *avad* and *shamar* “to till and to keep it” as strongly affirming that man's purpose in the garden is to work it and preserve it from all damage, a destiny that contradicts particularly with the commonly

accepted fantastic idea of “paradise” (78).

Intertextual reading of Avad and Shamar in the light of Priesthood (Num 17:13)

Priesthood activity is clearly defined in most contexts in which the term 'priest' occurs. Most remarkably, their major activities include a constant duty of protection around the tent of meeting against death by the wrath of God (Numbers 17:13). The second major definite activity is giving instructions on performing diverse sets of offerings. In most of the priesthood context the verb avad and shamar are used in combination to describe the duty of those who served within the tabernacle in general. In other words, they restricted the access to the tabernacle (Numbers 18:5).

The Garden of Eden and the tabernacle are parallel in a sense. Within the context of priesthood activity, it could be strongly suggested that the primary work of Adam in the garden was to be guardian of the garden sanctuary. However, consequent upon their failure to guard the garden against Satan's encroachment (Genesis 3:1-5), both were sent out of the garden and the task of protecting shamaris given to the cherubim (Genesis 3:24) (Waltke 87). Here we have a comparative look at our environment as sanctuary which is most equivalent to the tabernacle. The presupposition of our environment as sanctuary clearly depicts that as humans we are the priests of our environment, we have the responsibility of protecting it against anything that will pollute its ideal standard. Our priesthood responsibility to our environment in serving and protecting comprises every vocation in general that is not against the scriptures.

Intertextual reading of Avad and Shamar in the Context of God's Protection (Gen 8:22)

God's provision, sustenance and protection towards his creation has been the epicentre of the concept of avad and shamar. However, the question is whether the concept of shamar and avad can be applicable within the context of the creator himself. There is no doubt from the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2, how God was actively involved in the process of serving avad and protecting shamar. He causes rain to fall where there is no human to work the earth, plants to grow and provision for sea animals which is far beyond human capability (Psalms 104:24,25, Isaiah 43:20). On the other hand, man being created in the image of God was created to work because work is part of God's activity, in the light of this Darrow L. Miller, Bob Moffitt and Scott D. Allen allude that work is part of what gives us dignity, it allows us to care for our families, our communities, and ourselves. In doing our work we are to do it “as working for Lord” (Col. 3:17, 23-24) in a way that honours and glorifies him (63).

God's relationship to his creation can be seen within the context of 'service' and 'protection.' If avad simply means 'to serve' then God's servant must work through the context of protecting or preserving his creation. The connection of serving and protection is obvious in this context. However, in this act of serving unlike human stewardship which has shown mostly no sense of accountability (Psalms 24:1), for He himself is the creator who has no other than him to give account

Naturally speaking, this act of 'serving' and 'protecting' begins with God himself as the initiator which has been practically demonstrated in the life of Jesus who chose to serve, rather than to be served (Mark 10:45). Christ projects the active servant work of God to humanity in human nature by redeeming humanity to God's original purpose (Philippians 2:5-8). Similarly, man was created in the image of God with the potentials to demonstrate having the same attitude of serving and protecting to redeem our society and to restore our environment to

its original nature. By this practice we are serving one another to the glory of his name, “let each of you look not only to his own interest, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4 ESV). Because by making your environment in an orderly manner you are not doing it to yourself alone but to others as well.

Human Responsibility

We read in Psalm 24:1 that “the earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell there in” (ESV). However, God the owner willingly gave it as a divine gift to humanity (Psalm 115:16). Christopher J.H. Wright perceptively comments that “ecological concern is obviously high on our contemporary ethical agenda, faced as we are with the terrible effects of massive pollution, ozone depletion, carbon emissions and global warming, habitat and species destruction, deforestation and soil erosion, and all other ghastly effects of human degradation” (103-104). Our attitudes toward managing the above listed factors are really affecting our ecological settings. The following points discuss a few of these factors.

Improper Waste disposal and the sense of disorder

Drawing from the exegesis of Gen. 2:15, the concept of *avad* and *shamar* have been misconstrued which must have led to the improper management of waste disposal, this has become a major concern in our societies today, despite several attempts by successive governments and even private organizations in that direction, as several communities (particularly the urban areas) have been affected by heaps of festering waste dumped in almost every nook and cranny of the country (Spencer 12). We seem not to realize the daily effect caused by such an attitude toward waste disposal. Some wastes include harmful plastics, expired liquids and chemicals which are dangerous to health if improperly disposed. Research has shown that some plastic takes 100 years before it decomposes. “plastic bags we use in our everyday life take about 10-1000 years to decompose, while plastic bottles can take 450 years or more” (Leblanc, thebalancesmb.com). This causes poor soil water retaining capacity which results in poor yielding of crops on our land. The recent action taken by the Taraba State governor, Darius Ishaku on May 20 2019 to ban the use of polythene and plastic bags in the state to ensure environmental cleanliness in Jalingo, the state capital according to Punch Newspaper. It further comments that this is quite a good step, if all the remaining 35 states of the federation would vehemently initiate this process and action. Apart from the above statistics on the inherent dangers caused by improper waste disposal the issue has also been money consuming as government is putting effort on sanitation control over that. Navigating the tap root of the problem will help to have less sanitation effort. Water pollution is also another serious threat to health. The World Health Organization has a global record that “contaminated drinking water is estimated to cause 502,000 diarrhea deaths each year (WHO). Coming to Nigeria, further research has shown that “the uses of contaminated water for drinking and domestic chores have increased the chances of diarrhea which is a contributory factor to the deaths of more than 70,000 under five Nigerian children annually” (Okeke, allafrika.com). Improper waste disposal not only having effect on water pollution, but many are its havocs; giving birth from one havoc to another. The blockage of drainage systems and global warming are also its resultant effect. As Leblanc notes that “some of the wastes disposed are hazardous chemicals which when they come in contact with the soil they can be absorbed by plants which are later

utilized by other organisms including humans which can cause several health challenges” (Leblanc, thebalancesmb.com).

Reflecting on the text, precisely the expression vayyannihehu 'and he put him' from the root navah 'to rest or to settle down' is not just portraying the idea of removal but “the fact that the man was placed there to lead a life of repose, not indeed in inactivity, but in fulfillment of the course assigned him,” (Ross 119). Denoting the idea of active service of protecting shamar to maintain its ideal state. Without the sense of shamar the entire human nature will lose its orderly manner. The earth is meant to be protected. There will be no magic in this; God will not come down from heaven to clean and to protect our environment. We must take responsibility.

Inadequate management of resources

One of the major factors affecting our lack of preserving and keeping a healthy environment is our attitude toward managing resources. There is often a general sense of shock in regards to the management of resources. Things seem almost out of control. When we think of the national government; is there a clear, positive direction that the local councils and governments follow? Some wonder and say "where is this country heading to"? Nigeria is one of the top oil producing country apart from other natural resources (fertile land for agricultural use, available water for irrigation and the rest), however, despite its riches in natural resources its resource wealth is one of the lowest among the world's developing regions, both in aggregate and per capital term. About 2.6 million barrels per day for the last 18 years has been produced yet the country loses some certain percentages consequent upon the fact that it cannot manage her own refineries, each day the oil has to move out of the country and come back. The problem has not stopped at this point, you hear often of oil pipe-line damages which have claimed a huge amount of life as a result of fire-outbreak. The environments where these resources are available are still not safe, you often hear of oil pollution affecting not only aquatic lives but making most of the land to be barren and destroyed. This resource management issue not only is it shocking within the local councils and governments, the issue has been hovering within Christendom; the salt and the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). In our society today there is no clear sense of stewardship, self-seeking and individualistic attitudes are the major forces behind this. Even our children that are coming up, we no longer consider how their lives will be in the near future. God has provided us with all that we need, however, managing it is a problem, we suffer sometimes not because we lack resources to provide our daily needs, but because we lack adequate management of our resources. Leaders and individuals in Nigeria should know that we cannot keep a healthy environment by self-seeking.

Another major factor affecting healthy environment in Nigeria is Open-defecation. A problem mostly associated with rural areas. However, urban areas are now becoming the major contributors to this increase of the problem which is becoming a major concern to the environmental cleanliness in Nigeria; putting the country to be the world's most popular country for open-defecation. Recent research has shown the estimated figure of more than 48 million Nigerians practice open-defecation which has placed the country as second in the world (behind India) (Sahara Reporters.com 2021). The scripture has admonishes Christians

with instruction on every aspect of life. The Israelites were given instruction on defecation outside their camp. As people of God they are to protect shamar their environment by keeping it clean “You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it. And you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up your excrement. 14 Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp.... (Deuteronomy 23:12-14 ESV). The last statement “Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp” has provided the reason for the cleanness more significantly in relation to healthy environment. Just imagine that God walking around your community amidst this degradation.

Dangers of pesticide usage

Pest control and the use of chemical herbicides has been an issue to literate and non-literate, within agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. The use of chemicals herbicides and the chemical fertilizer in some years back are not common among farmers, however, the country have experienced abundance of food. Nigeria has long been depending on agriculture for her sustenance and for economic growth apart from oil. Today with the new system of farming through the use of chemical herbicide which is seen as new development to agriculture, yet food supply has drastically reduced; high increase of food prices in markets and silent starvation in both rural and urban areas. Not only have that but pesticide posed potential risks to food safety, the environment and living thing. Non-targeted organisms, including human beings are always at risk of being victims. However, the question still remains on how can we keep our foods, crops, and livestock safe from pest without causing any harm on the organisms? The idea may be difficult especially to farmers. However, we should not forget that keeping a healthy environment includes caring for creatures as well. The concept of shamar is also to care for God's creation and to take dominion does not mean to take advantage of God's creation. Nosakhare Osazee Erhunmwunse in his article titled 'Implications of Pesticide Usage in Nigeria' cited World Health Organization (WHO.int), stated that the adverse effects of pesticides contamination is not limited to the environment but, extended to human health. Hazards arising due to the application of pesticides are mainly due to lack of information, knowledge and awareness, poor legislation or of enforcement of legislation, and sales in the open market of high pesticides (16). Erhunmwunse continues by giving “categories of people who are exposed to pesticides either accidentally or occupationally: pesticides manufacturers, vendors or sellers, mixers, transporters, loaders, operators of application equipment, growers, pickers and clean-up workers and the consumers of food items treated with pesticides” (16). The herbicide use nearby well or stream can easily be washed to contaminate stream waters which are not only harmful to aquatic animal but human being as well.

Proper consideration should be taken with immediate effect to salvage the problem if not 95% of the population directly or indirectly will be affected with chemicals. On the use of organic substance for sustainable development in regards to agricultural system, the ECHO (Education Concern for Hunger Organization) during her recent conference on 'sustainable agriculture in Nigeria' held in Jos focused primary on using organic substances. One of the resource person Baba Yoruba from Burkinafaso presented on making organic pesticide that

will not cause harm to humans. This method has been tested with effect. For more information one can visit their website at www.ECHOcommunity.org.

Presupposition of the Garden of Eden

The Garden of Eden has been depicted as a sanctuary where God invites humanity to enjoy fellowship and peace with him (Waltke 87). The basic requirement in keeping shamar the garden is faithfulness and justice. This requirement is fundamental to every vocation in life that doesn't oppose the will of God. As a church and community God has given us the responsibility of stewardship in every endeavor of life which requires faithfulness and justice to reflect his character. The term avad 'serve' in this context indicates putting effort into constant protection shamar to avoid any damage. Government and non government leaders are to show faithfulness and justice: judges are to judge with justice as their primary function which involved hearing cases, deciding issues, and apportioning penalties as judges in the Old Testament were instructed to do (Deuteronomy 1:16). Furthermore, they also preserved shamargood order in society through righteous and peaceful acts. We cannot keep a healthy environment and do away with corruption if the sense of shamar is lacking. The concept of protecting through justice is not restricted to leaders; however, the community must see it as an individual responsibility.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research has shown clearly that work is fundamental to mankind as God's divine plan from the beginning which includes vocations in general that is not contradicting God's will. However, the agricultural translation of Genesis 2:15 remains the best option. Man's purpose in the garden is 'to work it' and 'protect it' from all damage. Idleness is the opposite, as the scripture strongly oppose it. The idea of the curse in Genesis 3 came after Genesis 2:15 which clearly indicates that work is in God's divine plan from the beginning, as the major theme of Genesis 2:15 could be described as man's relationship with the earth, into which the idea of working and keeping the Garden clearly fits.

The research recommends that church and community must see their environments which include vocation in general as a place which need serving avadand protection shamar. Keeping a healthy environment is not optional but an obligation ('to till' and 'to preserve' Genesis 2:15), it is an act of service to God. Community and the church should do it as an act of service to the Maker. We cannot keep a healthy environment by a self-seeking attitude. Groups and individuals in the community should do away with the self-seeking mentality and individualistic attitude. Christians should be an example of the above listed recommendations; as the light of the world (Matthew 5:14).

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