

**REREADING ZECHARIAH 8:16-17 IN THE CONTEXT OF PEACEFUL
COEXISTENCE IN NIGERIA**

Chisom S. Ugwuowo PhD

ugwuowo.chisom@funai.edu.ng

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies

Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo, Ebonyi State,

Kowhiroro Bright

bright-kowhiroro@delsu.edu.ng

Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy, Delta State University, Abraka

and

Nduka Alfred Ncheke

ndukancheke@gmail.com

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies,

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

Zechariah 8:16-17 is apt to address peaceful coexistence, particularly in Nigerian milieu. The study aims to analyse the original context of Zechariah 8:16-17 and uses its exegetical deductions to address interpersonal relationships in Nigeria, especially in relation to peace living. The research methodology adopted in this research is Historical Critical Method of Biblical Exegesis. The study reveals that Nigeria had witnessed schism for decades. Citizens live in fear of aftermath of conflict; hence interpersonal mutual coexistence is affected. Inhabitants of Nigeria are struggling to survive the enmity which has become the order of the order virtually in all facets of the country. People lack genuine trust on each other. Self-centeredness and greedy has jeopardized peaceful coexistence among people, even in the religious sphere. The researchers are of the view that proper understanding of the original context of Zechariah 8:16-17 and its proper application would restore peace and mutual relationship among Nigerians in the contemporary dispensation.

Key words: Peace, Coexistence, Peaceful Coexistence, Zechariah 8:16-17, Nigeria

Introduction

The issue of peaceful coexistence is a common concern of the citizenry in Nigeria. Nigeria, a pluralistic nation with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, has struggled with peaceful coexistence. Religious and ethnic sentiments have often been exploited, leading to conflict. Zechariah 8:16-17, with its emphasis on truth, justice, and peace, offers a framework for ethical conduct and community building. The book of Zechariah, particularly chapter 8, provides a

message of restoration and hope following the exile, emphasizing the importance of ethical behavior and social justice for a thriving community. The historical context of Zechariah reveals a community struggling to rebuild and redefine itself after a period of immense hardship, which mirrors some of the challenges faced in Nigeria today (Petersen, 1984). According to Falola (1998), this text offers a theological framework for rebuilding communal trust—directly applicable to Nigeria’s 350+ ethnic groups struggling with post-colonial divisions, religious violence (e.g., Boko Haram, farmer-herder conflicts), political corruption undermining social cohesion.

Despite efforts to promote harmony, peaceful coexistence in Nigeria remains elusive. Endemic ethnic biases and religious bigotry are often exploited to fuel conflict. One of the conspicuous problems discovered by the researchers in this study is that little or no attention is paid to Zechariah 8:16-17 as one of the antidotes to the problem of chaos and escalated conflict among people and groups in Nigeria. There is a need to find common ground and promote mutual respect among different groups. The problem lies in translating religious teachings into practical actions that foster peace and justice, and promote a shared national identity. Some scholars suggest that religious conflict is an ideologically charged concept. Political elites incite violence for electoral gain (HRW, 2023). The core issue is how to apply the principles of truth, justice, and peace from Zechariah 8:16-17 to address the specific challenges of religious and ethnic tensions in Nigeria, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Hebrew Text of Zechariah 8:16-17

It is necessary to indicate that Masoretic Text is the choice of the researchers’ Hebrew text. This Hebrew text of Zechariah 8:16-17 is hulled from Bible works version 8. Masoretic Text is the Hebrew Bible with Hebrew vowels which facilitate easy pronunciation and reading of Hebrew text(s), hence the reason for the researchers’ choice of the Hebrew text.

16 אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּ דְבָרֵי אֱמֶת אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ וּמִשְׁפַּט שְׁלוֹם בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם:

17 וְאִישׁוֹ אֶת־רֵעֵת רֵעֵהוּ אֶל־תִּחְשְׁבוּ בַלְבָבְכֶם וּשְׁבַעַת שֹׁקֵר אֶל־תִּתְּחַבְּבוּ כִּי אֶת־כָּל־אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר שָׁנְאתִי נֹאֲמִי־הִנֵּה:

English Translation of Zechariah 8:16-17 (Researchers' Translation)

16 These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth one man to a fellow (friend), and true judgments, peace; judge rightly at your gates.

17 A man should not devise evil against a fellow (friend), and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the LORD.

Sitz-im-Leben of Zechariah 8:16-17

Zechariah 8:16-17 is situated in a post-exilic Jewish community seeking to rebuild their society and redefine their identity. It was a social setting of returning exiles in Jerusalem (520–518 BCE) facing Samaritan opposition, economic hardship, and internal strife (Meyers and Meyers, 1987). The emphasis on truth and justice reflects a desire to establish a just and equitable society, contrasting with the corruption and social injustice that contributed to the exile. The call to "speak the truth to one another" and "render true and sound judgment in your gates" highlights the importance of honesty and integrity in all aspects of life, especially in legal and communal settings. The "gates" were municipal courts where Persian officials expected orderly jurisprudence (Boda, 2004). In other words, the lawful statement is not within the dispensation of all but particularly in two phases. On one hand, "speak the truth to one another" is expected of all returnees from exile. On the other hand, "render true and sound judgment" is for legal community and council of elders to whom decision making, maintenance of law and order and customs, and settling of disputes are entrusted to.

Zechariah prophesied in the second year of Darius I (520 BC), with chapter 8 generally dated to 518 BC, two years after the temple's foundations were relaid. The message was delivered to a remnant community of only tens of thousands, led by Governor Zerubbabel and High Priest Joshua (Redditt, 1995). The Persian Achaemenid policy allowed Yehud to rebuild its temple but kept the province under tight fiscal control. The returnees faced harsh conditions and determination was necessary. The emphasis shifted from ritual to righteousness (Wolters, 2014).

Reading Zechariah 8:16-17 Closely

Individual and Collective Civic and Moral Duties v 16

The Hebrew phrase דַּבְּרוּ אֱמֶת translated "speak truth" is in imperative plural. This implies that speaking truth to a fellow is compulsory obligation which each individual owe each other.

According to Boda (2004), the Hebrew אמת which means “truth” in English rendition denotes reliability, not just factual accuracy. This verse emphasizes the importance of honesty and integrity in all interactions. It calls for transparency and trustworthiness in communication, rejecting deceit and falsehood. This honesty should extend to all, including neighbors and brethren.

The statement presented in Hebrew משפט אמת שפטי which literally means “judge a judgment of truth” implies legal term for fair arbitration. This calls for fairness, equity, and the pursuit of harmony in dealings with one another. Justice should prevail in legal and administrative matters, ensuring that these spaces are filled with truth and peace rather than corruption and injustice. The use of the Hebrew word שער־יִרְמָה which is interpreted as city gates denotes ancient civic centers for legal proceedings. The "gates" mentioned in the verse refer to places of legal and communal decision-making (Boda, 2004).

The use of the Hebrew word וְשָׁלוֹם in the context of the text shows that complete welfare of man is divine intention. The word does not merely imply absence of conflict but positive peace (Meyers and Meyers, 1987). In other words, it means wholeness; it can be used to imply communal harmony. The judgment should aim to restore and establish peace within the community. Equitable decisions should allay feuds and produce peace. These commands are presented as duties incumbent upon the people, showing gratitude to God and glorifying Him. Performance of these duties is linked to the fulfillment of God’s promises.

An Order to Refrain from Noxious Activities v 17

The statement in v 17 indicates that obnoxious rules and noxious deeds are banned through decrees, specifically divine orders. The Hebrew words תִּחְשְׁבוּ רָע are used to denote “think/plan harm”. The words imply premeditated malice. However, this nature of human attitude is prohibited in the prophetic oracle. It is clarified in the oracle that no one has the prerogative to harm another person. According to Peterson (1984), the passage warns against harboring ill intentions, malice, resentment, and harmful scheming towards others. It is a call to guard hearts from evil and cultivate compassion and empathy. False oath captures in the Hebrew phrase שִׁבְעַת שָׁקֶר denotes that oath-breaking undermines social trust.

The Hebrew word שָׂנְאָתִי is articulated in the English word “I hate indicates divine rejection of relational sin. The verse condemns false oaths and deceit, urging people to uphold the integrity

of their promises. False oaths breach trust and undermine the sanctity of words. Dishonesty, injustice, and ill intent are things that God hates. God's desire is aligned with values that foster flourishing, unity, and love. The law is not only given to restrain men by a bridle and contain a rule of life as to outward duties, but also rules their hearts before God and angels (Wolter, 2014).

Discoveries of the Exegesis

1. It is both a collective and individual responsibilities to be honest in interpersonal relationship. This responsibility is a mandatory.
2. Justice must prevail in legal and administrative matters, ensuring that these spaces are filled with truth and peace rather than corruption and injustice.
3. All obnoxious rules and noxious deeds are prohibited. They are banned by nature, particularly Supreme Being through prophetic proclamation.
4. False oaths and deceit is solemnly condemned urging people to uphold the integrity of their promises.

Concept of Peaceful Coexistence

For denotative and contextual understanding of the term “peaceful coexistence”, it is essential to analyze the terms "peaceful" and "coexistence" separately. The term "peaceful," as defined by Koko (2022, p. 52), refers to a state of complete peace, suggesting an all-encompassing and holistic approach to peace. Gazali and Mohammed (2023, p. 9) explain that the origin of "peace" can be traced back to the Latin word "PAX," which symbolizes a treaty or agreement aimed at resolving wars, disputes, and conflicts, whether they arise between individuals or nations. This understanding ties the concept of peace to the successful resolution of hostilities and conflicts both within a society and on a global scale. In this light, Nwanguma (2018, p. 145) asserts that, despite the diverse interpretations of "peace," it fundamentally denotes the absence of conflict or warfare among groups or individuals. Conversely, actions that disrupt peace, such as violating laws or creating disturbances or violence, can adversely affect relationships within communities (Bakari, 2019, p. 3). This indicates that the deterioration of peace impacts not only individuals but also society as a whole. In contrast, peace serves as a foundation for creativity and development (Atanang et al., 2022, p. 198). For a society to flourish, it requires a peaceful environment, regardless of existing differences. The notion of

"peaceful coexistence" has been present since the inception of human society (Izueke et al., 2014, p. 367). This longstanding aspiration for harmonious existence reflects a core facet of human nature, consistently motivating endeavors to enhance the well-being of individuals at international, national, and local/community levels. Chukwu (2021, p. 256) posits that peaceful coexistence entails a state in which all members of a community engage in harmony, love, mutual respect, and tolerance, transcending differences in religion, ethnicity, language, or social standing. He further argues that peaceful coexistence is essential for the economic development of any nation, as societal progress is unattainable amidst chaos, conflict, anarchy, intolerance, and mistrust. The goal of harmonious coexistence is to foster peace, reconciliation, and security among individuals, irrespective of their religious or ideological affiliations (Mousavi & Mousavi, 2025, p. 234). In essence, the ability of individuals to live harmoniously together is crucial for societal development, as national security, economic prosperity, and overall advancement hinge on peaceful coexistence (Koko, 2022, p. 51). Nevertheless, Nigeria, a country with over 350+ ethnic groups and a diverse religious landscape, continues to grapple with decades of conflict, including ethno-religious clashes. The lack of trust, selfishness, and greed have hindered peaceful coexistence, affecting both religious and political domains. Frequent conflicts between Muslims and Christians in northern Nigeria have resulted in significant loss of life and property (Nwachukwu and Ibenwa, 2011). Additionally, Communal conflicts, often sparked by land ownership disputes, have also led to devastating consequences (Ibenwa and Uroko, 2020). These conflicts have resulted in immense human suffering, displacement, and economic losses. The root causes of these conflicts are complex, involving factors such as politics, ethnicity, religion, economic interests, and land disputes (Soyombo and Attohs, 2009). The fear of domination and perceived marginalization have fueled tensions among ethnic groups, making it challenging to achieve peaceful coexistence (Iyanda and Awofisayo, 2024 p. 131). Some notable conflicts in Nigeria in recent time include the Ife/Modakeke crisis, Zango-Kataf crisis, and Farmer-Herdsman clashes, among others (Abang and Essien, 2023). These conflicts have undermined Nigeria's potential for growth and development, earning it a reputation as a country with significant security challenges.

Application of the Exegesis in Nigerian Context

Truth and honesty are two synonymous that form part of ethical society for human and structural development. In a society often plagued by corruption and dishonesty, the call to speak the truth is particularly relevant. This applies to all levels of society, from individual

interactions to government affairs. On the other hand, **justice and equity improves people's welfare in any given human society if they are carefully applied in daily living.** The Nigerian judiciary system and law enforcement agencies should uphold justice and fairness, ensuring that all citizens have equal access to legal protection and that judgments are based on truth and not influenced by bribery or corruption. In addition, community leaders should revive traditional councils such as traditional practices for local dispute resolution (**Lederach, 1997**).

Peaceful coexistence can be fostered through fair decision, good governance and true judgment. In a country with diverse ethnic and religious groups, the call to avoid plotting evil against one's neighbour and to promote peace is crucial for fostering harmony and preventing conflict. In addition **ethical leadership enhances integrity and better society habitable for members.** Leaders at all levels should embody integrity and ethical conduct, avoiding false oaths and acting in the best interests of the people they serve. Noxious activities such as political violence ("devised evil") and false oaths (election fraud) should be averted and put to a stop by political and religious leaders of Nigeria (Suberu, 2021). **Hate speech and division should be carefully avoided. From the exegesis of the text, they are condemned according to the prophetic oracle.** The verse speaks against hate speech and the cooking up of plans to take unfair advantage of others. In Nigeria, both religious and political leaders must publicly denounce hate speech (cf. "devised evil"). There should be sanctity-of-oath campaigns for leaders. This would enhance proper application of the passage in Nigerian context for better interpersonal relationship which is the major intension of the prophetic utterance (Danfulani, 2021).

Recommendations

1. Educational institutions such as Universities and Colleges should incorporate teachings on honesty, justice, and peaceful conflict resolution in schools, religious institutions, and community programs.
2. The government should enhance the integrity and effectiveness of the judiciary and law enforcement agencies to ensure fair and impartial justice for all.
3. Religious institutions such as Church and Islam should create platforms for dialogue and collaboration among different religious and ethnic groups to promote understanding and mutual respect.

4. The government through legal sector and law enforcement agencies should implement mechanisms to hold leaders accountable for ethical conduct and to prevent corruption and abuse of power.
5. Individuals and groups should support community-led initiatives that promote peace, justice, and social cohesion.

Conclusion

Rereading Zechariah 8:16-17 in the context of peaceful coexistence in Nigeria highlights the enduring relevance of these ancient principles for addressing contemporary challenges. By prioritizing truth, justice, and the rejection of malice and deceit, Nigeria can move towards a more harmonious and equitable society. Zechariah 8:16-17 offers timeless principles for building a just and peaceful society. By emphasizing truth, justice, and the rejection of evil intentions, these verses provide a roadmap for fostering peaceful coexistence in Nigeria, where ethnic and religious tensions often threaten social harmony. Embracing these values can lead to a more equitable and unified nation. The verses serve as a call to action for individuals, communities, and leaders to embrace ethical conduct and work towards building a nation where peace and justice prevail.

References

- Abang, S.O and Essien, E.A (2023). Ethnic Clashes and Sustainable Peaceful Co-existence in Sagamu Area of Ogun State, Nigeria. *Green University Review of Social Sciences*, 9 (2), 1-16.
- Atanang, B.E, Ekanem, J.B and Oko, A. E. (2022). "Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria: Christianity in Focus." *Niger Delta Journal of Gender, Peace & Conflict Studies*, 2 (3), 197-211.
- Bakari,U.(2019). "Religion: The Base for Peaceful Co-existence among People in Taraba State, Nigeria: Implications for Counselling". A paper presented at the Maiden Ramadan Summit/Interreligious Lecture Organised by Yoruba Community Council, Northern State (Taraba State Chapter) held in NUT Hall, Donga,1-11.
- Boda, M. J. (2004). *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Chukwu, C.E. (2021). "National Integration and Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria: The Role of Inter-Ethnic/Inter-Religious Marriages". *Journal of Religion and Human Relations*, 13 (1), 250-266.
- Danfulani, U. (2021). *Religion and Conflict in Northern Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum, p. 112.

- Falola, T. (1998). *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.
- Gazali, K.A.Y and Ahmed Mohammed, A (2023). “Peace And Peaceful Coexistence: The Role Of The Youth In Peace building During And Post insurgency”. *International Journal of Innovative Development and Policy Studies*, 11(1), 8-14.
- Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2023). *Nigeria: Election Violence and Manipulation*.
- Ibenwa, C.N. & Uroko, F.C (2020). Discourse analysis of religion and inter-communal conflicts and its causes in Nigeria. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 76(4), 1-7
- Iyanda, A.O and Awofisayo, A. O (2024). Bridging Ethnicity and Religious Divide for Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria. *International Journal of the Humanities Education*, 1 (2), 130-140 .
- Izueke, E.M.C, Okoli, F.C and Nzekwe, I.I. (2014). “Peaceful Co-Existence: A Tool for Sustainable Development Along the Boundary Corridor of Nigeria”. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5 (27), 364-370.
- Koko, J.C. (2022). “Religion and Peaceful Coexistence in Contemporary Nigerian Society”. *Uniosun Journal of Humanistic and Development Studies*, 1(1), 50-61. Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building Peace*. USIP Press, pp. 87–89.
- Lederach, J.P. (1997). *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington D.C., USA: United States Institute of Peace Press
- Meyers, C. & Meyers, E. (1987). *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*. Anchor Yale Bible. New York: Doubleday.
- Mousavi S.Z. & Mousavi, S.A. (2025). “Peaceful Coexistence and Its Jurisprudential Foundations”. *Islamic Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, 1 (1), 233-246.
- Nwachukwu, K.O. & Ibenwa, C.N (2011). 'Religion and inter-communal crisis in Nigeria', in Nnadozie, O.U (ed.), *Simulation exercises for topical issues in social science*, p. 11, REK Books, Nsukka.
- Nwanguma, C.I (2018). “Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria: An Analytical Study of Christian Perspective of Neighbourliness”. *International Journal of Integrative Humanism*, 9 (1), 144-152.
- Petersen, D. L. (1984). *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Redditt, P. L. (1995). *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Soyombo, O and Attohs, F (2009). Trend of Political Crime and Violence in Nigeria in Salawu, R.I, Adebayo, A and Oladejo, A (eds) *Curbing Political Violence in Nigeria: The Role of Security Profession*. Mukugarmu and Brothers Ent.
- Suberu, R. (2021). *Religion and Politics in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum.
- Wolters, A. (2014). *Zechariah*. Leuven: Peeters.