

## FOOD AND WATER AS POLITICAL WEAPONS IN ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

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### Abstract

*This paper examines a series of Ancient texts with a view to prove that necessities, such as food and water, were used as political weapons in the ancient world. This trend has been adopted consciously or unconsciously by various entities in contemporary contexts. In order to prove clearly the extent that food and water were used as political weapons in the ancient world, the author chooses to focus on extreme cases of need such as hunger, famine, and war scenarios. Thus, texts such as Genesis 25-27, 2 Kings 6-7, 2 Kings 18 and the Book of Lamentations form the backdrop of the argument that food and water were used as political weapons. Transitioning into the contemporary context, the article considers Zimbabwe where political parties (i.e. ZANU PF or MDC) use food and water as political weapons to win the people's vote. The article shows that trend of politicizing these basic necessities may not be limited to Zimbabwe, but extends beyond Zimbabwe's borders to a global level. Therefore, the failure to provide necessities (such as food and water) remains a weapon that is used in manipulating policies and decisions in different eras.*

**Keywords:** Food; Water; Weapon; Context; Resource

### Introduction

Food and water are resources that play a significant role in the lives of humans and other creatures alike. These resources are so critical that most living creatures fight with all their energy to get them. Their survival depends on them. The fight for these invaluable resources is not only evident in contemporary contexts, but was also prevalent in ancient contexts, and at times, leads to the control of one group by the other. The strong control the weak, the powerful control the less powerful and the rich control the poor. Therefore, it can be asked "to what extent have food and water been used as political weapons in ancient and contemporary contexts?"

This research seeks to prove that food and water are significant resources that have been used as political weapons in ancient and contemporary contexts. Thus, in line with the aims of reading ancient texts in dialogue with contemporary contexts, (i.e. liberating the Church, Community and Creation), we can explore ways of disarmament and of offering freedom to the Church, community, and creation. In order to accomplish its mission, the research explores the significance of food and water in the ancient Near East, in Israel, in war zones, and in contemporary context, and concludes by synthesizing the results. The analysis of the significance of food and water incorporates both the diachronic and synchronic aspects. In that way, the research is able to trace historically how food and water have been used. But at some point, the

research focuses on a specific period in history (i.e. the period of the Book of Lamentations). As it finally makes a transition from ancient contexts to the contemporary context, rather than taking a comparative analysis which may lead to establishing unnecessary direct relationships, the research uses an analogous reading which brings out differences and similarities between the two contexts.

### **Exposition of key words and concepts**

For a study such as this to yield significant clear results, one has to identify key words and concepts and clearly define them.

#### ***Food***

The first key word is “food”. The Webster Reference Library Concise Edition English Dictionary (1999:128) defines food as “any substance, especially solid, taken in by plant or animal to enable it to live and grow; anything that nourishes”. From this definition one can summarise that when we talk about food, we are talking about any substance that enables nourishment, survival and growth. With regards to the context of ancient Israel, the first word translated as food is in Genesis 1:29 is **אכל**. It is derived from **אכל** which means to eat (Holladay, 1988:14). Several other nouns are derived from **אכל**, such as **אכילה**, **מאכלת** and **מאכל**. All these words are linguistically related to eating. The Book of Genesis shows a consistent use of these derivatives of **אכל** to refer to food. Thus, we can safely conclude that, conceptually, food has been associated with eating. In addition to the concept of food and eating, Brown, Driver and Briggs (1906:37-38) recognise the nuances of devouring and consuming. Figuratively the connotations of oppression and judgement are also manifested in the term. Jenni and Westermann (1997:105) note that **אכל** figuratively incorporates fire, sword, land, forest, heat, cold, rage, hunger, pestilence and illness. Besides the figurative meanings of oppression and judgment, **אכל** brings in the notion of joy, celebration and festivals. No wonder a number of festivities and celebrations were characterised by eating and drinking. The antonym of **אכל**, such as **ףע**, connotes being weary and faint. The concepts of sadness, sickness<sup>1</sup> and malnourishment are also portrayed in the antonyms of **אכל**. These are evidently signs of lack of food and water.

Although the English definition of food above implies solid foods, one has to be mindful that food is normally used in association with drink which is liquid. Sometimes the association overlaps such that, in some instances, the generic term food also incorporates liquids<sup>2</sup> (Uppsala, 1974:237). It is also common to see the word food used adjacent to drink. This signifies a time of joy and festivity. It can also signify covenant making (Jenni & Westermann, 1997:107). Therefore, when exploring issues of festivity, joy and covenant making, food and drink are inseparable and are viewed as one entity.

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<sup>1</sup> The antonym **חלה** which is used in 1Kings 17:17 is a good example assuming that the background of the story was a time of severe drought and that the son of the widow could have been malnourished, sick and weak because of lack of food.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, 1 Kings 19:8 and 1 Chronicles 12:40.

The other word translated food is לחם. In its basic form the word לחם refers to bread, food or grain<sup>3</sup> (Dommershausen, 1995:521). The word first occurs in Genesis 3:19. It then finds prominent use in the Book of Leviticus (i.e. Lev 3:11) and onwards<sup>4</sup>. From an etymological point of view, Dommershausen (1995:21) notes that the primary meaning of the word varies from region to region (i.e. in one region it means solid food<sup>5</sup>, in another it means meat,<sup>6</sup> yet in another it means fish).<sup>7</sup> With a careful analysis of the root and its derivatives, Dommershausen (1995:521-522) concludes that the word “suggests the basic idea of coming together (in close combat, contact with food, or joining together for a meal)”. Furthermore, it is suggested from folk etymology that לחם ‘bread’ is connected to לחם ‘fight’ on the assumption that wars were fought for bread (Unger & White, 1985:81). On the other hand bread was a popular gift and an expression of hospitality (Miller, S. & Miller, L. 1961:80).

### **Water**

We first encounter the word “water” in Genesis 1:1. Amid the chaos of creation, there was water. The Hebrew word specifically used here is מים. Thus, before the creation of humankind, God in his wisdom first created food and water for the yet to be created humankind. Although the word מים is used several times in the first chapters of the Bible and in ancient Near Eastern texts, the Hebrew word associated with the English word ‘drink’ is שקה. Our first encounter with this word is in Genesis 19:32. In the context of Genesis 19:32 the word שקה is used alongside יין which means ‘wine’.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the daughters of Lot give their father wine to drink so that he could be drunk.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of the drink is not just to quench thirst, but to make him drunk so that they could sleep with him. Although in this instance, wine is used as a tool to make Lot drunk, sleep with his daughters, and ultimately produce progeny, we need to understand that wine is also used as normal typical drink to quench thirst as in Genesis 14:1 (Russel, 1963:894). This practice became more pronounced during the Hellenistic period when water was mixed with wine (Russel, 1963:895). Unger (1988:1366) concurs by quoting the Mishna in the treatise of the Passover which states that “water was mixed with wine because it was too strong to be drunk alone”. In certain instances bread (i.e. food) and wine are inseparably used to refer to an ordinary meal as in Judges 19:19 (Youngblood, 2011:34).

The other word that is closely related to water is milk. The Hebrew word used for milk is חלב. The passage that clearly shows the relationship between drink, water and milk is Judges 4:19. In this passage, Sisera, having entered Jael’s tent, complains that

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<sup>3</sup> Thus the word can be seen from a cause-effect point of view ( i.e. grain that produces bread), a generic point of view ( i.e representing food in general) and a specific point of view ( i.e. bread as distinguished from meat and liquids) (Unger & White, 1985:23-24).

<sup>4</sup> Thus from a distribution point of view, לחם is predominantly used in Genesis and Exodus while לחם takes prominent position from Leviticus onwards.

<sup>5</sup> In Ugaritic, Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac and Mandaic the word refers to bread specifically and food in general (Reed, 2008:778).

<sup>6</sup> In Arabic, the word refers to meat.

<sup>7</sup> In South Arabic language of Soqatra (Reed, 2008:778), the word means fish.

<sup>8</sup> Holladay, 1988:134

<sup>9</sup> The issue of drinking wine and subsequently getting drunk is first alluded to in Genesis 9:21.

he is thirsty<sup>10</sup> and asks for some water (מעט-מים). The NIV states that Jael opened a skin of milk (חלב) and gave him a drink (שקה). The drink was used to make him relax so that Jael could kill him easily.

From this analysis, we gather that water, wine and milk were significantly the typical drinks in the ancient near East. Furthermore, water from rivers was usually diverted through the canals to irrigate crops. Thus, the survival of humankind was closely linked to these natural resources (i.e. water, wine and milk).

### Significance of food and water in the ancient Near Eastern context

Food and water were critical resources in the ancient Near East (Unger, 1985:1361). Although these resources were used to show hospitality,<sup>11</sup> they were also a source of conflict for much of the ancient Near East. For instance, Genesis 26:14-16 talks about the conflict between the Philistines, Abimelech and Isaac regarding the issue of wells. Further in that chapter, quarrels erupt again between the servants of Isaac and the herders of Gerar about wells once more. Thus, several conflicts in the 'land between' were centred on water, mainly because of the intermittent rainfalls. Oleson (2008:883) in agreement adds "not only is the rainfall meagre in this area, but it is unevenly distributed in space and time, and the total amount that actually falls in a given area can vary dramatically from year to year".

As for the importance of food, one must cast a glimpse on events unfolding when there was famine. The scramble for food would extend to eating donkeys and cannibalism.<sup>12</sup> Further, the importance of these resources is reinforced by the various gods assigned to food and water. For instance, there were various gods of fertility<sup>13</sup> to show the significance of food. In addition to the various gods assigned also to water, there were also a myriad of myths<sup>14</sup> that circulated in the ancient Near East to show the central role played by water. Although in certain cases water represented chaos (Sarna, 1989:6), it is also evident that water signified life as will be proven later.

The significance of food in the ancient Near East can be appreciated better when one looks at the elaborate festivals,<sup>15</sup> sacrifices and banquets<sup>16</sup> associated with their celebrations. In most of their festivals, banquets, and even funerals,<sup>17</sup> food occupied a central place. Jenks (2008:251) notes that in the ancient Near East the intense need for

<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew uses השקיני-נא which is a *Hifil* imperative with a 1<sup>st</sup> person pronominal suffix and a particle of entreaty.

<sup>11</sup> For example, in the story of Abraham and the three visitors in Genesis 18, water and food are clearly used as resources to show hospitality.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance the story recorded in 2 Kings 6:24-29.

<sup>13</sup> Examples include *heqt*, *inanna*, *ishtar*, *anat* and *asherah*.

<sup>14</sup> For example, in the beginning of the poem of Gilgamesh and Aga, there is constant reference to 'to complete the wells' which suggests that the war that is later fought is basically because of water.

<sup>15</sup> For example, in Egypt there are the festival of the Beautiful Feast of the valley, Sed festival, Opet festival, the god's birthday parties or the *epagomenae*, while in Babylon there were the Akitu, New year festival, Babylonian Sabbath, the feast of Marduk. These feast sometimes followed the calendar month (New Moon, full moon, seventh day as well as the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month), while others were premised on the seasons of the year (harvest time, sowing/planting, rain season or winter).

<sup>16</sup> For instance, the Banquet of Ashurnasirpal II (Oppenheim, 1969:558-560) has an elaborate list of foodstuffs which shows the central place of food in the king's hospitality to the people.

<sup>17</sup> Kuhrt (1995:608) notes how at funerals kings of Babylon would invite various groups of people to lament but at the end treat them well by the provision of food and drink.

food spills into dreams.<sup>18</sup> He further highlights that “such intensity leaves society at the mercy of those who would exploit its limitations, because the person who controls food supply has great power”. Jenks (2008:251) notes Genesis 25 and 27 as typical examples in which food was exploited. He concludes that the “threat to inflict such starvation is probably the ultimate use of ‘food power’ as a weapon of control”.

The examples of Genesis 25 and 27 above show clearly how food was manipulated between human beings. However, a further analysis of food manipulation reveals that it was not limited to human beings but also extended to the deity. For instance in the Egyptian Rituals and Incantations under ‘curses and threats,’ the threat to withdraw offerings, bread and meat also applied to the gods who did not build the staircase of Meri- Re for King Unis (Wilson, 1978:327). Thus, it was a common belief that the gods needed food for their sustenance. The withdrawal of food from the gods would act as form of punishment that pushes the gods to cooperate.

In the Egyptian Book of the Dead 175, Osiris raises some complains to Atum who seems to have given a command that Osiris should go and stay in the desert with contentment. Osiris’ main complaint is that there is no water, air and the desert is very deep, dark, and lacking. Further, sexual pleasure is exchanged for water, air, bread, and beer (Ritner, 2003:28). From Osiris’s complaint, one can gather that the ancient Near Eastern gods also enjoyed water, air, bread, and beer.<sup>19</sup> However in this case, these necessities were now being exchanged for sexual pleasure. This reinforces the argument that the ancient Near Eastern gods also yearned for food and drink. Sometimes, their longing for these necessities resulted in manipulation. In the above case, these basics were given in exchange for sexual pleasure.

Food in the ancient Near East also determined voyages destinations and allegiances. For instance, when Israel was moving from Egypt to Canaan, there were promises of better food in Canaan (Exod 3:8; Deut 8:8). However, as they journeyed to the Promised Land, they experienced shortages of food and water in the desert. This was a threat to the entire voyage and the people almost retreated as they recalled the abundance of food in Egypt (Num 11:4-6). Thus, their reason for going forward to Canaan or going back to Egypt was because of lack of food and water supply. This example of Israel’s movement from Egypt to Canaan prompts us to move to a detailed study of food and water in Israel.

### **Significance of food and water in Israel**

Since the Torah occupied a central position in the life and ideology of the Israelites, our initial analysis of the significance of food and water is naturally drawn to the first book of the Torah. In the first chapter of Genesis, before the record of the creation of humankind (i.e. Gen. 1:26), God created food and water for humankind.<sup>20</sup> This is in the form of rivers, sea, vegetation and animals. After the creation of mankind, there is the

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<sup>18</sup> See for instance Isaiah 29:8.

<sup>19</sup> Deuteronomy 32:38 also assumes that the gods enjoyed food and drink.

<sup>20</sup> It should also be noted that in Genesis 2:7, man is created first before trees and food. To reconcile the seemingly contradictory passages of Genesis 1 and 2, Hamilton (1990:154) suggests that the plants in Genesis 1 are wild plants while those in Genesis 2 are those that grow through human cultivation. It is also important to take into account the possible different writers of Genesis 1 (Elohists and Priestly) and 2 (Yahwists and possibly post Priestly) (Hamilton, 1990:152).

command to take dominion over creation (Gen. 1:28). Immediately after this (Gen. 1:29-30), we encounter the first instruction concerning food (i.e. mankind is invited to eat and enjoy creation). However, the instruction to enjoy food should be read alongside its counterpart in Genesis 2:16-17 which suggests that although mankind is to enjoy all food, there are also some limitations.<sup>21</sup> Thus, although God freely offers every food to be enjoyed, there are some established boundaries. There is food to be freely enjoyed and there is food that is prohibited (Hamilton, 1990:172). The prohibition of certain kinds of food is aimed at preservation of humankind's health or an acknowledgement that deity is the ultimate provider (Harris & Youngblood, 2008:181) of the food (e.g. blood).<sup>22</sup> Thus, food can be provided for or withdrawn for spiritual, ritual, dietary and health reasons (Walton, 2016:196-197).

Furthermore, the disobedience of Adam and Eve was based on food (Sigmon, 2013:93). As we have already noted, Genesis 1 and 2 focus on God offering food and water to humankind but establishing some boundaries as well, while Genesis 3 records the first sin of humankind. This sin was basically a violation of prohibited food. Therefore, one can summarily conclude that the first three chapters of the Torah, the book that occupies a central role in the life of the Israelites, describe the importance and pitfalls of food. It pictures God generously giving creation as food to humankind on the one hand (Westermann, 2004:11), and on the other hand humankind failing to live within the confines of permitted and prohibited food.

Chapter 4 of Genesis seems to shift the focus from humankind to God. The story is a record of two brothers who offer sacrifices to God. Abel's sacrifice is accepted while Cain's is rejected. The specific reason for rejecting Cain's offering is not given.<sup>23</sup> However, the story seems to support the theory that God prefers animal sacrifice to plant sacrifice (Hamilton, 1990:223). Thus, God prefers meat over grain/vegetable. MacDonald (2008:32) captures this well when he says "meat was highly valued, especially in comparison with vegetables". He goes on to conclude that, "the divine preference in this story matched the general preference of the Israelites". It can be observed then that the first four chapters of the Torah are dedicated to food. The first three chapters focus on God giving humankind food and the last chapter focuses on humankind giving food to God. In the first three chapters humankind fails to live within the stipulations of prohibited and permitted food while in the last chapter God shows preference for animal as food over grain/vegetable food.

Moving further into the Promised Land, our first encounter with the land of Israel (Palestine) shows that it is referred to as 'a land flowing with milk and honey' (Exod 3:8). This phrase should be understood as a metaphor about the land's abundant food and drink. One could also add that the phrase does not only appeal to the abundance of food but to its nutrition. The abundance of food in Israel is also attested elsewhere in the Egyptian story of Sinuhe.<sup>24</sup> However, there were years when food was scarce. This

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<sup>21</sup> Sigmon (2013:95) agrees that, "the command defines a limitation, a boundary or regulation defining the human's role in the world that God has created".

<sup>22</sup> Youngblood (2011:22) argues that blood falls into the prohibited category because it signified the life of the animal and that life belonged to God, the giver of life.

<sup>23</sup> Asshoto & Ngewa (2006:17).

<sup>24</sup> The story states that, "Figs were in it, and grapes. It had more wine than water. Plentiful was its honey, abundant its olives... Barley was there, and *emmer*. There was no limit to any (kind of) cattle... Bread was

scarcity of food in Israel was always explained in terms of the residents' relationship with God. Thus, the bulk of the curses and blessings in Deuteronomy 27 and 28 are based on the fertility motif. One can assume summarily that if Israel obeyed God there would be abundance of food. However, if they disobeyed there would be famine. God in his wisdom is the first one to use food as a means to call for the obedience and submission of his people. If the people obeyed and submitted to God's laws, He would enable the land to produce enough food for the people. However, if the people resisted his commandments and laws, God would withhold rain and in turn the land would not produce food for the people. Thus, God effectively used food as bait to ensure obedience and submission.

It is worth noting also that God was not the only one who used food as a tool; the general populace also used food to get what it wanted. For instance, most offerings and sacrifices offered to God were aimed at obtaining God's forgiveness, establishing consecration, and communion (Harris & Youngblood, 2011:164). The belief was that once God ate the sacrifices and is satisfied, then his anger would be appeased and a normal good relationship would resume. However, it was not guaranteed that God simply would quickly accept the offerings. In a number of cases, God refuses to be manipulated through food. For instance, in 1 Samuel 13:8-14 Saul tries to seek God's protection from the Philistines through some offerings. This manipulation of food is rejected and obedience is affirmed in 1 Samuel 15:22. Another scenario is in Micah 6:6-8. God is seen to prefer justice and mercy to sacrifices and offerings (Hos 6:6). The rejection of offerings and sacrifices by God is climatically articulated by Amos in 5:21. The author uses the words 'hate' and 'despise' to express the utter rejection of food manipulation. The Hebrew words for 'hate' and 'despise' are שׂוֹאֵה and מֵאֵס respectively. These words used in conjunction with חוּר in its *hifil* stem and translated by the NIV as 'stench' spells out God's total rejection of the offerings. From this analysis, we gather that the followers of God used food to appease God's anger, establishing communion and showing devotion to God and to one another. The use of food in this way was sometimes accepted but sometimes rejected depending on the recipient's overall analysis of the offeror's attitude.

### **Significance of food and water in war zones**

One of the primary reasons for going to war was to secure food and drink. Seevers (2013:128) captures this by citing the motivations for Thutmose II's rise to power and Thutmose III's campaigns.<sup>25</sup> It is interesting that both pharaohs claim to be motivated by the desire to supply food and drink to the gods (i.e. *rah*) and the loyal ones. However, Seevers (2013:128) doubts whether the loyal ones were ever rewarded since there seems to be no record to support this. It may be assumed that it was a propaganda speech with self-interests at the core.

The significance of food and water in war zones is further highlighted in 2 Kings 18:27-32. In this pericope, the Assyrian psychological threat of withdrawal of food and drink emerges. The withdrawal of food and drink would result in people eating their

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made for me as daily fare, wine as daily provision, cooked meat and roast fowl, beside the wild beast of the desert..." (Wilson, 1996:19-20).

<sup>25</sup> Besides the purpose of heroism, the Asiatic campaigns were to "kill the treacherous ones who were in it and to give things to those who were loyal to him" (Wilson, 1969:234).

own excrement and drinking their own urine. Seevers (2013:141) notes well that in such situations of warfare, the victims are offered two choices, either to surrender and enjoy good food and drink, or resist, suffer, eat and drink own excrements.

A closer look at 2 Kings 18:27-32 reveals that the psychological threat could result in two possible scenarios. First, it is aimed at instigating rebellion against leadership. This is clearly seen in the choice of language that the commander uses. He chooses to communicate in Hebrew so that the ordinary person could understand, and not in Aramaic,<sup>26</sup> which would have been understood by the leadership only. Thus, by communicating to the ordinary person the commander is instigating insurrection on the account that Hezekiah was not going to be able to provide the basic necessities of life, such as, food and drink. This should again be understood against the backdrop of the suzerain – vassal treaty which obligates the king to provide protection and necessities to his subjects. If the king fails to provide these basics, he would have abrogated on covenant stipulations, thus, rendering the obligations null and void. In such a case, the vassal could change allegiance (i.e. through insurrection) to another suzerain who is able to provide the necessities.

Besides insurrection, the psychological threat was meant to motivate the hearers to change allegiance. Thus, the commander's aim is to get the people to surrender and shift allegiance to the new king who has better promises. To sum it up, one can say, food and drink were used as a tool for insurrection and shift of allegiance.

Deuteronomy 28:47-57 heightens the significance of food and water in war zones. Written from a contextual background of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, verses 47-57 provide a graphic picture that moves from eating one's own excrement to cannibalism. Thus, Israel is forewarned that if they are to break the covenant stipulations, the invading army would starve their victims, first, to the extent of eating their own excrements and drinking their own urine. Second, they would starve them further until they resort to cannibalism. Jenkins (2008:251) notes that such tactics of starving enemies are widely attested in ancient Near East treaties, especially the curse section of the Assyrian treaties. In light of all this, MacDonald (2008:57) is right to conclude that "besieged cities were brought to submission by cutting off their water supply or through starvation".

A special case that buttresses MacDonald's point of cutting off water supplies and starving the populace is found in the Book of Lamentations. The specific details of the enemy cutting of water supplies are nowhere found in the Book of Lamentations. Such information can be obtained from books such as 2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 36 and Jeremiah 52. What we have in the Book of Lamentations are the effects of the siege. Thus, Giffone (2012) considers the *ahistorical* and *atemporal* nature of the book which opens its appropriation to diverse contexts. However, the association of the book with the fall of Jerusalem, possibly in 587 BC (Parry, 2010:5) and subsequent liturgy commemorations<sup>27</sup> every year in the month of Ab is still significant. Scholars have noted also that the book may have been used in accordance with the ancient Near East

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<sup>26</sup> Vannoy (2011:604) notes that Aramaic was the international language known by those involved in diplomacy and commerce.

<sup>27</sup> Wright (2015:26) observes that besides the memorial of 587, the book of Lamentations is used to remember the fall of the temple in AD 70 and "many terrible times of persecution of Jewish people culminating in the Holocaust".

practice of “bemoaning the fallen sanctuary as the clearing of the site began in preparation for reconstruction” (Provan, 1991:20). In that regard, the book would serve as a memorial as the people look in retrospect at the destruction of the shrine, and as a motivational force as they look prospectively to the reconstruction of a new shrine.

From the first dirge of Lamentations, echoes of starvation ring loud in 1:6, 11, 19. In 1:6, the image of a royal family is given, but the royal family, which under normal circumstances would have plenty and be able to supply extra to its subjects, does not have food. This royal family is compared to a deer that finds no pasture. The result is that it eventually dies because of weakness in the hands of the pursuer. In 1:11, the shortage of food is depicted graphically the general populace exchanges its most valuable treasures for food.<sup>28</sup> Since in most ancient Near Eastern contexts, one’s valuable assets gave them recognition and respect<sup>29</sup> in the society, their loss naturally brought disgrace. Thus, one would hardly exchange any valuables for food<sup>30</sup> unless the shortage of food is so severe that it has become a matter of life and death as expressed in this verse. Lamentations 1:19 focuses on the priests and the elders.<sup>31</sup> In the Old Testament Israel set up, these were the community leaders.<sup>32</sup> The priests depended on the people for their daily supplies.<sup>33</sup> They were therefore not supposed to leave the temple area. However, the priests and elders have moved to the city to look for food. Thus, Lamentations 1:6, 11 and 19 clearly show that the food shortage has affected all levels of the community (i.e. from the ordinary people and the community leaders up to the royal family).

Lamentations 2 is also full of allusions to food. For instance, 2:6, 7 and 22 are connected through the use of the Hebrew word מועד, which a number of versions translate and include a nuance of feast.<sup>34</sup> The religious act of worship is tied together with festivity (i.e. the joy that comes from eating and drinking). Lamentations 2:11 and 12 now focus on the fate of children (עולל) and infants (יונק). In verses 11 and 19, the author tells us that children and infants faint (עטף) in the streets of the city. Earlier on, the city was a location for the death of elders and priests, but now it is for the young ones. The young ones are portrayed as dying in their mothers’ hands requesting bread<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This verse interestingly uses two Hebrew terms used for food. The first term used is לחם which is used as the object of two participles ‘seeking’ and ‘groaning’. The other term is אכל which is used comparatively alongside מחמוד . The purpose of the exchange of precious commodities is to save or buy back life (להשיב גופו). Parry (2010:55) shows that “their primitive instinct to survive drives them to exchange their precious things for whatever food they can get hold of”.

<sup>29</sup> For instance Proverbs 31:11 and 23 clearly note that the husband of the virtuous woman is respected at the city gates because of their household valuables.

<sup>30</sup> Wright (2015:67) expresses it well, noting that “in sieges and similar extremities hunger will drive people to give anything in exchange for food and water”.

<sup>31</sup> The author uses two Hebrew terms for community leaders (i.e. זקן and אנשי).

<sup>32</sup> “The High civil position of the elders and priests would have offered them more social protection against famine than most” (Parry, 2010:63).

<sup>33</sup> Numbers 18:20-32 spells out clearly that the Priests are to receive a tithe from the Levites who would have received a tenth from the people. Thus, from this set up both Levites and Priests depend on the people for their daily supplies and are strictly advised not to leave the tent of meeting, which later was replaced by the temple.

<sup>34</sup> We have NIV (appointed feast/festivals), KJV (solemn feast) and New American Standard Version (appointed feast).

<sup>35</sup> Although the NIV translates the Hebrew word לחם as bread, it can best be rendered as cereals, thereby differentiating it from אכל which can be translated as bread or meat.

(גד) and wine (י). The picture gradually builds up to an unimaginable peak in 2:20. The mothers eventually hopelessly resort to cannibalism. It is now survival of the fittest. The weak young children and infants become food for their mothers.<sup>36</sup> This verse can be understood better if read alongside its counterpart in Jeremiah 19:9. In Jeremiah, it is clear that the cannibalism is as a result of the siege.<sup>37</sup>

Lamentations 3, which is wholly dedicated to the strong man (הגבר), also makes reference and allusions to food several times. These include 3:4, 15,<sup>38</sup> 16 and 46. In 3:4, the strong man (הגבר) complains that God's wrath has made his skin and flesh old. The ageing of the skin and flesh is expressed by the special word בלה in Hebrew. The word basically means to 'wear out' or 'waste away' (Youngblood & Stek, 2011:1328), according to the NIV. In Psalm 32:3 where the word is also used, the ageing is attached to the bones. This may suggest that in Lamentations 3:4 the author is not necessarily restricting ageing to the flesh and the skin, but also to the bones referred to later. If taken this way, then one can assume that the author intends the entire verse in Lamentations to be taken as a parallelism. As with the case in Psalm 32:3 (Stek, 2011:889), some form of illness, loss of appetite, and loss of skin texture can be assumed in Lamentations 3:4. This is a common trend in Israel that when one is psychologically afflicted, they would withdraw from food (i.e. fasting) which would then lead to skin losing its shape. Therefore, one could legitimately conclude that indeed the ageing skin and bones referred to in Lamentations could have been prompted by withdrawal of food and water.

While Lamentations 3:4 may be assumed to refer to food, Lamentations 3:15-16 is unequivocal in its reference to food. The strong man laments that God has given him herbs as food and gall as drink. He openly accuses God of offering gravel, possibly as food, which result in the breaking of the teeth. He also raises the issue of God trampling him in the dust. The reference to dust can be closely linked to the curse of the serpent in Genesis 3:14. In Genesis 3:14, God's wrath condemned the snake to eating dust all the days of its life. Thus, Lamentations 3:15-16 and its link to Genesis are focused on food and drink.

The last image on food in Lamentations 3 is found in verse 46. Here the strong man has moved from the first person singular to the first person plural. Thus, he envisages Israel holistically, as a prey of the enemies. The enemy is salivating and is ready to enjoy its food.

The references to food and drink that are found in Lamentations 1, 2 and 3 are preparatory to a much more elaborate use that is found in Lamentations 4. In other words, Lamentations 1, 2 and 3 may be vague in their presentation of food and water, but Lamentations 4 is much more explicit. Thus, 1, 2 and 3 may be foundationally building up to the climax in Lamentations 4 on the issue of food and water.

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<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that 2:20 does not say that the mothers eat their own children. Rather, it is expressed as a rhetorical question to God (אם תאכלנה נשים פרים עללי טפחים) making it more emphatic that what is happening is abhorrent.

<sup>37</sup> The argument that the suffering is as a result of the siege finds support from Lamentations 3:5-9, where the strong man (הגבר) is a representative of the community.

<sup>38</sup> Although the issue of bitter herbs is clearly stated in 3:15, the concept began in 3:5 with the Hebrew word רש/ראש which may mean unspecified poisonous plant or poison (Holladay, 1988:329). Thus, translations like New American Standard and NIV just translate the word as 'bitterness' while the KJV prefers 'gall'.

In Lamentations 4:1-2, the author compares Israel to precious mineral that has lost its value. The comparison is further expanded in Lamentations 4:3 where two animals of distinct characteristics are portrayed. Jackals are portrayed as careful to feed their young ones. Ostriches are portrayed as heartless. Israel is then compared to the ostrich. Dobbs-Allsopp (2002:131) captures this image, saying, “suffering’s corrosive cruelty has reduced her (Israel) to behaving in a manner not even found among scavengers” This image finds clarity in verse 4 where children are thirsty and do not have food. Wright (2015:133) suggests two readings for the phrase “Because of thirst the infant’s tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth”. First, it may be that the children’s tongue sticks to the roof of the mouth because of thirst. Second, it could be that the children are not able to speak or cry. They are so weak that they do not even have the energy to cry or utter a word. Rather than seeing these readings as distinct, it is better to see them as complimenting each other. The children’s tongue sticks to the roof of the mouth because of thirst, but they are also not able to cry or utter a word because of loss of strength. Apart from the suckling children, there are other children who are a bit older who eat solid food. These are the ones who are begging for bread. One needs to understand this from the Israelite context that saw begging<sup>39</sup> as disgraceful according to Psalm 109:10 and an act that was associated with a curse. So humiliating is the situation that Bergant (2003:113) concludes that “desperate need is here compounded by bitter shame”. The war scenario depicted here has effects of abandonment. The people of Israel abandon their responsibility of feeding their young ones because of suffering. The children end up begging for food and water to try and still quench their hunger and thirst. Thus, the siege has greatly affected both the parents and children in terms of food and water provision.

The siege did not only affect parents and children from the lower class, but it also affected those of the upper class. Verse 5 describes these as ‘those who ate delicacies... brought up in royal purple’. In a nutshell, these are people who used to live a luxurious life, but have been reduced to living with the poor. Provan (1991:113) notes that the “disaster has touched even those who would normally be protected from social ills”. In the same vein, Parry (2010:136) notes that “starvation is no respecter of persons in this democracy of deprivation”. Thus, when we talk of necessities, such as food and water, social strata are set aside.

Verses 7 and 8 seem to be moving from the generic in verse 5 to the specific (i.e. from just the upper class to the royal<sup>40</sup> family). The author evaluates the present state of the bodies as compared to the past. In the past, bodies of the royal family members were brighter than snow, whiter than milk, more ruddy than rubies and like *lapis lazuli*. However, they are now blacker than soot, their skin has shriveled on their bones and has become as dry as a stick. The reference to the texture of the skin is picked up from 3:4. In 3:4, the context was specifically to the הגבר but now in 4:7-8, it refers to the royal family. “Hunger has drained their colour and shriveled their skin... They are starved and dehydrated” (Wright, 2015:135). That the royal family has been affected

<sup>39</sup> The Hebrew word translated ‘beg’ by the NIV is שאל, which may mean ‘ask’, request or demand (Holladay, 1988:356-357). It is the same Hebrew word used in Psalm 109:10.

<sup>40</sup> The Hebrew word חזיר may refer to one dedicated or consecrated to God (Holladay, 1988:232). It may also refer to prince as suggested by the NIV. In this case the entire royal family was seen as dedicated to God, just as the king himself was a representative of God.

to this level by the siege, prepares a firm foundation for verse 20. However, before laying bare the hopelessness of the situation and the fate of the royal family the author brings to fore the unimaginable.

The unimaginable is built climactically by first, an evaluation of those that die because of hunger *vis-a-vis* those that die because of the sword. The author notes that those who die by the sword are better off than those who die because of hunger. Provan (1991:115) suggests that the evaluation is based on the immediacy of the death. Wright (2015:136) concurs that the issue has to do with immediacy. He observes that the Hebrew word that begins verse 9 is ‘good’. Thus, it is better to die quickly by the sword than slowly through hunger.

The unimaginable comes in verse 10. Mothers turn their own children into food. Although this verse should be read alongside Lamentations 2:20 in a symmetrical position, one can also gain more insight when it is read alongside 2 Kings 6:24-7:20. This is mainly because of the Deuteronomic influence on the book of Lamentations (Provan, 1991:21). Thus, in the two stories, three things are worth noting. First, in both stories, the feminine is induced by a prolonged siege on the city which eventually leads to cannibalism.<sup>41</sup> Second, focus is on mothers (who are normally known for their sympathy and care towards their children) who turn to cannibalism. Third, there is evidence of reliance upon the king to provide protection, food and water in accordance with the suzerain-vassal treaty. However, as one comes to the Book of Lamentations, the hope in the king quickly vanishes as the king himself is captured (Lam 4:20).

Chapter 5 has fewer verses that focus on food and water. Since the whole chapter is structured as a conclusion to all the dirges, the few verses that refer to food and water are portrayed as concluding remarks. The first verse that captures our attention is verse 4. The verse seems to suggest that the residents can only get access to water through money. Trading in water was rare in Israel. However, more disturbing is the fact that a lot of these basic resources (including water) belong to Israel. They now have to purchase their own resources from the invading adversaries. This is mainly because the land (i.e. their own inheritance given to them by God) now belongs to strangers as stated in verse 2. Wright (2015:151) comments that this is a terrible reversal which carries a deep and unbearable theological shock to the ears of all Israel.

Whereas verse 4 focuses on water, verse 6 brings to the fore the other basic resource that has been manipulated. The people submit themselves to Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread. It is clear from this verse that Egypt and Assyria may have used food as tool for submission. The phrase translated by the NIV as ‘we submitted’ should literally be translated as ‘we gave a hand’ (נתנו יד). This can be understood as a symbolic way of making commitment, pledge (Yamauchi & Youngblood, 2011:741), surrender or seeking assistance. The word translated as ‘enough’ in the NIV is the Hebrew verb טבעש which means ‘satisfy’ (Holladay, 1988:348). In this context it is used as a *qal* infinitive construct. The word translated as ‘bread’ in the NIV is the Hebrew word לחם, which is omitted by the Septuagint. From this analysis, we gather that the people of Israel submit to Egypt and Assyria so that they may get enough bread to satisfy their hungry ones. Thus, food was used in exchange for their freedom.

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<sup>41</sup> The focus in both of the stories is specifically on the mothers who turn to cannibalism.

Verses 9 to 11 revisit the conditions under which they get their food. First, they get their food at the expense of their lives. It seems there is a curfew with the Babylonians killing anyone who dares to go outside the demarcated areas. As a result, a number of the Judeans die because of hunger. Those who are brave obviously die because of the sword as they try to search for food outside. The change of the skin texture is repeated in verse 10 to show the extent of the starvation and malnutrition the people are enduring. Verse 11 describes life under soldiers in both ancient and contemporary contexts. While torture, execution, denial of food and water seem to be targeted at men, the women's main ordeal lies in sexual abuse. The author takes time to narrate how both married and unmarried women<sup>42</sup> are raped by enemy soldiers. It can also be assumed that some of the women reluctantly consent to the sexual demands of the soldiers to get food. This line of thinking can be inferred from the preceding verse 6 where Israel prostitutes or gives herself to Egypt and Assyria to get food. The exchange of sexual pleasure for food was common in ancient war zones and the practice continues to rear its ugly head in contemporary contexts as will be seen below. Therefore, if it is read along this line of thought, verse 6 would be generic and verse 11 specific. In any case, the author is very careful to report all these as sexual violations. Parry (2010:151) notes from the Hebrew word used (i.e. עונה) that the focus is on humiliation for both the men and the women.<sup>43</sup>

After the narration of the humiliation of the women and the men, the author shifts to the leaders who are referred to as the שרים. Although the NIV prefers to translate this word as 'prince', the word can also mean ruler, official or chief (Koehler & Baumgartner, 1998:929). Thus, in that case the author is concerned about those in the royal positions. Again, in the Israelite context, these are the people that should provide leadership, protection and basic necessities such as food and water in accordance with the suzerain-vassal treaty. The fact that they fail to provide these covenant obligations simply means the populace can switch allegiance. Raising up by their hands stresses that there is no hope. Therefore, the leadership of Israel has been decapitated and is no longer able to offer basic necessities such as food and water. The Babylonians are now able to capitalize on the vulnerability of the leadership and coerce the populace to shift allegiance.

Verse 13 pictures young men who, under normal circumstances, should be conscripted into the army reduced to doing jobs meant for female servants (Parry, 2010:152). Provan (1991) agrees with Parry (2010) that the reference to the grinding of corn by young men (בחורים) represents humiliation according to Exodus 11:5 and Judges 16:21. Parry (2010:152) goes on to note that, "boys are forced to carry piles of wood and, perhaps partly due to their hunger, the weight is too much for them". Parry's (2010:152) observation that the staggering of the boys is due to hunger is useful in this investigation since this goes a long way to show that not only was food and water used as a political weapon but child labour was also rife.

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<sup>42</sup> The author carefully includes the married and unmarried by the use of two different Hebrew words (i.e. נשים and בתולת).

<sup>43</sup> The men are supposed to protect and provide necessities such as food and water to their women but they are failing. As a result, the women sell their bodies (a preserve of their husbands) in order to get the necessities. The process happens through rape which is a humiliation to both men and the women.

Lamentations concludes with an observation that while all the suffering continues, including the manipulation of basic resources such as food and water, God is still the King (i.e. v. 19). By concluding the laments this way, the author is cautiously appealing to the suzerain-vassal treaty that ultimately God is still the unmoved King who is able to provide adequately these resources without interruption. God is the creator and provider of basic necessities. Thus, the nation of Israel continues to look up to Him for provision, sustenance, and protection. The knowledge that God is the ultimate Suzerain, provider of the necessities such as food and water can act as a preemptive tool against those that manipulate these resources.

In summary, the analysis of food and water in the Book of Lamentations has shown clearly what a typical ancient context of war zone looked like. We have seen that the siege was a common strategy used by invading armies. They would block the canals and stop water from getting into the city. The siege would last for a long time until food is exhausted within the city. The erratic rains of the land of Israel also means that agriculture depends mostly on the canals. Thus, if the canals are blocked, there are high chances of famine. The famine coupled with the loss of drinking water would generally lead to cannibalism. The recorded cases of cannibalism seem to focus on women. Children are the first victims. The obvious result of the withdrawal of food and water is dehydration, malnutrition, diseases and eventually death. The author records that those who die because of hunger and thirsts are worse<sup>44</sup> off than those who die from the sword. Sexual violations are also prevalent in war zones. Women and children become the worst victims as in the case of the Book of Lamentations. The main aim of the withdrawal of water and food which eventually leads to starvation, dehydration, cannibalism and sexual abuse is to force people into submission.

### **Significance and manipulation of food and water in contemporary contexts of Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe is an example of a country that has experienced the worst form of manipulation of food and water. The manipulation of these necessities became evident after independence (i.e. 1980). The pre-independence manipulation of the basic resources was concealed, probably because of the gap that existed between the colonialists and the locals. Thus, the colonialists resided in specific areas of the cities while the locals had their own area. Secondly, the colonialists had abundant food and water supplies compared to the locals. Therefore, it was easy for the colonialists to hire the locals to work for them in exchange for food and water. In this way they appeared to be helping the inhabitants without necessarily depriving them of the necessities. In addition to the almsgiving aspect of the colonialists' activities, one can also argue that there was a developmental aspect. For instance, the Matabeleland-Zambezi water project was first mooted in 1912 during the colonial era. The project was meant to bring development to Matabeleland and Bulawayo in particular. The biggest obstacle

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<sup>44</sup> This is probably in terms of numbers and in terms of mode of death. Thus, those that die because of hunger seem to be more than those that die because of the sword. Secondly, in terms of the mode of death, those that die because of starvation and dehydration take longer and experience a more severe way of dying than those who are instantly killed by the sword.

to this during the entire colonial era was unavailability of funds. After the country's independence, politicians used the project to canvass for votes during election times.<sup>45</sup>

However, after Zimbabwe became independent, the gap between the colonialists and the locals began to close and the previously separated groups began to intermingle. In spite of these positive developments, a new threat which would destabilise the Matabeleland and Midlands regions emerged. This was the tribal conflict which eventually led to *Gukurahundi*.<sup>46</sup> The tribal conflict was centred in the Matabeleland and Midlands regions. Initially, it was a conflict that pitted Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) against Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) forces but eventually it became a conflict between the Shona and Ndebele tribal groups.

Although in the ancient Near East context, the siege was the commonest way of restricting peoples' movements, in the contemporary context of Zimbabwe, it was detention and curfews. The systematic withdrawal of food would then happen to the people who were in detention and under curfews. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ) and The Legal Resource Foundation (LRF) (1997:177) report that the withdrawal of food was the most outstanding deprivation of the 1980s. It resulted in near starvation of more than 400 000 civilians. As was the case with ancient Near East scenarios of siege, the food embargo was always accompanied by severe famine. The contemporary context survivors, however, would always see this as state-induced hunger.

In order to appreciate the psychological threat of withdrawal of food in the contemporary context of Zimbabwe, one needs to examine the words uttered by one so-called Commander Jesus<sup>47</sup> "You are going to eat eggs, after eggs hens, after hens goats, after goats cattle. Then you shall eat cats, dogs and donkeys. Then you are going to eat your children. After that you shall eat your wives..."<sup>48</sup> Such psychological threat is reminiscent of Sennacherib's army commander in 2 Kings 18:27 (cf. Isa 36:12). The threat of cannibalism dovetails with mothers in the Book of Lamentations. Although certainly the two contexts (i.e. ancient Near East *vis-a-vis* the contemporary context of Zimbabwe) are different, but we can also observe the continuous use of food and water as a tool of subjugation and usurping authority.

The CCJPZ and LRF (1997:118) reports that the food embargo had serious effects in Matabeleland South; "all events which occurred did so against the background of a seriously weakened and demoralised populace, who were having to watch the children cry and beg for food which their parents were unable to provide on a daily basis". It is further reported that sharing food with neighbours was prohibited. Those found sharing were punished severely. Retail shops were forced to close. Those which were opened ran out of stock and therefore folded up naturally. No vehicles were allowed in or out of Matabeleland South.<sup>49</sup> However, those who were brave risked their lives by

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<sup>45</sup> The project would be mentioned only during campaigns and after elections it was hardly ever heard.

<sup>46</sup> *Gukurahundi* refers to the first rains that wash away the chaff. In the Zimbabwean conflict era, it metaphorically referred to the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade that was trained in Korea. The Brigade was well known in Matabeleland and Midlands regions for its cruelty and inhuman acts of atrocity.

<sup>47</sup> 'Commander Jesus' was a nickname given to one of the generals in the fifth brigade known for his cruelty

<sup>48</sup> See CCJPZ and LRF (1997:177).

<sup>49</sup> This was done to prevent transport carrying food from entering the region.

breaking the curfew at night in order to get food and share it with their neighbours. The CCJPZ and LRF (1997:119) conclude that, “The food embargo alone was thus a significant and effective strategy which proved to 400 000 ordinary people in Matabeleland South the power of the State to cause extreme hardship”.

It is worth noting also that though this analysis focuses on the contemporary context of Zimbabwe, food and water have been used as a tool of submission even by the international community. For instance, when the Zimbabwean government imposed the curfew and state of emergency in Matabeleland South from 6am to 6pm and innocent Zimbabweans were edging closer to starving to death, it is reported by the CCJPZ and LRF (1997:61) that, “foreign governments threatened to withhold financial aid on humanitarian grounds”. The Zimbabwean government was forced to lift the state of emergency and the curfew.

The use of food and water as a political weapon in the contemporary context of Zimbabwe was not only prevalent in the 1980s, but continues to be felt even after the *Gukurahundi* atrocities. For instance, the Marwezu<sup>50</sup> 24 October 2007 Report from ZimOnline narrates how villagers in Mwenezi district were denied food aid by Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) officials because they supported the opposition party led by Morgan Tsvangirai. He goes on to state that, since elections were fast approaching, the fear was that food would be used as a bait to elicit support. The manipulation of food is not only restricted to political leaders but extends to traditional leaders too. For example, Chief Charumbira is quoted as saying, “We have also ordered them that they should consider only ZANU PF supporters on programmes initiated by the Government (including food aid). We cannot afford continuing feeding the enemy because they are sell outs”. Furthermore, the Chief alleges that the opposition supporters are biting the hand that feeds them. The reporter of the article seems to be, “virtually confirming the use of food aid as a political weapon to coerce villagers to support the ruling party”.<sup>51</sup>

In subsequent utterances, Chief Charumbira denies that there was manipulation of food on political grounds. Instead, he accuses the MDC and non-governmental organisations of sabotaging the government through food distribution. He then strongly suggests that all non-governmental organisations be screened and vetted to ascertain their political affiliations before being given permission to go to rural areas with food aid.

It is worth noting also that though ZANU PF has been the main subject in a number of cases that involve manipulation of food and drink, counter accusations have been levelled also against the opposition (i.e. particularly the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). For instance, it is reported that the then Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa complained to the Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee (JOMIC) that the MDC was manipulating food aid for political mileage.<sup>52</sup> It is reported that President Mugabe took the complaint to the World Food Program (WFP) executive director, Josette Sheeran. In another related issue, Grace Mugabe castigated Non-Governmental Organisations’ food aid programs labelling them as having a

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<sup>50</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/report/zimbabwe/Zimbabwe\\_Villagers\\_denied\\_food\\_aid](https://reliefweb.int/report/zimbabwe/Zimbabwe_Villagers_denied_food_aid). (Date of access: 20 January 2020).

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.zwnews.com/issueful.cfm?ArticleID=15955>. (Date of Access: 17 January 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Report from ZimOnline 5 December 2009 (Date of Access: 17 January 2020).

regime change agenda (Shumba, 2015). This clearly shows that, from the ruling party's perspective, the opposition and non-governmental organisations are the ones manipulating food for political mileage.

We consider the exposure of continued use of food and water a political weapon by observing the sentiments of the just ended by-election in Lupane. David Coltart<sup>53</sup> bemoans the manipulation of food aid as the main reason behind MDC Alliance's loss of this crucial constituency in Matabeleland North. Linda Masarira<sup>54</sup> tacitly supports Coltart's assertion, "Let's talk facts: vote buying by distributing food and drugs led to ZANU PF's win".

## Summary

The analysis above focused on post-independent Zimbabwe. It has clearly shown that, during the *Gukurahundi* time, food and water were used as political weapons by the government and the army. Sometimes, it came in the form of psychological threat and at times there was actual withdrawal of these basic commodities. The analysis has also revealed that the ruling party, the ZANU PF, is accused of manipulating food and water during election times to win votes. These accusations have equally been made against the opposition party, the MDC. The manipulation of food and water is not limited to political parties, but traditional leaders are also accused of the same. Thus, the chiefs have also been implicated in the allegations of mishandling the distribution of food and water to their subjects, just as the international community, especially in cases which involve regime change agendas.

## Conclusion

This article sought to establish the significance and extent to which food and water have been used as political weapons in ancient and contemporary contexts. In order to achieve this, the focus systematically moved from the general to the specific. Thus, the analysis focused on the ancient Near East, Israel, war zones and concluded with the contemporary context of Zimbabwe. It was established that food and water are basic necessities that humankind cannot do without. The two necessities are usually inseparably used in societies to satisfy hunger and thirst. Unfortunately, these basic necessities have been mismanaged at family, societal, national and international levels. In the ancient contexts, the investigation has established that, in line with the suzerain-vassal treaty, it was the responsibility of the suzerain to provide these necessities in times of scarcity. Any suzerain who was able to provide them would have the upper hand over those who could not provide them. As such, various battles were centred on promises to provide food and water. It was noted also in this article that the desire to have food and water was not limited to humankind, but was extended to deities. Thus, in as much as human beings would manipulate these basic necessities amongst themselves, they would also try to extend the manipulation to the deities. The deities, in turn, would threaten to withhold food and water if humankind did not obey them. The study's focus on Israel revealed that food and water occupied a central position in

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<sup>53</sup> The Zimbabwean Mail. MDC-A blames Gukurahundi for its loss in Lupane. August 4 2019 (Date of Access: 17 January 2020).

the life and belief system of the nation. The first chapters of Genesis are concerned mainly with food and water. Even the first sin of humankind is narrated with food in the background. In the war zones, where women and children are the most affected, enemy soldiers would cut supplies of food and water until the victims surrender. The analysis concluded with a focus on the contemporary context of Zimbabwe where political parties, traditional leadership, non-governmental organisations, and the international community are implicated in the use of food and water as political weapons.

Since this article has shown clearly that food and water have been used as political weapons from the ancient to contemporary contexts, it therefore remains the task of future researchers to explore possible ways of disarmament.

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