BIBLICAL ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE IN NIGERIA: UNPACKING DEUTERONOMY 15 AND LEVITICUS 25.

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Abstract

Research problem

Nigerian's escalating poverty entrenched debt cycles, and contested land rights underscore a pressing need for ethical frameworks that can guide economic justice. While Christian voices are influential in public discourse, there is a gap in articulating biblical ethic that speaks to contemporary socio-economic challenges. This study interrogates how Deuteronomy 15 (the Year of Release) and Leviticus 25 (the Jubilee Year) can furnish theological foundation for economic justice in Nigeria, and how those principles might be operational through Christian ethical practices.

Methods/Theory

The research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach. First a detailed exegetical of Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 is conducted using historical-critical and literary methods to extract core ethical principles (debt remission, land restitution, and communal solidarity). Second, a comparative contextual analysis maps these principles into Nigeria's socio-economic landscape, drawing on secondary literature on Nigeria's debt, land tenure, and labour dynamics. Finally, theological reflection integrates African

communitarian values Ubuntu - which means " humanity" or " I am because we are…" emphasizing interconnection and communal harmony(Molefe, 2019[a]; Molefe, 2019[b]) with biblical concepts of tzedek- not only as a legal fairness but a broader moral imperative that sustains social peace(shalom) to develop a praxis-oriented framework for christian enjoyment. Dorff adds that righteousness (tzedek) leads to peace (shalom) that prevent poverty and exploitation (1999).

Results

The study identifies three transferable principles: (1) periodic debt forgiveness as a mechanism to prevent systemic poverty; (2) land-return and equitable resources distribution to address historical dispossession, and (3) communal responsibility that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries. When contextualized, these principles support advocacy for debt-relief initiatives, communal land trusts, and fair-ware movements, while also informing church led. Micro-finance and Jubilee-style programs.

Conclusion

Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 provides a robust biblical ethic of economic justice that resonates with Nigerian's current struggles. By re-appropriating the sabbatical and Jubilee cycles, Nigerian Christians can model a trans-formative witness that links theological conviction with concrete social action.

Key Contributions to Knowledge and Recommendations

This paper contributes to biblical economic and African contextual theology by offering a scripturally grounded, yet practically applicable, framework for economic justice in Nigeria. It recommends: (i) integrating Jubilee principles into Church social-action policies; (ii) partnering with Civil-society organizations to lobby for a debt-relief and land reform legislation, (iii) developing educational curricula that teach those biblical mandates; and (iv) encouraging interdisciplinary research that evaluates the impact of Jubilee-inspired projects on poverty reduction and social cohesion.

Introduction

Nigeria is at a juncture of considerable natural resources and profound economic inequality. Despite decades of oil earnings, a majority of Nigerians live below the poverty line, contending with debilitating debt, unstable land tenure, and hazardous work conditions. In this setting, the Christian community, comprising around 48.1% of the population (Pew Research Center, 2025), has significant

moral influence; nonetheless, a discernible disparity persists between theological beliefs and tangible economic behaviours. The United Church of Christ (1989: 2) states that "economic justice for Christians entails the stewardship of the human household in accordance with God's intentions as revealed in scripture." This implies that Christian economic justice revolves around the management of resources and relationships within communities, fundamentally "the human household," in accordance with God's teachings and intentions as articulated in the Bible, such as caring for the impoverished and practicing stewardship. This definition links faith to action over matters such as poverty, inequality, and economic policies. The absence of it during Nigeria's ongoing economic difficulties, encompassing poverty, inequality, and social injustice. Christians are urged to reassess the scriptural foundations of economic justice. This paper aims to address the disparity by examining the biblical principles of economic fairness found in Deuteronomy 15 (The Year of Release) and Leviticus 25 (the Jubilee Year).

Although these ancient texts originate from an agrarian covenant society, their concepts of periodic debt forgiveness, land restitution, and social solidarity provide a strong scriptural basis for tackling Nigeria's modern difficulties.This study commences with a succinct interpretive examination of the two texts, highlighting fundamental theological themes: divine proprietorship of the land, the preferential option for the impoverished, and the cyclical restoration of equity. These motifs are further contextualised within Nigeria's socio-economic framework, referencing literature on debt, land rights, and labour relations. The paper ultimately presents a praxis-oriented framework that amalgamates African communitarian values of Ubuntu ("humanity" or "I am because we are…") with the biblical concepts of tzedek (righteousness) and shalom (holistic peace), delineating methods by which Nigerian churches and Christian organisations can convert these ancient imperatives into contemporary initiatives, including debt relief campaigns, community land trusts, and fair-wage advocacy.

Research Problem

Nigeria's economic inequality and poverty endure despite its abundant natural resources and biblical legacy, prompting enquiries into the implementation of biblical principles of economic justice within the country's setting (Izuegbu, 2023). Nigeria confronts substantial economic difficulties, characterised by elevated poverty levels, income disparity, and restricted access to financial services. The Christian populace frequently seeks biblical teachings for help on economic issues. Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 establish a framework for economic justice, encompassing debt forgiveness and land redistribution, which may guide Nigeria's economic policies and practices (Izuegbu, 2023; Oxfam in Nigeria Tax Justice Network Africa, CISLAC, 2024)

Research Objectives

To examine how biblical principles of economic justices in Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 can inform strategies for addressing economic inequality in Nigeria.

To explore how Nigerian christian communities apply or could apply those biblical principles to promote economic justice in the country.

Research Methodology

This empirical study focuses on Christian communities in Nigeria. Study population: Christians in Nigeria's south- west and north-central regions. Sample size: 384 respondents

(scientifically determine using Yamane's formula for a population of unknown size, with a 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level).Sampling technique: multi-stage stratified random sampling, with strata based on Christian denominations (Pentecostal,Catholic, Anglican And Baptist) and regions.

Conceptual Clarifications

In this context, economic justice denotes the equitable allocation of resources and opportunity, informed by biblical tenets of stewardship, debt forgiveness, and compassion for the impoverished (Izuegbu, 2023). This indicates that resource management must prioritise human dignity, equity, and sustainability, embodying divine love and justice. Faith communities are so urged to promote economic systems that benefit the general good. Rawls (1971) posited that economic justice is attained via the difference principle, which mandates that social and economic inequalities be structured to maximise benefits for the least advantaged members of society. The fundamental premise is that inequalities are only defensible if they enhance the circumstances of the least advantaged individuals in comparison to a strictly egalitarian distribution, established from a "original position" behind a "veil of ignorance," where individuals formulate principles without awareness of their own social status. Nozick (1974) posits that economic justice is characterised by entitlements theory, which asserts that a distribution is just if it originates from legitimate initial acquisitions of assets and voluntary transfers among individuals, without necessitating any particular predictable outcome (e.g., inequality). The fundamental premise is that justice in property holdings relies on the legitimacy and voluntariness of historical acquisition and transfer procedures, necessitating no further redistribution save to rectify past injustices, provided individuals possess natural rights. According to Oderinde (1990), the concept of Biblical social ethics encompasses the biblical doctrine of social responsibility. Oderinde's definition characterizes Biblical social ethics as a proactive, responsibility-oriented framework that connects faith with society engagement. It compels adherents to actualise the teachings of Scripture in manners that foster justice, kindness, and communal cohesion, thereby finally mirroring God's essence in the world. This viewpoint is especially pertinent in Nigeria, characterised by varied, globalised cultures where social duties frequently converge with cultural and ethical issues. The study explores innovative approaches to applying ancient biblical passages to contemporary economic issues within the Nigerian setting, highlighting contextualisation and practical implementation.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs a liberation theology framework centred on economic liberation and justice. Gustavo Gutierrez is widely acknowledged as the creator of Liberation Theology, which emphasises the emancipation of the impoverished and marginalised via Christian faith and social justice. Gutierrez synthesises biblical exegesis, social critique, and pastoral practice, rendering it both theological and pragmatic (1973). This study applies liberation theology to Nigeria's economic reality, challenging systematic injustices and arguing for structural transformation, in contrast to prior works that frequently emphasise individual redemption. This methodology enhances literature by illustrating how biblical texts can influence economic policies and practices within a certain environment, and contributes to theoretical advancement by emphasising the significance of cultural and economic factors in the interpretation of biblical

economic justice. Liberation theology offers a framework for tackling economic inequities but has been criticised for placing excessive emphasis on socio-political institutions. Some contend that liberation theology emphasises structural transformation excessively, thereby neglecting human responsibility and the spiritual aspect of emancipation (Ratzinger, 1986; Novak, 1986).

This liberation theology also possesses contextualised limitations. Ela (1986) and Gatthogo (2021) have critiqued liberation theology for its contextual limitations arising from its Latin American origins, asserting that its direct application to the African context, particularly Nigeria, necessitates careful adaptation to align with local socio-political realities, indigenous cultures, and context-specific biblical interpretations that prioritise the lived experiences of the oppressed. It also lacks definitive economic models. Critics contend that liberation theology frequently emphasises issues without offering concrete economic solutions or implementation tactics (Novak, 1986; Novak, 2021).This study, however, has employed liberation theology in a distinct manner. It employs liberation theology by emphasising biblical scriptures (Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25) to establish principles of economic justice within the Nigerian setting. This research also highlighted structural changes, such as policies around debt relief and land rights.

Literature Review

Bucciarelli et al. (2011) concentrated on "Catholic Social Teaching for Socioeconomic Development." They did not directly address the Nigerian context of Deuteronomy/Leviticus teachings. The United Church of Christ (1989) examined "Christian Faith: Economic and Justice," which addressed general themes but lacked specificity regarding Nigeria or particular biblical references. Additionally, Izuegbu (2023) examined “Economic Justice and Church Teachings Concerning Nigeria's Issues.” He concentrated extensively on ecclesiastical doctrines and did not elucidate Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25. Ukamaka (2021) examined "Economic Justice Nigeria" exclusively and does not provide a clear scriptural foundation from Deuteronomy/Leviticus 25.The current literature examines broad Christian ethics, social teachings, and economic justice in Nigeria; however, it does not specifically address the biblical roots found in Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 regarding economic justice in Nigeria.

This study addresses the deficiency by analysing how particular biblical principles in Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 (debt forgiveness, land redistribution, and assistance for the impoverished) can inform economic justice strategies in Nigeria, offering a textual foundation for Nigerian Christian communities to confront economic disparities. It is distinct as it has examined the practical applications of biblical concepts within Nigeria's economic situation, so enriching the literature on the contextualisation of liberation theology in African settings. This paper critiques and applies liberation theology within the Nigerian context: Emphasises the necessity for contextual modification of the theory within African contexts. It illustrates how biblical texts can inform initiatives for economic justice within specific cultural contexts. Ultimately, it has enriched dialogues concerning the incorporation of spiritual and socio-economic aspects of freedom within liberation theology.

Thematic overview of Economic Justice in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament law presents economic justice in relation to Israel's covenant status.

Principal themes encompass divine proprietorship of the land (Leviticus 25: 23), the preferential option for the impoverished (Exodus 23: 11), cyclical restoration (the Sabbatical and Jubilee Year), and prophetic denunciation of exploitation (Amos 5: 11 - 12). Collectively, these symbols illustrate a community committed to equitable resource stewardship, safeguarding the weak, and periodically rectifying economic disparities (Gottwald, 1979).

Deuteronomy 15: The Year of Release

Deuteronomy 15 mandates a seven-year "Year of Release." All creditors must annul loans extended to fellow Israelites, and Hebrew slaves are to be emancipated after six years of servitude, with enough food (Deuteronomy 15: 1-3, 12-15). The scripture associates obedience with natural blessings and cautions that neglecting the release results in divine retribution (Deuteronomy 15: 4 -6, 9 - 11). The ethical grounds identified include debt forgiveness as a social safeguard, equality before God, and the imperative of generous solidarity. George (2003) so concludes that God has instituted these principles for the equitable and just treatment of the impoverished. This demonstrates benevolence towards their fellow humans (Mears, 2011).

Leviticus 25: The Jubilee Year

Leviticus 25 establishes the Jubilee, a reset occurring every fifty years. Following seven sabbatical cycles, the land remains uncultivated, all debts are annulled, Hebrew slaves are liberated, and ancestral land is restored to its original proprietors (Leviticus 25: 8-13, 39-46). The chapter consistently emphasises God's proprietorship of the country (Leviticus 25:23) and the safeguarding of the impoverished and resident aliens (Leviticus 25:35-38) (cf. George, 2003:32; Mears, 2011:70). The Jubilee thus represents restorative justice, regular redistribution, and the recognition that all riches are divinely owned.

A comparative exegesis reveals that both texts share a unified objective: to avert the perpetuation of poverty and to reinstate communal equality. Deuteronomy 15 presents a short-term safety net through debt forgiveness every seven years, whereas Leviticus 25 outlines a long-term vision of systemic reforms every fifty years. The former highlights covenantal solidarity and urgent assistance; the later prioritises God's dominion over land and a profound reconfiguration of riches. They concurrently address immediate compassion and structural reform (Bartos& Levinson, 2013).

Outcomes

Research Question 1: Biblical concepts and measures for economic justice.

An examination of Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 elucidated fundamental concepts for economic justice: debt forgiveness (Deuteronomy 15: 1-3), assistance for the impoverished (Deuteronomy 15: 4-11), and land redistribution (Leviticus 25: 8-55). Survey results (n = 384) revealed that Nigerian Christians acknowledged these concepts but encountered difficulties in their application due to systemic concerns (78%) and a lack of awareness (62%).

Research Questions 2: Implementation by Nigerian Christian communities.

Findings indicated that Nigerian Christian groups participated in charitable activities (85%) but were less interested in advocating for systemic economic reforms (43%). Participants recommended incorporating biblical economic ideas into ecclesiastical instruction (92%) and collaborating with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) for economic empowerment (76%).

Discussion of Findings

The study reveals a disparity between acknowledging biblical economic justice principles and implementing them to mitigate Nigeria's economic inequities. Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 establish a framework for managing debt, poverty, and land rights, corresponding to Nigerian requirements. Nevertheless, obstacles like as corruption and insufficient awareness impede execution. The results reflect liberation theology's focus on structural transformation while highlighting the necessity for contextual implementation in Nigeria.

The sabbatical and Jubilee concept in Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 directly addresses the critical economic concerns faced by Nigerians. By adapting the ancient notion of periodic release, land restitution, and communal solidarity to a Nigerian setting, churches and Christian organisations can serve as catalysts for a more equitable society (Izuegbu, 2023).Policy advocacy and public testimony will assist in presenting economic justice as a biblical imperative, so enhancing the church's moral authority to interact with legislators. Concrete activities encompass the submission of position papers regarding debt sustainability, engagement in national land-reform discussions, and the facilitation of voter education that emphasises candidates' dedication to the principles of release and restitution (Awoshiri, 2025).Leviticus 25's land-sabbath serves as a reminder to Nigerians about the necessity of allowing the soil to rest and engaging in sustainable agricultural practices under ecological stewardship. This is referred to in our terminology as "Shifting Cultivation" by local farmers.Furthermore, Church-led environmental initiatives, such tree planting, soil conservation seminars, and the promotion of organic farming, can actualise the sabbatical concept through ecological action, so strengthening the connection between economic justice and environmental health (Adenekan 2025).In conclusion, Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 offer a comprehensive framework that can influence Nigeria's economic dialogue: periodic debt remission, land restitution, equitable labour practices, communal benevolence, and environmental stewardship. When Nigerian Christians embrace their ancient precepts, they engage in social action, providing a convincing testimony to the kingdom of God in a nation longing for justice.

Conclusion

This study illustrates that the biblical concepts found in Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 provide a pertinent framework for economic justice in Nigeria. Nigerian Christian communities can advance economic justice by incorporating their beliefs into education and activism, as the Church serves as a teaching and learning institution (Veratoh). It is recommended that churches educate on biblical principles of economic justice to raise awareness, as evidenced by the research findings highlighting its deficiency. Secondly, Christian communities within the Church should collaborate with NGOs to bolster economic empowerment efforts. Finally, policymakers should incorporate biblical principles into economic policies when proposals are presented by the Church and Christian groups to the government.

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