


Biblical ecological framework for re-evaluating the Nigerian *Land Use Act*: An exegetical study of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15

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Nigeria is currently grappling with ecological degradation related to deforestation, soil exhaustion, disrupted agrarian cycles and resource-based conflicts intensified by structural gaps in the Nigerian *Land Use Act of 1978*. While the *Land Use Act* is characterised by centralized authority and a lack of ecological mandates, biblical land laws in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 offer a compelling vision of stewardship, land rest, and restorative justice. This study situates these biblical traditions within Nigeria's contemporary ecological crisis to explore how scriptural principles can inform sustainable land governance. The objective of the study was to develop a biblical ecological framework for re-evaluating the *Land Use Act* by examining Old Testament land laws, identifying gaps in the Act, comparing both systems and proposing a model for ecological and justice-oriented reform. Using a qualitative methodology that integrated exegetical analysis, ecological hermeneutics, political ecology and comparative policy evaluation, the study discovered that the biblical principles provide a holistic system of land stewardship grounded in cyclical rest and socio-economic equity. In contrast, the *Land Use Act* lacks mechanisms for ecological renewal and restorative justice. Thus, the study proposed a model of Covenant Stewardship and Restorative Land Tenure to guide sustainable reforms. The research emphasised that integrating biblical ecological wisdom into Nigeria's land governance offers a viable path towards sustainability, equity and intergenerational justice.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The originality of this work lies in its new conceptual model, novel methodological integration and groundbreaking comparative application of biblical ecological principles to a contemporary legal framework in Nigeria, an area previously unexplored in academic literature. This study links Old Testament ecological laws with the *Land Use Act*, proposing the Covenant Stewardship and Restorative Land Tenure framework to guide sustainable, just and ecologically responsible land governance.

Keywords: ecological hermeneutics; land governance; Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15; *Land Use Act*.

Introduction

The 21st century continues to face an escalating ecological crisis marked by climate disruption, biodiversity loss, soil degradation and diminishing natural resources. These global challenges have provoked rigorous interdisciplinary reflection across scientific, ethical and theological fields (Andrea Vicini, Landrigan & Bullock 2025). While environmental ethics, ecology and sustainability studies have taken centre stage in discussions on environmental resilience, the potential contributions of biblical studies to ecological thought remain comparatively underexplored (Deane-Drummond 2022; Dike 2025; Dike & Agbo Paulinus 2025). Yet the Bible, particularly its legal and narrative traditions, offers a reservoir of ecological wisdom capable of informing contemporary responses to environmental crises.

Traditional biblical interpretations have often privileged anthropocentric themes, inadvertently obscuring the intrinsic value, agency and moral consideration afforded to the non-human world within the Scriptures (Hunt, Horrell & Stavropoulou 2024; Iovino 2010; Lowe, Lamb & DeBorst 2021). This is especially evident in studies of Old Testament legal

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texts, whose ecological implications frequently remain underemphasised despite their profound visions of land rest, justice and sustainability. Failure to recover these scriptural insights limits both scholarly discourse and faith communities from accessing rich theological frameworks for ecological responsibility and sustainable living. Consequently, this study applies a nuanced eco-theological hermeneutic to selected Old Testament legal texts, specifically Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15, to investigate how these passages articulate early visions of environmental justice, sustainable practice and ethical land governance.

Nigeria presents an urgent context for this kind of investigation. The nation grapples with soil exhaustion, deforestation, disrupted agrarian cycles, desertification and resource-based conflicts. Although the *Land Use Act* (Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004) was enacted to regulate land ownership and enhance equitable access (Dike, Okoronkwo & Dike 2025), its operational emphasis has tended towards administrative control and economic exploitation rather than ecological sustainability. By contrast, the biblical legal traditions in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 envision a system in which land is granted rest, vulnerable populations are protected and economic accumulation is restrained for the sake of communal and ecological flourishing. This study therefore places these biblical traditions in dialogue with the *Land Use Act* to explore whether and how biblical ecological wisdom might inform a re-evaluation of Nigeria's contemporary land governance structure.

The *Land Use Act* lacks explicit provisions that acknowledge ecological limits, mandate restorative land practices or incorporate rhythms of land rest into national land governance. This omission contributes to environmental degradation, inequitable land distribution and unsustainable land-use patterns. Additionally, scholarly engagement with the Act rarely considers the potential contributions of biblical ecological principles, leaving a significant gap in interdisciplinary environmental discourse. There is thus a need to examine whether the ecological vision embedded in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 can offer constructive insights for sustainable land reform in Nigeria.

The overarching goal of this study is to develop a biblical ecological framework for re-evaluating the Nigerian *Land Use Act*. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the ecological and ethical insights embedded in selected Old Testament texts and assess their relevance for contemporary land governance in Nigeria. Firstly, the study undertakes an exegetical analysis of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15, focusing on the themes of land rest, socioeconomic release and stewardship. This analysis aims to uncover the ways in which the Sabbath and Jubilee laws articulate a covenant relationship between humans and the land, providing principles for sustainable and just management of natural resources.

Secondly, the study identifies ecological gaps and limitations within the *Land Use Act*, paying particular attention to areas where the legislation prioritises administrative control or economic exploitation over environmental sustainability and community well-being. Thirdly, it compares the biblical principles of land rest, renewal and economic justice with the Act's provisions on land governance and resource use, highlighting points of convergence and divergence. Fourthly, the study proposes a biblically informed ecological model that can guide sustainable, equitable and justice-oriented land management in Nigeria, offering practical insights for policy reform while emphasising the moral and ecological significance of the land as a covenant partner.

This study adopts a qualitative exegetical methodology, combining eco-theological hermeneutics with a comparative approach. The eco-theological hermeneutical method examines Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15, focusing on land [*adamah*] as a covenant partner, sabbatical rest and socio-economic release, highlighting ecological responsibility and ethical stewardship. The comparative method places these biblical insights in dialogue with contemporary ecological science, environmental ethics and the *Land Use Act of 1978*, identifying convergences and divergences to inform sustainable and equitable land governance. Secondary literature from theology, environmental studies and legal scholarship enriches the analysis, ensuring both theological depth and practical relevance.

Scholarly foundation on eco-theology and the Nigerian *Land Use Act of 1978*

In contemporary scholarship, ecological theology and biblical interpretation have increasingly intersected, producing a rich body of literature that reconsiders the relationship between Scripture, creation and ethical responsibility. This interdisciplinary development reflects a broader shift away from anthropocentric readings of the Bible towards more holistic, Earth-centred approaches that regard creation as an active participant in God's covenant economy. For instance, Andrea Vicini et al. (2025), writing within the *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church* series, analyse plastic pollution through the lens of Catholic integral ecology, interpreting *Laudato Si'* as a global moral call to ecological conversion. Andrea Vicini et al. (2025:22) argue that ecological crises, such as pollution, are not merely scientific or technological problems but profound moral and spiritual failures requiring 'a renewed theology of care that integrates environmental, social, and spiritual dimensions'. Their emphasis on integral ecology parallels the biblical concept of sabbatical rest in Leviticus 25, where the well-being of land and community is morally intertwined. Their work offers a theological foundation for understanding the Earth as a moral subject, harmonising with Old Testament visions of land rest and renewal articulated in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15.

Continuing this trajectory, Deane-Drummond (2022:386) identifies within Scripture a deep ecological ethic grounded in the interdependence of life. She observes that 'the Bible's moral imagination extends beyond human community to embrace the entire created order', urging readers to interpret biblical texts as dynamic theological engagements with ecological concerns. Her work emphasises that ecological responsibility emerges from recognising mutual interdependence under divine sovereignty, an insight that strongly resonates with the land theology of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15.

The methodological foundations of this study are further supported by the work of Kavusa (2019) and Hunt et al. (2024), who advance ecological hermeneutics as a critical interpretive framework. Kavusa (2019:230) traces the evolution of ecological biblical interpretation 'from stewardship-oriented readings to Earth-centered and liberationist paradigms', thereby challenging exploitative interpretations that privilege human dominion over creation. Similarly, Hunt et al. (2024:329) describe ecological hermeneutics as a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' that interrogates anthropocentric readings and exposes the theological roots of environmental injustice. Their insistence on 'reading the Bible for the Earth' legitimises ecological interpretations of Sabbath and Jubilee laws as ethical correctives to unsustainable economic and social systems.

Ecofeminist theologians further enrich this interpretive landscape. Dike and Agbo (2025:4) re-examine the Yahwist creation narratives from a feminist perspective, arguing that 'God's impartiality in creation undermines patriarchal hierarchies that devalue both women and the natural world'. Similarly, Dike (2025:20) interprets Genesis 2:4–25 as, 'an eco-feminist call to equality within creation, rejecting any theological justification for male or ecological domination'. These insights align with the broader eco-theological aims of exposing systemic domination: economic, gendered or environmental and recovering mutuality within creation. Beyond theology, Iovino (2010:30) contributes an ecocritical perspective by proposing a 'non-anthropocentric humanism' that situates humans within a wider ecological community rather than above it. This ethical stance aligns with the biblical portrayals of land as a covenant partner. Complementing this, Lowe et al. (2021:52) propose a theocentric model of sustainability rooted in divine justice, arguing that 'true sustainability must reflect divine justice, ensuring that economic growth serves the flourishing of all creation'. Collectively, these studies demonstrate a converging scholarly movement towards integrating ecological awareness with theological ethics. They provide the conceptual scaffolding for an eco-theological hermeneutic that views Scripture through ecological, ethical and theological lenses. This framework recognises land as an active covenant participant, critiques exploitative systems and envisions sustainable living as an expression of divine

justice. Building upon these foundational insights, the present study situates its examination of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 within an ongoing theological conversation about ecological responsibility and the moral restoration of the Earth.

Adunbi (2015), in *Oil Wealth and Insurgency in Nigeria*, provides a detailed ethnographic examination of how oil wealth shapes power relations, community marginalisation and resource struggles in the Niger Delta. He argues that state control over land and subsoil resources, reinforced by legislation such as the *Land Use Act*, creates structural conditions for exploitation, environmental degradation and insurgency. His work highlights how land and natural resources become sites of contestation, produced through unequal relationships between the state, corporations and local communities. This offers a critical backdrop for evaluating the *Land Use Act's* emphasis on administrative control and resource extraction over ecological well-being and community stewardship. Jatto (2024) examines the environmental and socio-economic consequences of oil and gas exploration in the Niger Delta and their implications for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). His analysis demonstrates how industrial activities have contributed to widespread pollution, land degradation and threats to livelihoods. Importantly, he reveals that existing land governance systems often legitimise extractive practices while failing to protect ecological health or local communities. These findings illuminate the ecological gaps within Nigerian land policy frameworks and reinforce the need for an alternative land ethic, one rooted in principles of sustainability, renewal and justice. Ejiofor (2023), exploring the 'fear of ethnic domination', argues that Nigeria's natural resource conflicts persist because groups perceive land control as tied to political power and ethnic survival. The *Land Use Act*, by vesting ultimate authority in the state, often generates distrust and conflict. This perspective underscores how land governance in Nigeria is not just an administrative issue but also an ethical and relational one, shaped by questions of justice, equity and communal identity. Such concerns parallel biblical notions of land as a covenant trust intended for communal well-being rather than domination or exploitation. Salihu (2023), in a doctoral study on urban land use planning in Northwest Nigeria, evaluates how regulations influence residential property investments. He finds that while planning regulations are intended to improve land administration, issues such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, weak enforcement and political interference often undermine effective land governance. The study reveals the limitations of technocratic or administrative land control, demonstrating the broader challenges embedded in the *Land Use Act's* centralised structure. Although his focus is urban property investment, the findings connect to national debates on equity, access and responsible stewardship, all of which are central to biblical land ethics.

The studies above have not significantly attempted to place the *Land Use Act* in dialogue with biblical ecological ethics or Old Testament land theology. No doubt, legal scholars critique the Act for its shortcomings in administration and environmental management, and theological scholars explore ecological themes in Scripture; however, these two fields rarely intersect. The absence of an integrative biblical legal analysis leaves a critical gap that the present study seeks to address. Thus, the review so far sets the stage for analysing how biblical concepts can bridge identified ecological gaps in the *Land Use Act* towards just and sustainable land management.

Theoretical framework

Political ecology and ecological hermeneutics together provide the theoretical foundation for this study. These frameworks allow for an interdisciplinary interpretation of the selected biblical texts (Lv 25 and Dt 15) and a critical examination of contemporary land governance under the *Land Use Act*. Political ecology emerged in the late twentieth century as a response to ecological studies that neglected political and economic contexts in their explanations of environmental degradation. Scholars have demonstrated that environmental problems are rarely the result of natural processes alone; rather, they arise from historically rooted power relations, economic structures and political decisions (Tornel 2023). Political ecology therefore focuses on the ways in which access to land, control over natural resources and environmental burdens are distributed unevenly within society (Ajl 2023). It adopts a holistic view that links local environmental conditions to broader structural influences, including state legislation, colonial histories, capitalist expansion and global trade (Frame 2022).

In this framework, environmental issues are understood as fundamentally political: they involve competing interests, unequal power and contested claims over land and ecological resources. Hassan and Prasad (2025) argue that policies governing land and natural resources often privilege powerful actors, while local communities disproportionately bear the consequences of environmental decline. This perspective is especially relevant in the Nigerian context, where the *Land Use Act*, centralises land ownership in the hands of state governors and has often facilitated exploitative land allocations that neglect ecological sustainability. In the context of environmental conflict in the Niger Delta, such centralised governance structures intensify both ecological degradation and social inequality (Bornu 2025). Thus, political ecology enables this study to interrogate how the *Land Use Act* shapes land access, land use patterns and environmental outcomes and to evaluate the socio-political forces that contribute to the country's ongoing ecological crises.

Ecological hermeneutics offers a complementary interpretive lens for reading biblical texts in ways that foreground ecological consciousness, while political ecology provides the analytical tools for examining modern land governance.

Ecological hermeneutics emerged in response to the understanding that Western Christianity contributed to environmental degradation through anthropocentric interpretations of Scripture that emphasised human domination over nature (Sayem 2021). Subsequently, scholars developed interpretive methodologies that seek to recover the ecological wisdom embedded within biblical texts (Belser 2022; Deane-Drummond 2022). This hermeneutical approach treats the earth as a central participant in the biblical narrative rather than a passive backdrop, highlighting the ways in which land, animals and ecosystems possess intrinsic value and agency. Ecological hermeneutics resists readings that focus exclusively on human interests and instead encourages interpretations that promote ecological justice, sustainability and respect for creation (Ferreira & Sutton 2024). The bringing together of political ecology and ecological hermeneutics provides a powerful interdisciplinary framework for this study. Political ecology exposes the power dynamics and structural forces shaping Nigeria's land governance and its ecological consequences, while ecological hermeneutics illuminates the ecological and justice-oriented principles embedded within the biblical texts. These frameworks allow the study to place ancient scriptural visions of land rest, renewal and justice in critical dialogue with the modern *Land Use Act*, thereby offering a biblically informed ecological framework for shaping land management in Nigeria.

Exegetical study of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15

The Sabbath and Jubilee laws (Lv 25; Dt 15) represent a profound articulation of early environmental justice and land ethics. Deuteronomy 15 belongs to the Deuteronomistic Law Code (Dt 12–26), which reinterprets the Sinai legislation for Israel's settled agrarian context (McConville 2002). While the focus of Leviticus is on land restoration and the preservation of family inheritance, Deuteronomy shifts the emphasis towards social compassion, debt release and the ethical responsibilities of the community towards the poor. In contrast, Leviticus 25 stands within the Holiness Code (Lv 17–26), which highlights Israel's distinct identity and its obligation to reflect Yahweh's holiness in social, economic and ecological relationships (Milgrom 2001). This chapter introduces the Sabbath Year (*sabbath*) and the Jubilee Year (*yobel*) as divinely mandated structures that govern time, land use and interpersonal relations within the covenant community.

Exegesis of Leviticus 25: Holiness code

The first chapter (Lv 25) presents a theological ecology that unites land, people and divine ownership. It unfolds in three major movements: Sabbath Rest for the Land (vv. 1–7), the Jubilee and Land Redemption (vv. 8–34) and Protection of Vulnerable Israelites from Debt Bondage (vv. 35–55). Leviticus 25:23 states, 'the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me'. This verse establishes a non-

negotiable theological principle: Israelites cannot permanently alienate land because they do not own it absolutely; God does. The land functions as a covenant gift (Wright 1990). The Jubilee institutionalises periodic socio-economic correction, rooted in God's character (ed. Jusu 2017). Release is not arbitrary charity but covenant faithfulness. The sale of land is described as a lease based on the number of harvests until the Jubilee (vv. 14–16). This policy ensures that families retain long-term access to productive resources, as wealth cannot accumulate uncontrollably in the hands of a few. Wright calls this 'restorative justice', not redistributive socialism (Wright 2006).

Verses 25–28 introduce the *goel*, a close relative responsible for buying back family land lost to poverty. The *goel* system ensures kinship solidarity and prevents generational displacement (Sklar 2014).

Leviticus 25:39–43 prohibits treating impoverished Israelites as slaves. Instead, they must be treated as hired workers, anticipating eventual release. This law counters the ancient Near Eastern trend of permanent debt servitude. The Jubilee and Sabbath years allow the land itself to rest (vv. 4–7). This introduces an early biblical principle of ecological sustainability, affirming that land has limits and must be treated as part of God's covenant community.

It is important to note, concerning Leviticus 25, the exegetical surprise of the absence of the Hebrew *nahalal* [inheritance] regarding Israel's ownership of the land. Instead, the passage prefers the term *ahuzza*, which implies a temporary holding or tenancy rather than absolute ownership. This distinction is maintained throughout the legislation concerning the Jubilee. Whenever the text describes the return of land to its original family unit, it consistently employs *ahuzza* rather than *nahalal* (Lv 25:10, 24, 25, 27, 28). This terminology is crystallised in verse 13, where the mandate is given: 'In this year of Jubilee each of you shall return to his property (*ahuzza*)'. However, the root *nhl* is not entirely absent from the chapter, but its appearance serves to heighten the theological tension. It appears prominently only in verse 46, in a context that creates a jarring contrast: it is applied not only to the holy land but also to foreign slaves. The text instructs the Israelites that they 'may bequeath them [foreign slaves] to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever' (Lv 25:46). Here, the verb *vehitnahaltem* is utilised, suggesting that while human bodies may be 'inherited' as permanent property, the land of Canaan cannot be (Tawil 2005). The theological implication of this lexical shift is that the Priestly writer restricts the concept of *nahalal*, that is, absolute, permanent dominion, to Yahweh alone (Schmidt 2009). This is explicitly articulated in Leviticus 25:23, which declares, 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me'. Consequently, humans cannot truly possess the land as *nahalal*; they are merely divine tenants holding an *ahuzza*, or lease, from God (Havrelock 2020). The Jubilee functions as the mechanism to prevent Israelites from

acting as absolute owners, enforcing the reality that the only 'property' they are permitted to own with the finality of *nahalal* is, tragically, the foreign chattel slave.

Exegesis of Deuteronomy 15: Deuteronomical law code

The second chapter, Deuteronomy 15, is part of the Deuteronomical Law Code (Dt 12–26), which adapts Sinai laws for Israel's life in settled agricultural land (McConville 2002). Whereas Leviticus stresses land restoration, Deuteronomy emphasises social compassion, release and economic community ethics. The passage unfolds in the following order:

Deuteronomy 15:1–2 commands a release (*Shemittah*) every seventh year, cancelling debts among Israelites. Unlike the Jubilee, this addresses movable property rather than land tenure. The *Shemittah* functions as a structural safeguard against generational poverty and an institutional correction to prevent creditor dominance (Craigie 1976:232).

Deuteronomy 15:4 explicitly calls the land an inheritance given by God: '...for the LORD will greatly bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance (*nahalal*) to possess...'. *Nahalal* here is linked to the concept of *Shemittah* (the release of debts). The implication here is that the 'inheritance' is not a static legal claim (as in Leviticus) but a dynamic source of blessing that is contingent on generosity. The verse further declares, 'There shall be no poor among you', yet verse 11 states, 'The poor will never cease'. Scholars interpret this tension as a moral ideal held alongside human realism (Block 2012:365). The system aims to minimise poverty's causes even if total elimination remains unrealised. Thus, if the land is truly God's *nahalal* given to Israel, then hoarding its produce (by demanding debt repayment from the poor) contradicts the nature of the gift. The release of debt is the ethical requirement of holding the *nahalal*.

Verses 7–11 emphasise open-handedness towards the poor. The Hebrew verbs *patach* [open] and *natan* [give] intensify the imperative for active generosity. The rationale is explicitly theological: God blessed Israel, so Israel must bless one another (v. 10).

Deuteronomy 15:12–18 commands releasing Hebrew servants after six years and equipping them liberally from flock, threshing floor and winepress. Unlike Leviticus, Deuteronomy adds explicit humanitarian concern and insists that release must not leave the former servant empty handed (Wright 1996:187–189).

Verse 15 anchors the mandate in Israel's redemption from Egypt. Just as God liberated Israel, Israelites must create structures that reflect liberating justice in community life.

The above exegetical approach, filtered through an integrated eco-theological hermeneutic, reveals that these statutes are

not merely social or ritualistic, but a cohesive system designed to regulate the relationship between humanity, the land and God, predicated on the principle of divine ownership and restorative justice. The entire structure of Old Testament land ethics rests on the theological declaration in Leviticus 25:23: 'The land is mine; with me you are but foreigners and tenants'. The Hebrew terms *gerim* [foreigners], meaning someone who lacks hereditary rights, and *wetowosabim* [tenants], suggesting a temporary resident, are statuses that explicitly deny the Israelites absolute land tenure [*dominium*]. Their relationship to the land is conditional, requiring them to manage it on behalf of Yahweh, the true Landlord. This premise pre-emptively dismantles the root cause of ecological and social exploitation. Since the land is Yahweh's, its usage must adhere to his ethical standards, which prioritise the well-being of the whole creation, not just human profit.

The concept of the Sabbath extends beyond human rest to encompass the earth itself, establishing a foundational eco-theological rhythm. The Sabbatical Year [*Shemittah*] (cf. Dt 15:1-2) mandates rest for the land every seventh year. Leviticus 25:4 commands a 'Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord'. The phrase 'Sabbath to the Lord' parallels the weekly Sabbath, sanctifying the cessation of agricultural labour and imbuing the land's rest with cultic significance. The land is thus elevated from a mere resource to a moral subject with its own covenant right to participate in the sacred rhythm of creation. This enforced fallow year functions as a divinely mandated act of soil conservation and fertility renewal. It serves as a check on anthropocentric hubris, forcing humans to trust God for sustenance and to respect the limits of the natural ecosystem. The produce that grows spontaneously is designated for the poor and wild animals (Lv 25:6-7), enacting a small-scale temporary redistribution of natural resources and recognising the right of non-human creation to the earth's bounty.

Deuteronomy 15 makes provision for the necessary socio-economic corollary to the land's rest, enshrined in the release of financial and human burdens. The command is *Shemittah* to 'grant a release' (Dt 15:1) of debts owed by a fellow Israelite. The rationale is the explicit prevention of permanent poverty: 'There need be no poor people among you' (Dt 15:4). The inability to pay debts often forces the poor to sell their land (Lv 25:25) or their labour (Dt 15:12). Economic insecurity is thus directly tied to the disruption of the land stewardship model. By cancelling debts and releasing servants, Deuteronomy 15 ensures that the vulnerable retain their social and economic footing, making them viable stewards of their ancestral land. This social equity is the prerequisite for stable environmental stewardship. The system demands that the community's ethical priority (eliminating poverty) supersede individual economic gain. The primary and explicit goal of Deuteronomy 15 is socio-economic justice and the elimination of systemic poverty within the covenant community of Israel. The ultimate goal is idealistic: 'There need be no poor people among you' (Dt 15:4).

The *Shemittah* (release) of debts is the mechanism to achieve this. While not explicitly stating 'land return' like Leviticus 25, the debt cancellation ensures that the poor are not permanently driven to sell their ancestral holdings (a theme in Lv 25:25). The goal is to keep the economic system cycling and prevent the consolidation of wealth and land ownership. A textual tension exists even within Deuteronomy. After stating that poverty 'should be eliminated' (Dt 15:4), the text later acknowledges human failure: 'For the poor will never cease to be in the land' (Dt 15:11). This shift highlights that the law's goal is not merely legislative but ethical, demanding ongoing proactive charity ('You shall surely open your hand to your brother', Dt 15:11) to mitigate persistent failure. Thus, Deuteronomy 15 serves as a social justice manifesto designed to preserve the ethical and economic integrity of the Israelite nation, with little explicit regard for the land's health beyond the human community.

The Jubilee Year (every 50-years) is the ultimate expression of the integrated system, providing a structural reset for both land and society. The Jubilee is heralded by the blast of the ram's horn and is a proclamation of 'liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants' (Lv 25:10). This liberation includes the *veshavtem* [return] of all land to the original family and the release of all bonded servants. The price of land is determined by the number of years remaining until the Jubilee (Lv 25:15-16), legally confirming that one is buying the right to use the land and not absolute ownership. The mandatory redistribution of land prevents the permanent centralisation of wealth and resource control. Land aggregation, which leads to absentee ownership and intensive, extractive agricultural practices, is systematically curtailed. The Jubilee enforces a long-term perspective on land management, ensuring that the land remains within the family lineage and is managed sustainably for future generations. The Jubilee synthesises all prior ethical concerns. By cancelling debt, releasing human bondage and restoring land tenure, it corrects the socio-economic causes of exploitation, reinforcing the theological reality that God is the ultimate owner of the land and the Liberator of the oppressed. The Sabbath rest for the land is thereby protected not only by ritual command but also by systemic economic reform. By enforcing a debt limit every seven years, the law places a boundary on economic exploitation. Unchecked debt accumulation is a primary mechanism for extracting resources (labour, land) from the vulnerable. The text mandates that societal well-being requires a periodic reset.

Comparative analysis of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15: Distinctions and convergences

Although Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 address similar concerns, their emphases differ significantly. Leviticus 25 prioritises land theology, divine ownership and ecological rest, embedding social justice within a priestly vision of holiness. Deuteronomy 15, by contrast, foregrounds social

compassion, debt relief and ethical responsibility within the community, reflecting a pastoral and exhortative theological style. Both texts converge on key theological principles: divine ownership, restorative justice, resistance to wealth consolidation and the protection of the vulnerable. However, Leviticus enforces these ideals through structural mechanisms such as land return and mandated fallow periods, while Deuteronomy relies more heavily on moral exhortation and communal generosity. Together, the Sabbath, *Shemittah* and Jubilee laws form an integrated covenantal system that regulates relationships between God, humanity and the land. By limiting absolute ownership, mandating periodic release and prioritising the vulnerable, these texts collectively articulate a theology of stewardship that confronts both social exploitation and ecological degradation.

Comparison of the biblical principles vs the Nigerian *Land Use Act of 1978*

The comparative analysis of the *Land Use Act*, and customary land tenure in light of the theological insights from Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 reveals striking themes about land, stewardship and justice. Leviticus 25 presents the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee, where the land must rest every seventh year and all sold land returns to its original owners every 50 years. This expresses God's ownership of the land ('the land is mine') and frames land as a covenant trust rather than a commodity. The laws promote sustainable land use by mandating periodic rest to prevent depletion and emphasise socio-economic equity by restoring land to ancestral families, preventing permanent alienation and economic inequality. Similarly, Deuteronomy 15 articulates principles of economic release and compassion: debts are forgiven every seven years to prevent poverty accumulation and ensure no poor remain within the community. These laws reveal a theological ethic advocating intergenerational restoration, communal welfare and the moral responsibility of land stewardship and economic justice (Tatum & Altmann 2025). Ultimately, these laws are not merely administrative but are rooted in a covenant obligation, a moral duty owed to God, the vulnerable poor and the land itself.

The *Land Use Act* contrasts with this biblical vision by centralising land ownership under the state governor, effectively converting land from a communal trust into a bureaucratic asset subject to governmental control and economic exploitation. While the *Land Use Act* grants usufructuary rights, it curtails the perpetual and restorative tenure embedded in the Jubilee, where land rights are temporary and revocable under state interests, thus potentially compromising sustainability and social equity. Customary land tenure aligns more closely with biblical theology in its communal, inherited landholding and stewardship models. However, by subjecting customary rights to state approval and limiting autonomous community control, the *Land Use Act* disrupts the covenant relationship between people and land emphasised in

Scripture. The absence of mandated land rest and restoration cycles in statutory law also undermines ecological sustainability central to Leviticus 25.

In essence, biblical principles underscore that land is not just an economic resource but also a sacred trust to be managed sustainably, justly and with concern for future generations. The *Land Use Act*, while administratively efficient, neglects these theological insights by prioritising state power and economic development over covenant land care and social justice. There is thus a critical need to integrate biblical ecological and ethical values from Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 to reform Nigeria's land governance, restoring land as a covenant partner deserving rest, equitable distribution and responsible stewardship.

The fundamental gap between the *Land Use Act* and the biblical land principles emerges primarily from their contrasting purposes and underlying spirit. The *Land Use Act* is essentially an administrative and centralised legal instrument, created to give the state extensive control over land allocation, management and use. Its outlook is bureaucratic, prioritising efficiency, regulation and governmental authority as the means for maintaining order and enabling development. In contrast, the biblical land principles found in Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 are deeply justice oriented and restorative. They present land not merely as a resource to be managed, but as a sacred trust belonging ultimately to God and entrusted to communities for their flourishing (eds. McLaren, Padilla & Seeber 2009). Biblical land laws emphasise social equity, the protection of vulnerable households and the prevention of generational poverty through mechanisms such as debt release, the Sabbath rest for the land and the Jubilee restoration of property. These principles limit wealth accumulation, discourage permanent land dispossession and ensure that every family retains access to the means of livelihood. Whereas the *Land Use Act* reinforces state authority, biblical land ethics prioritise community well-being, long-term restoration and the moral responsibility to preserve both people and land.

Proposed biblical and ecologically informed model

A biblical and ecologically informed land model provides a richer, more humane and more sustainable vision of land governance than what the highly centralised *Land Use Act* currently embodies. Grounded in justice, restoration, community participation and environmental care, such a model aligns the management of land with both moral values and ecological realities. It offers a framework that can correct long-standing inequalities, protect the vulnerable and ensure that land remains a life-giving resource for future generations (Boulot 2025; Murphy 2023). In this way, the model seeks to integrate the *Land Use Act's* public interest goal with the moral and ecological depth of the biblical laws:

- Policy must first recognise the land's moral and ecological significance, viewing it as a life-support system that requires reciprocal care, not just a commodity.
- Large-scale agricultural and industrial leases should be subject to a mandatory rotational fallow system. This introduces the ecological principle of the Sabbatical Year into modern land management, ensuring soil renewal through incentives and penalties.
- A dedicated National Land and Resettlement Trust Fund should be established to systematically redeem lands alienated from vulnerable communities and provide micro-debt relief for poor farmers, embodying the economic justice goals of the Jubilee.
- Strengthening the *Customary Right of Occupancy* empowers local and traditional institutions, recognising their inherent role as stewards of generational land inheritance, thus decentralising control and enhancing the moral and ecological significance attached to the land.

Findings

This section presents and discusses the major findings of the study within the framework of eco-theological hermeneutics and political ecology. By placing the ecological and ethical principles of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 in dialogue with the Nigerian *Land Use Act of 1978*, the section evaluates key areas where biblical land ethics can inform a more sustainable and justice-oriented model of land governance in Nigeria.

The exegetical study of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 reveals three interconnected principles that constitute an early ecological and socio-economic framework within the biblical tradition. Firstly, the principle of land rest is derived from the Sabbatical Year legislation in Leviticus 25. Here, the land is commanded to rest every seventh year, signifying that the land itself possesses intrinsic value and is a covenant partner in the human–divine relationship. This instruction demonstrates ecological wisdom by preventing soil exhaustion, allowing natural regeneration and promoting long-term sustainability. Secondly, the principle of socio-economic release is articulated in Deuteronomy 15, where the cancellation of debts every seventh year serves to prevent entrenched poverty and promote economic balance within the community. This mechanism protects vulnerable households from generational indebtedness and cultivates a compassionate socio-economic system. Thirdly, the principle of restorative justice emerges from the Jubilee laws in Leviticus 25, which require that alienated land be returned to its original families. This system prevents the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, reverses structural inequality and sustains equitable land tenure across generations. Together, these biblical mandates present a theological foundation grounded in the belief that God is the ultimate owner of the land while humans are stewards entrusted with ensuring ecological health, social justice and equitable resource distribution.

The study further establishes that Nigeria's current ecological crisis reflects significant structural gaps within

the *Land Use Act*. Widespread environmental degradation, seen in deforestation, soil depletion, pollution and the breakdown of traditional agrarian cycles, is intensified by the absence of ecological provisions in the Act. Notably, the *Land Use Act* does not mandate land rest, soil regeneration practices or sustainable resource-use requirements, leaving ecosystems vulnerable to exploitation. In addition, the Act centralises land authority in state governors, prioritising administrative power over communal stewardship systems that have historically preserved ecological balance. The revocation clause, framed under the broad notion of 'public interest', exacerbates tenure insecurity for marginalised communities who depend on land for livelihood and identity. Furthermore, the Act marginalises customary ecological knowledge and practices, many of which closely mirror the stewardship-oriented principles seen in biblical traditions. These weaknesses collectively foster unsustainable land practices while amplifying socio-economic inequalities across communities.

The comparison between biblical land ethics and the provisions of the *Land Use Act* reveals both convergences and divergences. On the one hand, both frameworks reject the idea of absolute private ownership, locating final authority either in God or in the state. Both also claim to promote the common good, at least in principle. However, significant divergences emerge upon closer examination. The biblical system emphasises ecological rest, prescribing cyclical periods of land renewal, whereas the *Land Use Act* lacks any ecological mandate. In terms of justice mechanisms, Scripture embeds restorative cycles such as the Sabbath and Jubilee, which periodically reverse inequitable land accumulation, while the *Land Use Act* relies primarily on administrative redistribution without structural restoration of alienated land. Regarding authority and stewardship, biblical thought roots land tenure in divine covenant obligation, contrasting sharply with the *Land Use Act's* centralised, politically driven administration. Finally, concerning community autonomy, biblical and customary traditions empower local custodianship of land, while the *Land Use Act* overrides such systems through state-managed occupancy rights. These divergences illustrate that the *Land Use Act* lacks the moral and ecological grounding necessary for fostering sustainability and justice in land governance.

In interpreting these findings, the study employs political ecology and ecological hermeneutics as theoretical lenses. Political ecology exposes how Nigeria's environmental degradation is deeply entangled with power relations, centralised state control, extractive economic systems and structural inequalities embedded in the *Land Use Act*. This perspective highlights that ecological problems cannot be addressed without confronting the political and economic arrangements that produce them. Ecological hermeneutics, on the other hand, reveals that biblical texts portray the land as a moral subject deserving rest, dignity and justice. The land is not merely a commodity but a participant in

the covenant relationship between God and humanity. Together, these theoretical frameworks offer a holistic understanding of Nigeria's ecological crisis and demonstrate the relevance of biblical principles for shaping more equitable and sustainable land governance. They show that meaningful land reform must integrate ecological responsibility, social justice and fair power relations.

Drawing from these insights, the study proposes a biblical ecological model termed Covenant Stewardship and Restorative Land Tenure. The model rests on several key pillars. Firstly, the recognition of land as a covenant partner affirms that land possesses ecological and moral significance and therefore requires rest, renewal and responsible use. Secondly, the institution of cyclical ecological rest, which the study conceptualises as a Nigerian Land Sabbath, involves rotational fallow periods for large-scale agricultural and extractive activities to promote ecosystem regeneration. Thirdly, restorative land access is envisioned through a Nigeria Jubilee Fund, a national mechanism designed to redeem alienated land, support displaced communities and provide micro-debt relief for smallholder farmers. The model also emphasises strengthening local custodianship by enhancing customary tenure rights and safeguarding intergenerational stewardship traditions. It calls for balancing development with ecological sustainability by incorporating environmental restoration requirements into land allocation and resource-use policies. Collectively, these pillars offer a framework that aligns biblical ecological wisdom with practical strategies for sustainable and just land management in Nigeria. So far, the findings highlight that biblical ecological ethics provide a coherent and compelling framework for sustainable land governance. The Sabbath and Jubilee traditions challenge exploitative land practices and promote patterns of rest, redistribution and ecological regeneration. In contrast, the *Land Use Act*, although well-intentioned, operates within a political-economic paradigm that prioritises state control and development-driven land use at the expense of ecological health and social equity.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the ecological and ethical principles embedded in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 provide a rich theological framework for sustainable and just land governance. The exegetical analysis revealed three interrelated principles: land rest (Sabbatical Year), socio-economic release and restorative justice (Jubilee), which collectively present land as a covenant partner, emphasising ecological care, social equity and intergenerational responsibility. A comparative examination of the *Land Use Act* revealed significant gaps, including the absence of mandated land rest, centralised state control, tenure insecurity for vulnerable communities and the marginalisation of customary ecological knowledge.

While the Act aligns with biblical principles in rejecting absolute private ownership and aiming for communal benefit, it diverges sharply in its neglect of ecological sustainability and systematic restorative mechanisms.

By applying political ecology and ecological hermeneutics, the study highlighted how structural inequalities, state authority and extractive practices drive environmental degradation in Nigeria, while biblical texts offer a morally grounded vision for ecological stewardship and justice. In response, the study proposed a biblically informed ecological model: Covenant Stewardship and Restorative Land Tenure, which emphasises land as a moral-ecological partner, cyclical ecological rest, restorative access for communities, strengthened local custodianship and balanced development. In conclusion, integrating biblical ecological insights with contemporary land governance provides a unique, morally and ecologically grounded framework for addressing Nigeria's environmental and socio-economic challenges. The study underscores the potential of faith-informed policy reform to achieve sustainable, equitable and justice-oriented land management.

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The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Uzoma A. Dike: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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