

A THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL STUDY OF JUSTICE IN DEUTERONOMY 16: 18-20 AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the biblical concept of justice in Deuteronomy 16:18-20 and its relevance to Nigeria's national development. Using a qualitative research design and content analysis, it examines biblical texts and secondary sources, highlighting that justice emphasizes fairness, equality, and accountability. Prioritizing justice can foster social equity, transparency, and sustainable governance through community-led decision-making and equitable access. However, Nigeria's development efforts often suffer from corruption, fiscal mismanagement, and human rights violations, as seen in cases like the Niger Delta Development Commission and government counterinsurgency programs. Unlike studies that focus solely on secular development, this research integrates biblical principles with governance, offering a theological-ethical framework. It contributes to the discussion of the Old Testament's relevance to African development, a topic that has received little attention. The study concludes that addressing Nigeria's developmental challenges requires transparency, accountability, community involvement, and justice-driven policies.

Keywords: Theology, Ethics, Justice, Deuteronomy, Social Justice, National Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The biblical book of Deuteronomy, specifically Deuteronomy 16:18-20, emphasizes the importance of justice in governance and national development. This passage advocates for impartial judges and officials who uphold righteous judgment without partiality or bribery (Deuteronomy 16:18-20, NKJV). According to Brueggemann (2001) and Miller (2011), Deuteronomy's focus on justice reflects God's vision for a fair and equitable society. Miller (2011) notes that Deuteronomy's concept of justice is rooted in God's righteous character.

Scholars Sanneh (2013) and Walls (2014) recognize the relevance of Deuteronomy's teachings on justice to contemporary national development issues, including governance, corruption, and poverty reduction. In Nigeria's context, Turaki (2004) argues that the absence of justice and fairness hinders national development. This study explores the theological and ethical implications of Deuteronomy 16:18-20 for Nigeria's national development, focusing on justice, governance, and corruption.

Nigeria's struggles with corruption and poor governance, as noted by Wariboko (2014), underscore the significance of Deuteronomy 16:18-20. This passage presents a vision of governance grounded in justice, fairness, and accountability, with important implications for Nigeria's development. As

Janzen (2000) argues, pursuing justice and fairness is crucial for Nigeria's economic and social progress.

Deuteronomy 16:18-20 provides a thoughtful theological-ethical framework for understanding justice as a crucial component of national development. This framework emphasizes fairness, equality, and accountability in governance and societal structures, promoting impartial justice (Deuteronomy 16:19), leadership accountability (Deuteronomy 16:20), and justice for the common good (Deuteronomy 16:18). Rooted in the biblical understanding of justice as a reflection of divine character (Brueggemann, 2001), this framework aligns with Nigeria's constitutional principles of justice and good governance (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

Scholars like Amartya Sen support this framework, arguing that justice is essential for human development and well-being (Sen, 2009). This study argues that Deuteronomy 16:18-20 offers a timely and relevant theological-ethical framework for understanding justice and its implications for national development in Nigeria, providing a transformative vision for promoting justice, peace, and prosperity.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a content analysis approach to examine the research topic. The study relied solely on secondary data sources, including academic journals, books, and reputable online sources. Secondary data collection involved gathering existing data from various sources, including peer-reviewed articles from reputable journals, relevant books and book chapters, and reputable online sources such as government reports and non-governmental organization (NGO) publications.

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the secondary data. The analysis involved coding, categorization, and theme identification to draw conclusions. To ensure validity and reliability, the study employed systematic sampling, data triangulation, and member checking. The study adhered to ethical standards by properly citing all secondary data sources, avoiding plagiarism, and respecting the intellectual property rights of authors and publishers. By using a qualitative content analysis approach, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

3. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Theology

The etymological roots of "theology" lie in ancient Greece, where the fusion of "theos" and "logos" yielded a term connoting a profound exploration of the divine realm (Grenz, 1994). McGrath (2011) states that theology is "the critical and systematic study of the nature of the divine and of the relationship between the divine and human beings" (p.12). It involves exploring the beliefs, practices, and traditions of a particular faith or religion.

Throughout history, the concept of theology has undergone significant transformations, evolving from a narrow focus on deity in early Christianity to a broader examination of divine revelation during the Middle Ages. The rise of universities further solidified theology's status as a rigorous academic discipline, complementing its ecclesiastical significance. By the 18th century, German

scholars had expanded the scope of theology to encompass a comprehensive analysis of scripture and ecclesiastical traditions. In contemporary times, theology is often synonymous with systematic theology, a discipline rooted in the traditions of dogmatics and doctrinal theology (Grenz, 1994).

Ethics

Conceptually, the notions of "ethics" and "morality" are frequently conflated, although a nuanced distinction can be made. Morality encompasses a multifaceted framework of norms, values, and principles that govern human behaviour, whereas ethics represents a theoretical examination of these moral principles. Ethics is characterized by its emphasis on universal norms and objective judgments, as opposed to subjective, personal values (Bartneck et al., 2021). The term "ethics" has its roots in ancient Greek, with "ethos" originally denoting a geographic location, habit, or convention (Cicero, 44BC). Immanuel Kant's philosophical framework posits ethics as a response to the fundamental question "What should I do?" (Kant, 1788). Various philosophical schools of thought have emerged, each contributing distinct perspectives on the nature of ethics. Ethics is "the study of what is right and wrong in human behaviour and decision-making" (Rachels, 2012, p. 1). It involves examining moral principles and values that guide human actions.

Justice

The notion of justice remains a nebulous concept, defying a singular, universally accepted definition within the realm of law. Instead, its meaning is often extrapolated from diverse perspectives. For the purpose of this work, a working definition is necessary to maintain focus. The term "justice" is rooted in the adjective "just," which connotes legality, lawfulness, and equity (Nyegianu & Duson, 2021). According to Black's Law Dictionary (Bryan, 2014), justice encompasses the fair treatment of individuals, the quality of reasonableness, and the impartial administration of law, including the punishment of crimes and compensation for victims. This definition underscores the importance of fairness, punishment, and proper governance. Furthermore, justice is also informed by ethical considerations surrounding the distribution of benefits and burdens, with the ethics of justice constituting a distinct field of study (Nwikipasi and Duson, 2021). Justice is "the moral principle that governs the relationship between individuals and society, ensuring that individuals receive what they deserve" (Rawls, 1971, p. 3). Justice involves promoting fairness, equality, and human rights.

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is "the fifth book of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, containing a series of speeches attributed to Moses" (Blenkinsopp, 2012, p. 1). It provides instructions on how to live a righteous life in obedience to God's laws.

Social Justice

The multifaceted concept of justice encompasses various interconnected aspects, including individual virtue, legal frameworks, and societal evaluation. At its core, justice can be distilled to the principle of allocating to each individual what they rightfully deserve. Social justice, in particular, focuses on the equitable distribution of resources within a community, influenced by its economic, political, and cultural structures (Deranty, 2016). This notion of social justice raises questions about the optimal organization of society to ensure fair distribution, which can be understood as achieving a state where individuals receive benefits and burdens commensurate with

their unique characteristics and circumstances (Miller, 1975, 20). Alternatively, social justice can be viewed as the fair allocation of advantages and disadvantages arising from collective cooperation (Rawls, 1999). Social justice is "the promotion of fairness, equality, and human rights in society, addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination" (Ife, 2013, p. 2). Social justice encompasses creating a more just and equitable society for all.

National Development

National development refers to the process of economic, social, and political growth and improvement in a country, involving policies, programs, and initiatives that promote economic growth, reduce poverty, and enhance citizens' quality of life (Todaro and Smith, 2015, p. 1). To fully understand national development, it is essential to examine the concept of development itself. Development is a life-changing process that enhances various aspects of human existence, including politics, economics, social structures, and cultural norms, ultimately leading to improved living standards (Oghator and Okoobo, as cited in Nwapa and Njaka, 2018).

A nation's development is measured by advancements in citizens' quality of life, including political empowerment, economic prosperity, and sociocultural enrichment. Effective national development initiatives have a tangible impact on the broader population's welfare. According to Obasanjo and Akin (1991), national development is a dynamic, long-term process focused on enhancing individuals' capabilities across various aspects of life.

National development encompasses more than economic expansion; it requires a holistic approach prioritizing poverty alleviation, unemployment reduction, and inequality mitigation (Ajogbeje and Oparinde, 2014). Effective development involves the synergistic convergence of economic growth, distributive equity, modernized social attitudes, and political stability, yielding tangible improvements in human well-being, health, and education (Kambhampati, 2004; Okoye, 2005).

At its core, development represents a deliberate, human-driven endeavour to propel systemic transformation, elevating individuals and societies from underdevelopment to enhanced quality and sophistication. Human development involves enhancing personal welfare and safety, enabling individuals to maximize their potential (Oyelaran, as cited in Adama, 2006). National development is a holistic process characterized by national cohesion, educational advancement, economic prosperity, and inclusive governance (Elugbe, 1990).

4. EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Theological-Ethical Analysis of Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 16:18-20 presents a nuanced theological framework for understanding justice within the context of ancient Israelite society. This passage reflects the Israelites' historical and cultural transition from a nomadic to a settled society, necessitating a formal system of justice (Miller, 2011). As part of a larger literary section (Deuteronomy 16:18-17:13), this passage emphasizes the appointment of impartial judges and officials who will uphold righteous judgment (Deuteronomy 16:18, NKJV). Theologically, this passage underscores the Israelites' understanding of justice as an attribute of God's character, emphasizing retributive justice through punishment and reward (Deuteronomy 16:20, NKJV) (Brueggemann, 2001; Janzen, 2000).

Furthermore, this passage highlights distributive justice, ensuring equal access to justice regardless of social status or economic position (Deuteronomy 16:19, NKJV) (Miller, 2011). Additionally, restorative justice is emphasized through the restoration of relationships and promotion of healing and reconciliation (Deuteronomy 16:20, NKJV) (Brueggemann, 2001). The passage also stresses impartiality in justice, warning against partiality and bribery (Deuteronomy 16:19, NKJV) (Wright, 2006). Accountability is further emphasized, requiring transparency and scrutiny in the administration of justice (Deuteronomy 16:20, NKJV) (Volf, 2006). Theologically and ethically, Deuteronomy 16:18-20 offers a framework for understanding justice grounded in God's character, emphasizing impartiality, accountability, and transparency (McConville, 2002).

National Development and Justice in Nigeria

Deuteronomy 16:18-20 has profound implications for national development, emphasizing fairness, equality, and accountability in governance and society. Amartya Sen notes that promoting justice and fairness is crucial for sustainable development and poverty elimination (Sen, 2009, p. 123). This passage highlights the importance of fairness and equality in justice administration, emphasizing that justice should be impartial and unaffected by social status, wealth, or influence (Deuteronomy 16:19, NKJV). Joseph Stiglitz argues that equal opportunities are essential for economic growth and poverty reduction (Stiglitz, 2012, p. 156). Furthermore, Deuteronomy 16:18-20 stresses accountability in governance and society, requiring leaders and officials to be accountable to the people and God (Deuteronomy 16:20, NKJV). Robert Rotberg notes that accountability is essential for good governance and corruption reduction (Rotberg, 2014, p. 123).

Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, faces significant development challenges, including a lack of justice, which perpetuates poverty, inequality, and corruption (World Bank, 2020). According to the UNDP, Nigeria ranks 161 out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index (HDI), indicating low human development (UNDP, 2020). Corruption is a major obstacle to Nigeria's development, with the country ranking 146 out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) (Transparency International, 2020).

As the African Development Bank notes, good governance and the rule of law are essential for promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, and improving human development (AfDB, 2020). Nigeria's development challenges are also reflected in its poor ranking in the Global Peace Index (GPI), indicating a high level of violence and instability (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020).

Nigeria's development is severely hindered by inadequate access to essential services, including justice, education, and healthcare, particularly for vulnerable populations. The country's justice system is plagued by delays, corruption, and limited access to legal services, which undermines efforts to promote transparency and accountability. Furthermore, Nigeria struggles with alarming rates of out-of-school children and high maternal mortality rates, with UNICEF reporting one of the highest rates of out-of-school children worldwide and WHO citing one of the highest maternal mortality rates globally (UNICEF, 2020; WHO, 2019). To address these challenges, Nigeria must prioritize justice, good governance, education, and healthcare, ensuring equal access to these essential services for all citizens (Adejumo, 2019; HiiL, 2020; Okojie, 2019).

In the context of national development, Deuteronomy 16:18-20's implications are clear: governments and leaders must prioritize fairness, equality, and accountability. Deepa Narayan argues that promoting justice and fairness is essential for building trust and social cohesion (Narayan, 2000, p. 156). Deuteronomy 16:18-20 offers a powerful framework for promoting fairness, equality, and accountability in national development.

Case studies on Negligence of Justice in Development Initiatives in Nigeria

Case Study 1: The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)

The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was set up in 2000 with the primary goal of transforming the Niger Delta region, which has long been afflicted by poverty, environmental degradation, and social unrest. Despite its noble objectives, the commission has faced intense criticism for its opaque operations, lack of accountability, and allegations of corruption and fiscal mismanagement. The NDDC's inability to fulfil its mandate of bringing development to the oil and gas communities has resulted in the continued suffering of the Niger Delta people, who remain plagued by poverty and neglect, despite the commission's lofty promises (Eke, 2017).

Case Study 2: Government handling of the Boko Haram Insurgency

North-eastern Nigeria has been ravaged by the Boko Haram insurgency, resulting in devastating loss of life, property, and mass displacement. However, the Nigerian government's counterinsurgency efforts have been marred by accusations of brutality, human rights abuses, and disregard for the rule of law, including claims of unlawful detentions and extrajudicial executions (Amnesty International, 2018). This neglect of justice and human rights has not only intensified the crisis but also hindered efforts to establish peace and stability in the region, creating a cycle of violence and impunity.

Case Study 3: The Lagos State Government's Urban Renewal Programme

The Lagos State Government's urban revitalization initiative has garnered acclaim for its endeavours to stimulate growth and enhance the well-being of residents. Nevertheless, the programme has faced censure for overlooking fundamental rights and justice, with reports of involuntary displacements and demolition of dwellings without sufficient reparation or alternative shelter provisions (Social and Economic Rights Action Center, 2019). The disregard for justice and human rights in this initiative has not only compromised its potential advantages but also perpetuated socioeconomic disparities within the state, ultimately undermining the program's intended objectives.

Case Study 4: The Ogoni Clean-Up Project

The 2016 inception of the Ogoni Clean-Up Project aimed to rectify the ecological devastation wrought by years of oil spills in Nigeria's Ogoniland. Regrettably, the initiative's sluggish progress and opacity have sparked criticism, accompanied by accusations of fiscal mismanagement and corruption (Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, 2020). Notwithstanding its touted commitment to environmental justice, the project's unfulfilled promises have perpetuated the Ogoni people's plight, leaving them to endure the debilitating consequences of environmental neglect.

Case Study 5: The Kaduna State Government's Handling of the Southern Kaduna Crisis

The protracted conflict in Southern Kaduna, initiated in 2016, has yielded devastating consequences, including substantial loss of life and mass displacement. Criticisms have been levelled against the Kaduna State Government's management of the crisis, citing partiality and an absence of accountability, as well as allegations of human rights transgressions and disregard for justice (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Rather than ameliorating the situation, the government's response has inadvertently intensified the crisis, thereby prolonging the suffering of the Southern Kaduna populace amidst unrelenting violence and neglect.

Case Study 6: The Rivers State Government's Management of the ₦50 Billion Loan

The Rivers State Government's decision to secure a N50 billion loan in 2015 to fund development projects has been marred by controversy. Critics argue that the loan's lack of transparency and accountability has led to allegations of corruption and fiscal mismanagement, ultimately hindering the state's development (Premium Times, 2019). Instead of alleviating poverty and neglect, the loan has perpetuated the cycle of underdevelopment, leaving the people of Rivers State to bear the brunt of inadequate governance.

Case Study 7: The Federal Government's Handling of the #EndSARS Protests

The #EndSARS protests, which erupted in October 2020, were a citizen-led response to the entrenched culture of police brutality and corruption in Nigeria. Though, the Federal Government's reaction to the protests has been marked by excessive force and a lack of transparency, sparking allegations of human rights violations and a disregard for justice (Amnesty International, 2020). Somewhat, instead of addressing the underlying issues, the government's heavy-handed approach has inflamed tensions, perpetuating the cycle of police brutality and corruption that Nigerians continue to endure.

Case Study 8: The Lagos State Government's Demolition of the Otodo-Gbame Community

The 2017 demolition of the Otodo-Gbame community by the Lagos State Government resulted in the displacement of thousands of residents, sparking widespread criticism. The demolition has been condemned for its opaque nature and lack of accountability, with accusations of human rights violations and a blatant disregard for justice (Social and Economic Rights Action Center, 2018). Far from achieving its touted development goals, the demolition has instead exacerbated the community's socioeconomic woes, consigning the people of Otodo-Gbame to a prolonged struggle with poverty and marginalization.

We have carefully selected eight case studies that expose the shocking neglect of justice in development projects across Nigeria. Each case reveals a unique instance of injustice, from environmental destruction and human rights abuses to corruption and financial mismanagement.

These case studies were chosen for a reason - they collectively show us the devastating consequences of ignoring justice in development projects. By taking a closer look at these cases, we can identify patterns and systemic issues that perpetuate injustice and hinder progress in Nigeria. Some disturbing themes emerge from these case studies. For instance, many development projects lack transparency and accountability, leading to corruption, financial mismanagement, and human rights abuses. We also see a blatant disregard for human rights, including the right to life, dignity, and property.

The environmental consequences of neglecting justice are equally alarming. The Ogoni Clean-Up Project and the Niger Delta Development Commission case studies show us the devastating impact of environmental degradation on local communities. Perhaps most concerning is how neglecting justice in development projects can exacerbate poverty and marginalization. By examining these case studies, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex issues surrounding justice and development in Nigeria.

This analysis can inform strategies for promoting justice and development, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and prosperous society for all Nigerians.

Lessons from Deuteronomy 16:18-20 for promoting justice and national development in Nigeria

Deuteronomy 16:18-20 provides a framework for promoting justice and fairness in Nigeria's national development. Four key principles emerge from this passage:

Neutral Arbitration: The importance of impartiality in administering justice is underscored in Deuteronomy 16:19. This principle is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where corruption and bias often compromise the justice system (Eke, 2017).

Leadership Accountability: Deuteronomy 16:20 emphasizes the need for leaders to be accountable for their actions and decisions. Nigerian leaders must prioritize the greater good over personal interests (Aiyede, 2009).

Justice as a Fundamental Right: Deuteronomy 16:18-20 presents justice as a moral imperative, essential for promoting societal well-being. Nigerian policymakers must prioritize justice and fairness, recognizing justice as a fundamental human right (Sen, 2009).

Grassroots Involvement: The passage highlights the importance of community participation in administering justice. Nigerian policymakers must engage with local communities and involve them in decision-making processes to ensure justice is served (Oyebode, 2014).

5. CONCLUSION

This research has culminated in a complex understanding of the theological-ethical underpinnings of justice in Deuteronomy 16:18-20, yielding valuable insights for Nigeria's national development trajectory. A vision of justice rooted in divine character emerges, emphasizing fairness, equality, and accountability as indispensable governance and societal pillars. Nigeria's development conundrums – poverty, inequality, and corruption – are intricately linked to justice deficits. Case studies underscore the imperative of integrating justice and accountability into national development initiatives, illustrating the deleterious consequences of neglecting justice on individuals and communities.

Deuteronomy 16:18-20 articulates a theological-ethical paradigm that underscores fairness, equality, and accountability as integral components of justice. Nigeria's developmental hurdles are inextricably linked to justice deficits, necessitating the prioritization of justice in addressing these challenges. Empirical evidence from the case studies underscores the imperative of integrating justice and accountability into national development initiatives. The repercussions of neglecting

justice are far-reaching, imperilling individuals, communities, and overarching development agendas. This study ultimately underscores the vital importance of justice and accountability in national development, issuing a clarion call to policymakers and practitioners to foreground justice in their endeavours.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are presented for promoting justice in national development initiatives in line with Deuteronomy 16:18-20:

- i. **Ensuring equitable access:** Development initiatives must guarantee impartial distribution of resources, ensuring all individuals and groups have equal opportunities (Deuteronomy 16:19, NKJV). Clear decision-making protocols and resource allocation guidelines can facilitate this (Sen, 2009).
- ii. **Cultivating transparency and accountability:** Development initiatives should establish mechanisms for accountability, ensuring leaders are answerable for their actions (Deuteronomy 16:20, NKJV). Independent oversight bodies and corruption reporting mechanisms can help achieve this (Aiyede, 2009).
- iii. **Community-led development:** Initiatives should incorporate local communities in decision-making, addressing their unique needs and concerns (Oyebode, 2014). Participatory decision-making mechanisms can facilitate community engagement.
- iv. **Addressing systemic disparities:** Development initiatives must confront and address entrenched inequalities, promoting social justice and equal access to resources (Brueggemann, 2001). Targeted policies and programs can help marginalized populations.
- v. **Inculcating a justice-oriented culture:** Development initiatives should promote fairness, equality, and accountability, fostering a culture of justice (Sen, 2009). Education and awareness programs can help instil these values.

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