


# Combating the Downward Spiral of Poverty: Lessons from Leviticus 25:35-22 and Its Implications for Modern Day Poverty Alleviation Efforts of the Church



Joseph Adasi-Bekoe <sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> School of Theology and Missions, Ghana Baptist University College, Ghana.

## ABSTRACT

Going downward, the spiral of poverty is common among the majority of the world's poor whose lives are marked by the experience of being in and out of poverty. Relying on an exegesis of Leviticus 25.25-32, this article studies how the laws of Yahweh helped ancient and agrarian Israel prevent this common experience. The exegesis reveals that the text in Leviticus consists of four units, each describing a type of destitution that has the potential, if not handled carefully, to push a poor person down the downward spiral of poverty. The crisis that the laws anticipate appears to progress, first with a fellow Israelite who out of financial difficulty sold his land. The second envisages a person who survives on leased land from another Israelite. The third anticipates survival by means of debt enslavement to a fellow Israelite. The final law is aimed at helping the situation of debt enslavement to a non-Israelite. In all these cases of destitution, group identity, residence or location is important in determining the type of assistance and the people who qualify to assist. The laws call on all members of the community to act proactively to relieve neighbor's poverty whenever one exhibits signs of poverty.

## Correspondence

Joseph Adasi-Bekoe

Email: [jadasibekoe@yahoo.com](mailto:jadasibekoe@yahoo.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

The downward spiral of poverty occurs when poor people further fall down the pecking order despite efforts to alleviate their poverty. The World Bank suggests that this is a situation in which poor people moving in and out of poverty find their latter state in poverty worse than their original state. This, the World Bank says, is a widespread phenomenon that affects almost 1.5 billion of the world's population. In its 2001 development report, the bank asserts that while the efforts to reduce poverty globally are yielding positive results, poverty remains a global problem of huge proportion affecting more than 3 billion of the world's 6 billion population.<sup>1</sup>

Several factors have been identified by scholars as responsible for this phenomenon. The World Bank prescribes measures like promoting equality, promoting global financial stability, bridging the digital and knowledge divide, providing financial and non-financial resources for international public good and increasing aid and debt relief to help countries take effective action to end poverty.<sup>2</sup> The book of Leviticus has made important recommendations aimed at helping ancient Israel to use its unique

<sup>1</sup> World Bank. Attacking poverty an overview. World Development Report, World Bank development indicators Washington, DC Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/673161468161371338/World-development-report-2000-2001>

<sup>2</sup> World Bank. Attacking poverty an overview. World Development Report, World Bank development indicators.

culture and faith to prevent the situation where people of God experience and even fall in and out of poverty. It seeks to end the downward spiral of the poor into poverty, a situation that characterizes our modern world leading to the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer. Could those same laws be applied to the situation of the modern church? Although such an exercise is often considered illegitimate, Wright suggests that with ethical application limited to the church as the new people of God, such an exercise is possible.<sup>3</sup> As he again observed, it is unreasonable to “confine the relevance of the Old Testament socio-economic ethics in this way since God is still interested in public issues. Although complete moral consensus may not be achievable, Christians can contribute to these debates.” It is thus reasonable to derive some applicable lessons through analogizing while at the same time being careful to take the important differences between the two very seriously.

## **ALLEVIATING POVERTY ACCORDING TO LEVITICUS 25:35-42**

### **Introduction to the Book of Leviticus**

Leviticus 25:35-42 is one of the key passages that deals with social welfare in ancient Israel. This text is probably the first biblical example of a system of social safety net for a group of people. Just as the church is seen as the *ekklesia*, the “gathering, assembly, and congregation”<sup>4</sup> of God, Israel is to be seen as the first attempt by God to gather a group of people unto his name. During the exodus from Egypt, God was taking Israel out of a harsh life of slavery to a place of bounteous provision, a land said to be flowing “with milk and honey” (Exo. 3:7-8). It was during the exodus experience that God first began to show the prototype church that it is important to deal kindly with her members and neighbours who happen to fall into a life of difficulty. God showed Israel that it was appropriate for them to treat their neighbors kindly because they were themselves slaves and strangers in Egypt, and had just experienced a life of difficulty. The first set of instructions on social welfare is recorded in the Pentateuch. It is also here that Yahweh began to teach Israel how to regulate and promote the welfare of the destitute. They were to do this with the use of the rich fertile land he promised their ancestors and had now given to them as an inheritance.

The five books of the Pentateuch tell the story of Israel's origin, its election and Yahweh's promise of the land, the liberation from slavery in Egypt, and the gift of a cultic and ethical rule.<sup>5</sup> It also offers instructions on how Israel is to live their lives once they possess the land Yahweh is giving to them as a gift. It is in the book of Leviticus, where with the “mediation of Moses, Israel receives from God the basic house rules for the cult and ethos; rules for family and societal life together.”<sup>6</sup> As a book providing the house rules, Leviticus is concerned with how to treat the poor and the marginalized.<sup>7</sup>

## **THE TREATMENT OF THE POOR ACCORDING TO LEVITICUS 25:35-42**

### **Social Welfare Challenges Identified in Leviticus 25:35-42**

Social welfare challenges in the Old Testament are usually associated with poverty arising out of the lack of economic participation. Lazonby identifies indebtedness, land loss, land preservation and wealth accumulation as key social welfare issues in the ancient Near East.<sup>8</sup> These were the problems that Leviticus 25 addresses, as to how Israel's faith prescribed a distinctive solution. In agrarian societies, the main reason for individuals' non-participation in economic activities is centered on the ownership and control of the land. Before Israel arrived on the Promised Land, Yahweh had given detailed instructions for an equal distribution of the land; a command that was eventually carried out by Joshua in Joshua 13-21. The passage in Joshua 13-21 and another in Numbers 34-36 carefully note the equity of the distribution of the land among the various tribes and families.<sup>9</sup> Lazonby says that it is meant to show Israel that not only was the land as a whole to be seen “as a gift but that individual portions

<sup>3</sup> C. J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997), 112-113.

<sup>4</sup> T. Longman (ed.). “The Church”. In *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Erich Zenger, “The Book of Leviticus: An Important Book in Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” *European Judaism* 41, no. 2 (2008): 90.

<sup>6</sup> Zenger, “The Book of Leviticus: An Important Book in Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 90.

<sup>7</sup> Zenger, “The Book of Leviticus: An Important Book in Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 90.

<sup>8</sup> David Lazonby, “Applying the Jubilee to Contemporary Socio-Economic and Environmental Issues.,” *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 16, no. 3 (2016), 31.

<sup>9</sup> W. Brueggemann, *The Land, Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 192.

belonged to particular extended families.”<sup>10</sup> The ownership of a rich fertile land, flowing with milk and honey, is the fulfillment of a long-standing promise of God to their ancestors that became the basis for Israel’s relationship with Yahweh.<sup>11</sup> This land, Yahweh’s *nahala* (gift), was to form the basis of His relationship with the people and hence was not to be sold so that no individual or family may be deprived of the benefits of it perpetually.

However, Yahweh recognized that situations may arise that will cause one of His people to lose their hold on the allocated ancestral land. This leads to the destitution of the individuals and families involved. If this situation were to be left unchecked, Israel risked a situation where a member of God’s people may lose their control over land permanently, leading to chronic poverty. Some scholars have argued that the laws of Leviticus 25 should be primarily seen as priestly legislation aimed at ensuring the perpetual land rights of the “small landowner and his descendants by preventing latifundism - the accumulation of large estates by the wealthy.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Treatment of the poor according to Leviticus 25:35-42**

By analyzing the laws from the perspective of social welfare, this study argues that the laws were intended to address the shortfalls that have the potential to create imbalances in society. As Heir has rightly submitted, Leviticus 25 should be seen as part of the laws specifically given to protect poor persons from abusive treatment.<sup>13</sup> The laws in Leviticus 25 outlined the establishment of a social safety net, whose aim is to provide relief for the poor by minimizing the need for social welfare assistance. The details of the law should be seen as the house rules for the smooth operation of the social safety net among the people of Israel, the prototype Church.

Willis says that Leviticus 25 consists of four units with similar introductions (verses 25-34, 35-37, 39-46, and 47-54).<sup>14</sup> Each type of destitution is introduced by the phrase *kî-yâmûk ‘āhikā* translated as “if your kin, becomes poor.”<sup>15</sup> This introduction to the sub-units suggests that the entire unit is concerned with social welfare provisions that help maintain the social standing of kinsmen in their clan, tribe, and nation. There seems to be some “logical progression in these four units, concerning increasingly desperate financial straits” which Israel is called upon to help prevent.<sup>16</sup> The crisis that these laws anticipate appears to progress, first with one of “your kin” who out of financial difficulty sold a land to stay out of poverty (vv. 25-34). The second envisages a person who survives on leased land from another Israelite (vv. 35-38), while the third anticipates survival by means of debt enslavement to a fellow Israelite (vv. 39-46). The final law is to help manage the most desperate situation of debt enslavement to a non-Israelite (vv. 47-55).<sup>17</sup> In all cases of destitution, group identity is the decisive factor in determining the treatment parameters of the destitute.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in two of the cases, (v39, 47) residence or location is important in determining the type of assistance and the people who qualify to provide the assistance.<sup>19</sup>

### **Redeeming the Sold Land: Verse 25-34**

The first law that regulates relationships with the poor calls on society to provide care to the destitute. This is found in verses 25-34. It begins with a “protasis regarding a type of destitution and is followed by an apodosis regarding the proposed response or solution to the destitution.”<sup>20</sup> It begins with a protasis, “If your brother (*‘āch*) has become poor and has sold his property” (vs. 25). Even though there is no hint as to what can cause one’s kin to become poor and sell part of his property; apparently, the writer does not think it is necessary to identify specific circumstances that might lead to the situation. Instead, the

<sup>10</sup> Lazonby, “Applying the Jubilee to Contemporary Socio-Economic and Environmental Issues.39.

<sup>11</sup> P. J Haas, *The Sacred and the Mundane: The Message of Leviticus*, (The Christian Century, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> J. S. Bergsma *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2007), 225.

<sup>13</sup> Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*, 52.

<sup>14</sup> T. M. Willis, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries- Leviticus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 184.

<sup>15</sup> M. R. Jacob, “Parameters of Justice: Ideological Challenges Regarding Persons and Practices in Lev 25:25-55”, (*Ex Auditu* 22, (2006); 136

<sup>16</sup> Willis, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries- Leviticus*, 188.

<sup>17</sup> Willis, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries- Leviticus*.

<sup>18</sup> Jacob, “Parameters of Justice: Ideological Challenges Regarding Persons and Practices in Lev 25:25-55,”136.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob, “Parameters of Justice: Ideological Challenges Regarding Persons and Practices in Lev 25:25-55,”136.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob, “Parameters of Justice: Ideological Challenges Regarding Persons and Practices in Lev 25:25-55,”136.

text offers a solution to that reality.<sup>21</sup> The passage, therefore, assumes that regardless of the reasons why some kin might become poor to the extent of attempting to sell or actually selling his piece of ancestral land, he must be assisted, whenever it is discovered, by redeeming his sold property.

A brother's private poverty has become public knowledge when he sells his property. This is a social welfare situation that demands that someone act to prevent him from further slipping. Apparently, one of the first properties available in agrarian societies that can be easily sold is the land. Since the land is man's main source of economic livelihood, its sale means that the man's ability to contribute to the stability of his clan has been significantly altered.

There are two difficulties in understanding the membership of this social safety net. The membership of this social safety net is made up of the "kin who has become poor and has sold his property" and the community is called upon to relieve the poor man. However, what is the identity of the man who has fallen into poverty and the people who are being called upon to assist the man? The MKJV translates *'âch* as "thy brother". This makes it difficult to precisely define the identity of the person in need of assistance. "Thy brother" appears to limit those who are called upon to assist the poor man to be from the poor man's biological relations only. However, a proper translation of *'âch*, as used here, according to Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries (H251) refers to both biological and or metaphorical affinity, and that is much broader than the limitation placed by the MKJV. The NIV appropriately renders the verse "if one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property..." Properly understood, the text suggests that all neighbors or better still all "countrymen" who become poor should be offered a helping hand.

The next difficulty is in the continuation of the sentence "If any of his relatives comes to redeem it, then he shall redeem that which his brother sold". Whose responsibility is it to help the brother who has sold his property to survive? The responsibility is let loosely on any *qârôb* "his relative". Again, the difficulty is the definition of "relative". Strong says *qârôb* refers to any relative "near (in place, kindred or time), any of kin, kinsfolk (or kinsman), (that is) near, neighbor, (that is) next, (them that come) nigh (at hand), more ready" (Strong H7126).<sup>22</sup> This makes the network of relatives wide enough to make it possible for all to have one to redeem their sold properties. The law therefore anticipates a situation where a wide network of relatives would be available to assist the brother who happens to fall into difficulty. This is supposed to work in a perfect world, to the advantage of the poor person, but as Meyer has pointed out, "the world is far from perfect and so what, for instance, would happen if he does not find a redeemer?"<sup>23</sup> Also, while the next of kin has the right to redeem that which the destitute person has sold, it is not clear if the property so redeemed, is to be given back to the poor person immediately or the next of kin has the right to retain the property until the coming of the Jubilee. Wright contends that such redeemed lands are kept by the relative until the turn of the Jubilee.<sup>24</sup> This idea seems to be supported by the later commands requiring the giving of loans rather than gifts to support the destitute who need assistance (Lev. 25:35-38). Otherwise, Lazonby writes, it becomes an incentive for poor people to sell their lands because the responsibility or redemption will be on their rich relatives.<sup>25</sup> While for the next of kin, redeeming and retaining the land can be an effective measure against latifundism, there is also the possible danger that even though the land would remain in the wider kinship group, it might end up being accumulated by a few powerful families.<sup>26</sup> But if the next of kin, who is mandated to redeem the property were to hand it over immediately to the poor man, then, it could be said that while the law may have the genuine welfare cases in mind, it may at the same time be encouraging irresponsibility on the part of the person who makes claims of being poor. However, if they retain the property until the turn of the Jubilee, then one can say that the law serves to protect the interest of the extended family rather than the welfare interest of the poor man.

The law, in appealing to clan brothers or next of kin to aid, also anticipates a situation where there may be no one to assist in verse 26. However, the law is silent on the options available to the

<sup>21</sup> Willis, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries- Leviticus*, 184.

<sup>22</sup> Willis, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries- Leviticus*, 184.

<sup>23</sup> E. E. Meyer, "The Jubilee in Leviticus 25: A Theological Ethical Interpretation from a South African Perspective" (University of Stellenbosch, 2004), 76.

<sup>24</sup> Meyer, "The Jubilee in Leviticus 25: A Theological Ethical Interpretation from a South African Perspective," 122.

<sup>25</sup> Lazonby, "Applying the Jubilee to Contemporary Socio-Economic and Environmental Issues." 39.

<sup>26</sup> Meyer, "The Jubilee in Leviticus 25: A Theological Ethical Interpretation from a South African Perspective."

destitute during the period he is unable to find a kinsman to help in the redemption of his property. The law seems to leave the poor man to his fate, until such a time that he can pay the redemption price himself or wait for the Jubilee. The second half of verse 26 provides that, where the poor man becomes fortunate and is himself able to redeem it, (verse 27) “Then let him count the years of the sale thereof and restore the overplus unto the man to whom he sold it; that he may return unto his possession”. In redeeming a sold-out property, the cost is to be arrived at by consideration of the amount of harvest left before the year of Jubilee when the property reverts to its original owner. In the case that the poor man is unable to redeem his property, verse 28 provides that “But if he be not able to restore it to him, then that which is sold shall remain in the hand of him that hath bought it until the year of Jubilee: and in the Jubilee it shall go out, and he shall return unto his possession.”

It can be discerned from the above that the law envisages that a wide range of *qârôb* (neighbor) will be found to step in to protect the man who has sold his property. Nonetheless, even if no redeemer is found in the short term, the poor man is assured of returning to his property after the Jubilee. It thus appears that the provision for the Jubilee offers effective protection against long-term destitution but does not insulate the destitute in the short term. Again, in the long term, the Jubilee is an effective remedy against land latifundism. The redemption laws call people to lend a hand to those who have fallen; they are expected to do so on the principle that they do so in view of their common status before the Lord.<sup>27</sup> In the social protective system of Israel, the law of redemption, thus, functions as a non-contributory transfer to the poor man who sells his land or property to survive. It envisages, as a social welfare measure, that someone other than the poor man will act to help deal with the risk or vulnerability of poverty.

The narrative moves from a poor man who sold his land to survive to one who sells his property in a walled city. Verse 29 states “And if a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, then he may redeem it within a whole year after it is sold; within a full year may he redeem it”. The law gives an exception to the sale of urban property (25:29–34). The exception means that properties sold in an unwalled city can be recovered. In the case of a walled city, the seller and his kinsmen have only a year to pay the redemption fee; if they are unable, the sale is finalized. The purpose of this exception is not clear, but proponents of the "land-reclamation" hypothesis have cited this to suggest that the redemption laws, and, to a larger extent, that of the Jubilee were all added by post-exilic priests with the intent to justify the recovery of farming lands lost during the exile period.<sup>28</sup>

Verse 31 provides, “But the houses of the villages which have no wall round about them shall be counted as the fields of the country; they may be redeemed, and they shall go out in the Jubilee”. Houses in villages are considered part of the land for farming and therefore cannot be sold permanently. The underlying idea of redemption is that the land of Canaan, as distributed among the Israelite tribes, clans, and families (Num. 33:54) is permanent. It remains the property of Yahweh, not theirs to buy, sell, and reapportion.<sup>29</sup> Again, verse 31 aligns well with the assertion that the main thrust of Leviticus 25 is primarily concerned with the independent small farmer.<sup>30</sup> This provision is clearly intended to prevent land latifundism. It contributes positively to the restoration of the social welfare needs of the small landowner by guaranteeing a possible re-occupation of the land of the poor farmer.

Also included in the properties that can be returned at the turn of the Jubilee is any house sold in one of the ‘Levites’ designated cities (Num. 35:1–8). Leviticus 25:32-33 says that. “Notwithstanding the cities of the Levites, and the houses of the cities of their possession, may the Levites redeem at any time. And if a man purchases of the Levites, then the house that was sold, and the city of his possession, shall go out in the year of Jubilee; for the houses of the cities of the Levites are their possessions among the children of Israel”.

The question of why Levites, the priestly tribe, have the right to redeem their property but the same is denied by the urban dweller has been used to suggest a possible confirmation of a “land-

<sup>27</sup> Willis, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries- Leviticus*, 191.

<sup>28</sup> Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*, 229; J.A.Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee, Uncovering Hebrew Ethics through the Sociology of Knowledge* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 88-89; G. Wallis, *Das Jobeljahr-Gesetz, Eine Novelle Zum Sabbathjahr- Gesetz. MIOF5 Cardellini, Die Biblischen*, 1969, 344-345.

<sup>29</sup> B. J. Schwartz, “Leviticus,” in *The New Interpreters Bible: One Volume Commentary*, ed. B. R. Gaventa and D. Petersen (Nashville: Abigdon Press, 2010), 146.

<sup>30</sup> G. North, *Leviticus, A Commentary, Translated by J. E. Anderson in Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: West Minster, 2000), 34.

reclamation” hypothesis.<sup>31</sup> Land reclamation hypothesis is the view that regards the Jubilee legislation as the production of exilic or post-exilic priests, with the intent to justify legally, the repossession of lands they and other returning Judean exiles lost.<sup>32</sup>

### Supporting people with intermediate poverty: Verse 35-38

Before describing how slaves are to be supported to exit debt slavery, verses 35-38 deal with how to support poor people in the intermediary state so they avoid falling into slavery. The law in its entirety offers some protection for a person who survives on leased land or borrows money from another Israelite (verses 35-38). The second law begins in verse 35 and states “And if your brother has become poor, and his hand has failed with you, then you shall help him; yes, even if he is a stranger or a tenant, so that he may live with you”. The first part of the law (verse. 35) stresses the importance of both relational identity (*your brother*) and community affiliation (*his hand has failed with you*) of the poor person who needs assistance.<sup>33</sup> The type of destitution addressed by this law is characterized by insolvency that necessitates financial assistance. Willis suggests that the Hebrew translated by the authorized version as “his hand has failed” could literally read, “his hand trembles with you”, a suggestion of a situation where such a man cannot maintain his place in the clan, and so becomes the “son” of another person.<sup>34</sup> Meyers seems to agree when he says that this is the situation in which the poor brother literally “stretches out his hand” to a fellow Israelite for survival. Since *fallen in (mowt) decay* can be translated as his hands “totter, shake, slip trembles” the phrase “his hand has failed” can also be translated as “his hand trembles”. This situation describes a condition where the poor man has trembling hands, an idiom used to represent the situation whereby the poor man now materially depends on someone else. Willis argues that the man has already sold the land on which he subsists, or due to severe weather failure, the poor man has now become dependent on one of his neighbors.<sup>35</sup> In such a situation, the text recommends adjustment in social practices toward the destitute.<sup>36</sup> The injunction is for the neighbor to receive him as one would receive a stranger or sojourner and make him comfortable.

The difficulty here, as previously noted, is the identity of the destitute who has sold his land and has now become dependent on others. The other difficulty in interpreting the text is the right understanding of how receiving the destitute as a stranger or sojourner will make him comfortable.

In the first place, since all the landed property belonged to the Israelites (Lev 25:23–24), one could infer that the brother (*’ach*), who once owned a land but has become poor and sold it or now borrows money must be of Israelite descent. In this case the NIV’s rendering of the identity of the poor person as “one of your countrymen” would be more appropriate than the KJV’s “thy brother”. If the injunction to support the brother in need applies to only persons of Israelite descent, then the law is discriminatory. However, a problem would arise if one were to say that all people of metaphorical affinity were to be supported. This is because in Israel, people were to be treated as brothers and given social assistance with living. This means that even strangers would be eligible to receive interest-free loans. If one were to accept this interpretation, then the permission to charge interest to people of other nations (Ex. 22:25; Deut. 23:19–20) becomes difficult to understand.<sup>37</sup>

The second major difficulty in understanding the text is the kind of support one is expected to render to the brother who has become poor. Verse 35b provides that one is obliged to support the poor brother “as you would an alien or a temporal resident, so he can continue to live among you” (NIV). The kind of support that will bring relief to the destitute requires to live on the land is suggested in verses 36-37, but it raises further questions. Verses 36-37 provide “You shall take no interest from him, or increase. But you shall fear your God, so that your brother may live with you”. This means that all loans granted to the destitute should be provided on an interest-free basis. Verse 37 further states that it is unacceptable to collect food in place of usury. “You shall not give him your silver on interest, nor lend him your food for increase.” Albeit is that the standard support provided for all aliens or temporal residents? Should the

<sup>31</sup> Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*, 229.

<sup>32</sup> Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*.229.

<sup>33</sup> Jacobs “Parameters of Justice: Ideological Challenges Regarding Persons and Practices in Lev 25:25-55”136.

<sup>34</sup> Willis, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries- Leviticus*. 191.

<sup>35</sup> Willis, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries- Leviticus*. 191.

<sup>36</sup> Jacobs “Parameters of Justice: Ideological Challenges Regarding Persons and Practices in Lev 25:25-55” 137.

<sup>37</sup> Schwartz, “Leviticus,” 147.

prohibition of interest payment be restricted here to the specific case of fellow Israelites or relatives attempting to redeem their property only or does it apply to all residents in a jurisdiction? How is that treatment supposed to ensure the social welfare benefit of the brother who has fallen into poverty?

Now, to answer the question of how the treatment of resident aliens can ensure the social welfare benefit of the brother who has fallen into poverty, the author reflects on the socio-historical condition of strangers in Israel. During and after the Exodus, Israel was acquainted with two classes of strangers; resident aliens and foreigners who considered their sojourn in the land temporary. The resident alien is referred to as the *ger*, and the foreigner is referred to as *zarim* or *nokhrim*.<sup>38</sup> The resident alien lived permanently in his adopted community became “a protected stranger” and enjoyed certain privileges that the foreigner did not. Israel, prior to the Exodus were themselves *gerim* (Ex 22:20). According to Smith, the status of the resident alien was “an extension of that of the guest, whose person was inviolable, though he could not enjoy all the privileges of the native.”<sup>39</sup> He, in turn, was expected to be loyal to his protectors (Gen 21:23) and to be bound by their laws (Num 15:15-16). Unlike the *gerim*, the *Zarim* had very little rights, even though he was expected to be accorded some courtesies. The hired laborer, even though may be a resident alien, is guaranteed daily wages, unlike the slave. So, the status change from slavery to hired laborer has been seen as “guaranteed employment” and consequently wages as an alternative to slavery.<sup>40</sup> What this legislation does to protect the social welfare interest of the destitute is to prevent the situation in which the poor man is reduced to slavery due to his economic standing.

Resident alien *ger*, unlike the *Zarim* also has full right of receiving or taking interest-free loans from all Israelites. According to the legislation of Deuteronomy, an Israelite may charge foreigner usury though he may not do so to a fellow Israelite (Deut. 23:21). The remission of debts at the turn of the Jubilee does not apply to the debts of foreigners (Deut.15:3). Belshaw sees in this distinction of the law (the requirement of taking no interest on loans) to guarantee interest-free business loans or grants in kind to the destitute.<sup>41</sup> In this, he sees the potential of recapitalizing the poor brother to begin a new productive venture all over again. This also becomes another important way of roping in all rich neighbors in the community to assist in providing for the social welfare needs of their poor relatives.

However, looking at this from the perspective of social justice, Jacobs has described the categorization of citizens into first and second-class members with special rights due to economic status as discriminatory.<sup>42</sup> Worse still, the fact that other residents living in the same geographical location could have different statuses and are expected to be treated based on membership of an ethnic group may not be fair to the underprivileged group. It must be countered that the laws of Israel generally required that slaves and generally all poor people be handled with fairness and not be mistreated (Ex. 21:20, 26-27, 23:9). The laws prescribe fair treatment for all, irrespective of their social standing or ethnic background. Again, believers must be wary of using modern standards to evaluate ancient standards. This researcher believes the laws here would compare far more favorably with ancient non-Israelite cultures.

Verse 36 again stresses the importance of obeying this law with reference to God who gave the law. Maybe, this is in anticipation of the fact that there are no legislated consequences for enforcing obedience to this law. Verse 37 repeats content-wise, what has already been prohibited in the first clause of verse 36. Here, it is packaged as Meyer says, “in a parallel chiasm.”<sup>43</sup> The verse adds the prohibition of making profits on food provided to the brother who has become poor and needs assistance. The practice of taking food for profit was a disingenuous way of evading the law against usury already given in verse 36 (cf. Neh 5:7-8) and has the same consequences upon citizens as exacting usury.

Verse 38 states: “I am Jehovah your God who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God”. This sets out the theological basis for the legislation used primarily as a measure against further harassment of a brother, who already finds himself in very difficult

<sup>38</sup> Jewish Virtual Library, “Strangers and Gentiles,” 2016, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org>.

<sup>39</sup> Smith AW, “Lectures on the Religion of the Semites” in: (HUCA, 3, 1956) 77–79

<sup>40</sup> Dervke Belshaw, “Socio-Economic Theology and Ethical Choices in Contemporary Development Policy: An Outline of Biblical Approaches to Social Justice and Poverty Alleviation,” *Transformation* 14, no. 1 (1997): 5–9, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Belshaw, “Socio-Economic Theology and Ethical Choices in Contemporary Development Policy: An Outline of Biblical Approaches to Social Justice and Poverty Alleviation.”

<sup>42</sup> Jacobs “Parameters of Justice: Ideological Challenges Regarding Persons and Practices in Lev 25:25-55”, 139.

<sup>43</sup> Meyer, “The Jubilee in Leviticus 25: A Theological Ethical Interpretation from a South African Perspective,” 83.

circumstances. Here one finds that Yahweh identifies himself as “the one who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land for an inheritance and be your God”. This is a subtle reminder to Israel that they or their ancestors have once found themselves in such a situation before, but He redeemed them. They are, therefore, expected to do the same for their brothers in difficult circumstances (Ex 22:21; Deut. 15:15, 24:18).

The overall relevance of this section for a theology of social welfare is that the law calls for support from the wider community to prevent poor people from further sliding into worse poverty.<sup>44</sup> The interest-free nature of the loans was also meant to create a network of obligations that would ensure the availability of such loans when others needed them.<sup>45</sup> This is an important practice because, in agrarian economies, life is unpredictable and prone to excessive risk, particularly when bad weather leads to crop failure. It, in essence, acted as an informal safety net in the “unpredictable context of subsistence farming and *reminded family members* that one day they too might need such support.”<sup>46</sup>

### Relief from Debt Slavery Verse 39-46

When interest-free loans are unable to guarantee recovery for the destitute due to, for instance, a bad harvest, the poor person is bound to find himself in a downward spiral of poverty. In such situations, the only option left is to sell more land and assets until there is none to be sold. When there are no more assets to sell, the poor man has no option but to attempt to sell himself. Verse 39-46 anticipates a situation where an Israelite might attempt to sell himself into debt slavery to survive.

The third law, outlining what to do in the scenario above, begins in verse 39, with the same clause as in verses 25 and 35, but with a slight variation “If your brother who lives beside you has become poor”. In its detail, the law envisages a more severe situation of potential debt enslavement. The protasis emphasizes three main issues that serve to define the identity of the brother in need of assistance. Emphasis is placed on community, residential, and relational affiliations of the destitute. The poor person is first identified by his relational identity as a brother, a reference to his Jewish identity. The clause also adds additional qualifications for residential and community affiliations. It states that the poor person in need of assistance “lives beside you” - probably in the same house, vicinity, or community. The law makes provision for the maintenance of an extremely difficult situation where one of the children of Israel has become poor and attempts to sell himself to a fellow Israelite to survive. Verse 39 states “And if your brother *who lives* beside you has become poor, and is sold to you, you shall not compel him to serve as a bondservant” (MKJV). What has happened to this man, to cause him to sell himself precisely, is not known, but the New American Standard Version (NASV) suggests that his predicament has to do with an inability to pay a debt he owes. The NASV says that the man has “become so poor with regard to you that he sells himself to you”. Being poor “with regards to” someone may suggest that one owes someone some debt he is unable to pay. The debt for this destitute has become too difficult to manage, so he offers to sell himself into debt slavery. Several factors, such as old age, sickness, and poor harvest among others, may combine to make one poor, and when this occurs, citizens may be compelled to sell themselves into slavery. An individual in such situations has effectively lost his or her place in the lineage system. He is on the threshold of becoming a “servant of” an Israelite instead of his original status as a child of an Israelite.<sup>47</sup> In such circumstances, the law, on purpose, prescribes adjustment in the social practices toward the destitute. The law prescribes that assistance be provided by the person he attempts to sell himself to so that he does not function as a slave. This law anticipates these unforeseen circumstances and places the responsibility on the person to whom the destitute attempts to sell himself to *lo-ta’vod bô avodat äved* (25:39b), literally not compelling the poor man to serve as a bondservant. Certainly, 25:41-44 insists that the Israelite cannot be enslaved by another Israelite.

The clause in verse 40 provides that “they are to be treated as a hired laborer (*šâkîyr*) (SHGD H7916) or temporary residents among you; they are to work for you until the Year of Jubilee” (NIV). In such a situation, the responsibility is placed on whoever ‘buys’ the poor man’s services to support him

<sup>44</sup> M. Schluter, “Welfare,” in *The Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda and Strategy for Christian Social Reform*, ed. M. Schluter and J. Ashcroft (Nottingham: IVP, 2005), 175.

<sup>45</sup> Schluter, “Welfare,” 181.

<sup>46</sup> Lazonby, “Applying the Jubilee to Contemporary Socio-Economic and Environmental Issues.” 39.

<sup>47</sup> Willis, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries- Leviticus*, 191.

to live in the land. The support is to come by treating the destitute not as a slave but as a hired servant or a resident alien. In other words, by virtue of the poor man being of Jewish origin, his status, as someone who had sold himself into debt slavery, is expected to change from a slave to a hired servant or temporary resident. The next clause also adds that the man is to serve as a hired servant until the turn of the next Jubilee. Now the question is how were Israelites expected to treat their hired servants and how does this treatment improve the poor man's social welfare status?

The treatment of poorer people in Israel is generally undergirded by Yahweh's injunction in Proverbs 19:7. The passage says, "Whoever is kind to the poor is lending to the LORD – the benefit of his gift will return to him in abundance" (ISV). Hired labourers were generally poorer people who lacked land to farm for themselves. They, therefore, depended on immediate payment for the work they performed (Deut. 24:14-15). They were supposed to be treated with respect, whether they were native Israelites or resident aliens. The Israelites were frequently reminded of God's special concern for the poor (Ex 22:21–22; cf. Deut. 10:17–19) and were frequently enjoined not to molest them (Ex 22:20; cf. Jer 7:6). They were not to be abused (Deut 24:14) and were to receive equal treatment before the law (Deut 1:16; cf. 24:17; 27:19). It was considered a serious infraction of the law to oppress a hired laborer or to deny them immediate payment for their services. Leviticus 19:13 says "You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning". Depriving the hired laborer of his due payment was considered a serious enough infraction of the law to attract the curses of Yahweh (Jer 22:13). The status of the hired laborer is distinct from that of the slave. While the law permitted Israelites to buy and keep slaves from neighboring nations and pass on such slaves as properties to their children, it could not do so for hired labourers. Hired labourers were generally seen as daily wage earners. It is therefore obvious that by converting the status of the destitute who sells himself as a strategy to manage his debt from slavery into that of a hired laborer, this provision of the law facilitates improvement in the social welfare standing of the poor man. In his new status, he may be working for his rich neighbor and still be earning daily wages to feed his family. The neighbor effectively becomes the poor man's employer and not his 'master'. Probably, that is precisely the reason why redemption is not recommended as a remedy for this kind of destitution. This status change is the most effective strategy to manage the condition of such a poor man until he is able to return to his ancestral land at the turn of the Jubilee.

The question that remains unanswered is whether slavery among Israelites was permitted, and if permitted, does it in any way contribute negatively to the well-being of the poor people involved? One way to explain this seeming contradiction is the difference between indentured and chattel slavery. The procedure by which the destitute is to be employed to work to pay off their debt in exchange for their freedom is indentured slavery. It may well be that Leviticus 25 uses the term "slave" in the sense of "chattel slave". Nevertheless, one can discern from the narratives that certain measures are in-built into Israelite slavery that ensure that the social welfare need of the slave is protected. Even where permitted, debt slavery is designed to be part of the social protective system for all poor people. It serves as an effective social safety net for the destitute. While in servitude, the poor person is guaranteed employment and hence wages, as a hired servant.<sup>48</sup> In narratives in which Israelite slavery is permitted, such slaves are released after a limited number of years and are also entitled to the payment of reparation upon their release. The payment of reparation to a released slave serves as a set-up or venture capital for the poor man to start life all over again.

Verse 41-42 provides for the release of the poor man who sold himself into debt slavery. Verse 40 closes with the clause that the poor man is to serve in his new capacity as a hired servant until the turn of the Jubilee. Verse 41 continues and specifically states "And he shall depart from you, he and his sons with him, and shall return to his own family. And he shall return to the possession of his fathers." The poor man who has been guaranteed employment and wages as a hired laborer is now required to go to his own family home.

This directive seems to suggest that while the man served as a hired laborer, he might have also enjoyed the full hospitality of the rich neighbor including possible shelter. However, this man can now return to his own family home because the Jubilee has brought a release and he can begin his life all over

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<sup>48</sup> Willis, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries- Leviticus*, 192.

again. Possibly, this man may return to his father's ancestral home and land because the turn of the Jubilee means that even if they were sold, the land and the house have now been released. He could return to his own house, if he had one, and was probably sold when he became financially insolvent. The turn of the Jubilee guarantees a full release of all properties, including land and buildings and slaves as noted earlier in verses 28-29.

The principle of the Jubilee, therefore, makes the responsibility for the long-term management of poverty and its consequent social welfare needs, a joint responsibility of all members of the entire community. It is expected that all members of the community will comply and cancel all unpaid debts, release all slaves, and release all property to their rightful owners. What remains unclear is what happens to a man who did not own a house before he became financially insolvent and went into debt slavery. Will the Jubilee be of any benefit to such a person and will it, for instance, guarantee such a man a housing accommodation? In such a case, other Mosaic laws make it possible for an indentured servant to become a bondservant voluntarily (Exo.21:5-6). Opting to become a voluntary bondservant becomes one possible way to avoid potential homelessness at the turn of the jubilee.

The principle of Jubilee and its requirement for granting a release at specific seasons is a policy alternative to deal with long-term poverty. By ensuring that everyone returns to their ancestral property at specified times, all members of society are guaranteed an escape route from the vicious cycle of long-term poverty. The Jubilee thus should be seen as the ultimate safety net, and together with its several sub-provisions, constituted a major component of the social protective system of Old Testament Israel.<sup>49</sup> The outright ownership (freehold) of land, the main capital asset in the economy of Israel, is prohibited. Thus, the right of the poor to their main productive asset, the land, is guaranteed for all.

However, there are apparent contradictions between the provisions for the rightful observance of the Jubilee in Leviticus 25:40-41 and several other Old Testament passages. For instance, in Leviticus, the release of slaves, land and debt cancellation is permitted only in the year of Jubilee, but in other passages like Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:1-3, 12-15; Jeremiah 34: 8-16, release and debt cancellation is expected in the seventh year. However, Belshaw sees this not as a contradiction, but as possibly an "alternative arrangement, for times when the Jubilee year is several decades away to provide for the release of the worker after six years of employment."<sup>50</sup> The provision in Deuteronomy to liberally supply flour, wine and livestock to released slaves in the seventh year is again seen as "the presumed intention of facilitating a return to sustainable self-employment" within the shortest possible period (1994:7). The provision of the Jubilee for a release at the end of a specified period (Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15: 1-3; Exodus 21:2), and a guaranteed return for a released slave to recover any ancestral property that he had forfeited are intended to restore poor people to their original status. This is seen as an effective means to end or eradicate poverty among the people of Yahweh.

The practicality of observing these provisions of the law has attracted several unfavorable reviews from scholars. Some critics view the laws as "surrealistic" and "utopian" in the sense that they seem impossible to observe<sup>51</sup>. Nevertheless, the narrative in Jeremiah 34:8-16 actually stated that when Israel was reminded of this law, all the people obeyed. Verse 10 says "And all the rulers obeyed, and all the people who had entered into the covenant allowed them to go free, each man his male slave, and each man his female slave, so that not any should enslave among them anymore; and they obeyed and let *them* go" (Jer. 34:10).

Similarly, a comparison has been made with the Mesopotamian *misarum* and the *anduraru*, which go back to the Old Babylonian and Assyrian periods in the early second millennium BCE.<sup>52</sup> In this example, a Babylonian king would declare a *misarum*, which was a general declaration of justice. The king might also declare "an *anduraru* 'release', which could include a remission of certain taxes,

<sup>49</sup> Belshaw, "Socio-Economic Theology and Ethical Choices in Contemporary Development Policy: An Outline of Biblical Approaches to Social Justice and Poverty Alleviation," 7.

<sup>50</sup> Belshaw, "Socio-Economic Theology and Ethical Choices in Contemporary Development Policy: An Outline of Biblical Approaches to Social Justice and Poverty Alleviation," 7.

<sup>51</sup> C. Carmichael, *Illuminating Leviticus: A Study of Its Laws and Institutions in the Light of Biblical Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 206AD), 122.

<sup>52</sup> Grabbe L I. "Leviticus" In Muddiman J and Barton J (Eds), *The Oxford Bible Commentary of the Gospels.* (New York: Oxford University Press 2001), 27-84; Lazonby, "Applying the Jubilee to Contemporary Socio-Economic and Environmental Issues."

a release of debts, reversion of property to its original owners, or manumission of slaves.”<sup>53</sup> Such provisions of gentile kings and the Israelite Jubilee “continue to stimulate models for liberation from oppressive forces” and provide alternatives for “reconciliation and new beginnings for the oppressed.”<sup>54</sup>

Verse 42 clearly states a theologically laden reason why Israelites should not be regarded as slaves, even if they are sold as one. The verse says “For they *are* My servants, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt.” Israel already became slaves of Yahweh when He brought them from Egypt. What this means is that if a fellow Israelite happens to fall into difficulty and becomes a “slave” both the “master”, and “bondsmen” alike are slaves of Yahweh. The “master” then would be encroaching on the right of Yahweh if he claimed the slave of Yahweh to be his own. The second clause of verse 42, “They shall not be sold as a slave” is an expansion of the principles established earlier in the first clause that prohibits Israelite slavery. Thus, no Israelite is allowed to be a “slave owner”, even if they bought one. But this directive applies only in the case of fellow Israelites. The law actually permits the purchase of slaves from the neighboring communities. However, this clause also serves as a reminder of the provisions of the law that require that destitute Israelites be supported and treated as hired laborers or resident aliens in verse 39. Verse 43 prohibits the rule with an iron fist over fellow Israelites, and generally sets out the conditions for the treatment of slaves, foreigners, and poor people in general. Since the slave and the foreigner were considered defenseless, which made them vulnerable, the Israelites were frequently reminded of God's special concern for such a class of citizens (Ex 22:21–22; Deut 10:17–19). They were specifically required not to be molested (Exo. 22:20) and abused (Deut. 24:14).

Even though, verse 42 implies that no Israelite is allowed to be a “slave owner”, even if they paid for one among their people, verses 44–46 set out the exemptions under which an Israelite is permitted to own one. It also describes the treatment expected of Israel on such purchased slaves. The Israelites were allowed to purchase slaves from the surrounding nations. Verse 45 also states that slaves could be purchased from sons of sojourner (*tôshâb*) but qualifies it to read as from “sons of the tenant’s *tôshâb* who are staying with you; and from their families that *are* with you, whom they fathered in your land. And they shall be your possession” (MKJV). What happens in the case of a child born to a *tôshâb* in a master’s household whose parents are of Israelite descent is not very clear. However, the law here seems to permit their perpetual enslavement. However, there is a stern warning that an Israelite cannot be purchased as a slave in verse 32, because Israelites already are slaves to God. Even in cases of severe debt enslavement, all that one could do was use them as hired labourers (*śâkîyr*) (verse 40). However, the perplexing difficulty is the seeming contradiction that allows children of all tenants born in a master’s house to be sold into perpetual slavery. The difficulty comes when this tenant is an Israelite. Can his son or daughter be sold into perpetual slavery? Does the son of a resident alien cease to be an Israeli on the grounds of the destitution of his parents?

Practical social welfare considerations may have influenced this provision of the law. In Israel, since all landed property belonged to native Israelites (Lev. 25:23–24), chances were that children of resident aliens born while the father was himself a slave may not have any inheritance to return to at the turn of the Jubilee. In such circumstances, the well-being of a child born in slavery is enhanced when he accepts to live in the house of his benefactor as a permanent slave. Again, as has already been observed, strangers, (both of Israel and foreign descent) mostly function as labourers and artisans (because they do not own land). However, children born to slave parents may not have an opportunity to learn a trade, so are left practically only with the option of becoming day labourers. In such circumstances, the child is better off as a permanent slave to rich people who could afford to provide his or her care.

The final section, Leviticus 25:47–55, virtually repeats the same situation of debt slavery, but this time involves the poor man selling himself to a non-Israelite living on the territory of Israel. In such a situation, the law of redemption applies. Where the poor man is unable to find a redeemer in the short term, the law of release is applied at the turn of the Jubilee. As with land holdings, the redemption price for indentured persons is determined by the number of years remaining until the Jubilee (25:47–54), since at that time any Israelite would be released.<sup>55</sup> The passage generally is intended to show Israel that,

<sup>53</sup> Grabbe “Leviticus”, 106; Lazonby, “Applying the Jubilee to Contemporary Socio-Economic and Environmental Issues” 39.

<sup>54</sup> Carmichael, *Illuminating Leviticus: A Study of Its Laws and Institutions in the Light of Biblical Narratives*.

<sup>55</sup> Schwartz, “Leviticus,” 147.

they have a responsibility towards the social welfare needs of their fellow Israelites. They broadly provide the policy alternatives by which Israel had to deal with the menace of poverty and its effect on the social standing of members of the society.

When individuals temporarily become financially insolvent and sell property to meet short-term needs, the principle of redemption ensures in the short term, that neighbors will assist the poor person in gaining back his property. In the medium term, when the poor person gains financial solvency, the principle again ensures that they can regain their sold property. The principle of redemption ensured that an individual's short and medium-term social welfare needs were met. The principle of redemption places responsibility for short and medium-term social welfare needs on either the individual, members of the immediate family, or neighbors.

While modern social welfare relies on individual mean testing to determine who needs social assistance, the system in Leviticus 25 relied on certain triggers to define public poverty. The first trigger is when one had become poor "and had sold his property" (Lev. 25:25). The second trigger is when one becomes poor and has nothing to sell but survives on leased land or may borrow money from another Israelite (Lev.25:35). The third and final trigger occurs when a poor person falls into a severe situation of debt enslavement to either a fellow Israelite or in a more desperate case, to a resident alien (Lev. 25:39, 47). In all three scenarios above, the needs of the individual have become public knowledge of neighbors. Yahweh expects that someone assumes responsibility when the individual has failed to deal effectively with his own situation.

### **SOCIAL WELFARE ImplicationS OF Leviticus 25**

Applying Leviticus 25 to poverty alleviation issues of the church requires careful consideration of which issues in the churches are analogous to the societal issues faced by Israel. It requires the identification of sufficient and sometimes complete similarities to suggest that some of the issues Israel faced intersect sufficiently with the issues in contemporary times.

Providing the Social Welfare needs of the poor has been shown in the Bible to be of prime concern to God. God is interested in the affairs of the needy who are unable to effectively handle their own economic and social circumstances and need the support of others to survive. This section provides an opportunity to reflect on how social welfare needs were provided in the anchor text.

Before the reflection begins, the insights gained from the exegeses of the selected passage will be summarised, comparing, and contrasting the approaches to social welfare provisions in the key text and explaining the differences and the similarities (if any). A summary of the evidence in the Bible that supports such a view of how social welfare was provided in the anchor text will be presented. Here, the researcher proposes to bring the salient lessons of the exegesis together and place them in the context of the entire Bible, to support the view that God expects the church to take steps to provide material support to address such needs. The study will also reflect on several practical questions relating to the applicability of the text to modern-day Christian churches and Christian social services agencies. Leviticus 25:25-47 is seen as the first example of a social safety net for a group of people - Israel. In this example, Yahweh, the originator of the first social safety net, employed a series of legislation (ground rules) to show Israel how to respond to the social crisis of poverty, publicly displayed when a destitute is compelled to sell a productive asset. The law was aimed at restoring the social welfare shortfall of the destitute whenever they are compelled to sell or lease a productive asset. Even though the land was equally distributed among the children of Israel upon their arrival on the Promised Land (Josh. 13-18), Yahweh anticipated that temporal circumstances may cause some of the people to relinquish their control over their ancestral land by selling it to rich neighbors. The law anticipated three possible actions of the destitute that could have negative consequences on their social welfare status and made provisions for their remedies.

The first possible anticipated action of the poor was to sell his rights over land to survive a temporary situation. In such circumstances, the law requires that relief is to come by way of redemption of the sold property. The law places the responsibility for redemption on the poor man's immediate family, community, members, or even his neighbors. The second situation involves mortgaging property, such as houses, or taking a loan from rich neighbors. The law requires such loans to be granted with no interest. The third possible scenario arises when a poor person sells himself into debt slavery

either to a fellow Hebrew or to a sojourner. The law requires, in such circumstances, that the rich neighbor modify the treatment of such a person by treating him as a day laborer instead of a slave. In this way, the poor man is guaranteed employment and a regular income. The law made the Jubilee the ultimate social safety net where all sold landed properties reverted to their original owners (Leviticus 25). The Jubilee also provided for the release of Hebrew slaves (Lev. 25:39-41, 54). Could the modification of behavior to accommodate an unfortunate brother who messes up his living provide a guide for social services workers, so we do not strictly treat people according to what they deserve?

The main findings in Leviticus are buttressed by several other OT passages, where provision is made to address the social welfare needs of the populace (Lev.19:9-10, 23:22, Deut. 24:17-22, 15, 26). In these passages, Yahweh commands His people to open their hands wide to the poor and lend them enough to cover all their needs (Deut. 15:8). Upon their arrival in the Promised Land, Yahweh expected that Israel would use the opportunities arising out of their possessing a rich fertile land to promote individual wellbeing to enhance continuity of the community. The “first fruits” of the land were to be shared with the Levite and the stranger” living in their communities (Deut. 26:2-11). At a set time of the year, the farmer brings a tithe of all his produce to a common place to enjoy with “the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow” living in their communities (Deut. 26:12-15). The gleaning laws provided that farmers in Israel deliberately leave the corners of their fields and not glean their harvest completely so that the poor can have access to the gleanings of the harvest (Lev. 19:9-10, 23:22, Deut. 24:17-22, Ruth 2-7). These laws ensured an equitable distribution of the bounty of the land. This law targets individuals to be involved in the fight against poverty and deprivation. In a church situation, social welfare agencies could encourage rich individuals to get involved in providing relief for the less fortunate. The burden of providing should not be left to the state only, and it is the responsibility of social workers or agencies to recruit more volunteers to this field.

Leviticus 25 shows that the main issues Israel was challenged to address with her unique faith centered on poverty arising out of the lack of economic participation. Individuals who fall into poverty are often forced to adopt coping strategies that tend to create a further downward spiral into poverty. The main trigger that begins the downward spiral is land and or property sale, often influenced by adverse economic conditions. If not checked, it would end in a severe perpetual debt of slavery. In line with Yahweh’s anti-poverty agenda in Deuteronomy 15:4, stating that “there should be no poor among you”, Israel is called upon to help their brothers out during times of difficulty. Leviticus 25 encourages generosity toward the poor to ensure that their slide into poverty does not continue. More specifically while this generosity was to be extended to all, including non-Israelites, as far as the generosity was directed towards Israelites, it was to be unique and in excess.

The main reason for the lack of economic participation in ancient Israel can be traced to land loss. Similarly, the problem of lack of economic participation in the churches can be traced to job losses and joblessness in today’s economy. Israel’s strategy of return and redemption of land, offering of loans and the release of slaves during the Jubilee provides important lessons for the church to learn from. Though slave labor and slavery are illegal in most of the world’s context, Leviticus 25 nevertheless raises the issue of how members of God’s family, in severe poverty, could be helped to become productive members of the community through opportunities to work. The central role of the family in looking after the material needs of its members has important ramifications for today’s Church as the family of God. Israel’s strategy had enormous implications for the family and the church as the new family may learn from it.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has examined the intricate social and theological framework of Leviticus 25, focusing on biblical laws regarding debt, slavery, and poverty alleviation among the Israelites. The passage presented a divine directive that prohibits Israelites from being permanently enslaved by one another, underscoring the belief that all Israelites are ultimately servants of Yahweh. This theological foundation dictates that any Israelite facing financial distress is to be treated as a hired worker rather than a slave, as their servitude belongs to God alone. In contrast, the law permits the purchase of slaves from neighboring nations, reflecting the unique covenant relationship between God and His people. This distinction suggests that

members of the household of faith are to receive special consideration in situations that perpetuate vulnerability.

The law of redemption provides a means for an Israelite or their family to reclaim property sold out of necessity, thereby preventing permanent loss of land. The article also addresses the treatment of debt slaves, who were to be released during the Jubilee year, a measure designed to prevent lifelong bondage and offer economic relief. These regulations on land ownership, interest-free loans, and the release of slaves illustrate God's desire for economic justice and communal restoration.

The article concludes by drawing parallels between the social welfare mechanisms in Leviticus 25 and the modern Church's response to poverty and economic inequality. The biblical principles of redemption, economic participation, and fair labor treatment offer a blueprint for how Christian communities can address poverty and injustice today. By supporting those in need, as ancient Israel was called to do, the Church reflects God's concern for the marginalized. The values of equity and restoration found in Leviticus 25 guide Christian social services to develop more just and compassionate responses to economic hardship.

Leviticus 25 offers a model of economic justice that merges theology with social welfare, providing a framework for faith communities to address poverty and inequality. The laws of redemption and the Jubilee promote a restorative approach to property and labor, emphasizing the prevention of permanent disenfranchisement. This biblical system ensured that the Israelites maintained their ancestral heritage and economic stability, while also encouraging generosity toward the poor and the equitable treatment of workers.

Modern churches can learn from these ancient principles, adopting a holistic approach to social justice that prioritizes individual well-being and dignity. By reflecting on how ancient Israel dealt with poverty and economic participation, this article challenges Christian communities today to engage in similar issues. The lessons of Leviticus 25 remind us that true social justice goes beyond meeting immediate needs, aiming instead at long-term restoration and equity. Just as Israel was called to be a beacon of hope, the Church is tasked with alleviating poverty and fostering opportunities for all to thrive.

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### **ABOUT AUTHOR**

Rev. Joseph Adasi-Bekoe (PhD) has been a minister of the Ghana Baptist Church since 2007. He served as an Associate Pastor of the Trinity Baptist Church in Kumasi and is now the senior Pastor of the Charismatic Baptist Church in Accra. Joseph also teaches Theology at the Ghana Baptist University College.