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SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL: AN OLD TESTAMENT STUDY OF COMMUNITY CARE AND HUMAN WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT: The ancient Israelite social fabric was intricately woven with community-oriented mechanisms designed to sustain human well-being across economic, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This article investigates the social support systems embedded in the Old Testament texts and examines their relevance to contemporary African and Nigerian communities confronting analogous challenges of poverty, communal fragmentation, and welfare deficits. Drawing upon a qualitative hermeneutical methodology that combines canonical biblical exegesis with socio-anthropological analysis, the study identifies three primary pillars of Israelite community care: kinship solidarity networks, institutionalized religious welfare provisions, and covenantal obligations to marginalised populations. The theoretical framework is anchored in African communalism and Ubuntu philosophy, which illuminates corresponding indigenous social support traditions across sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Findings reveal that Mosaic legislation governing gleaning rights, the Year of Jubilee, levirate customs, and tithes for the poor constituted a sophisticated welfare architecture that parallels and prefigures modern community development frameworks. The article contends that Nigerian faith communities and policy makers can draw meaningful lessons from these ancient systems to address contemporary social welfare gaps. Recommendations are offered for the integration of covenantal ethics and communal responsibility into Nigerian public policy discourse, faith-based intervention programmes, and social work curricula.

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1. Introduction

The question of how communities provide for vulnerable members has occupied theological, philosophical, and sociological discourse across centuries and continents. In African contexts, and in Nigeria particularly, the erosion of traditional communal welfare structures under the pressure of urbanisation, economic liberalization, and post-colonial restructuring has generated acute social welfare deficits (Adesanya, 2021). Churches, mosques, extended family networks, and civil society organisations continue to fill the gap left by an underfunded public welfare apparatus, yet the theoretical foundations undergirding these efforts remain insufficiently explored within academic literature (Okonkwo & Eze, 2022).

The Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, constitute one of the most ancient and enduring repositories of systematized communal care thinking in human history. Ancient Israel developed elaborate social welfare frameworks encoded in its legal, narrative, poetic, and prophetic traditions. These frameworks addressed the needs of widows, orphans, strangers, and the economically dispossessed through enforceable communal obligations grounded in covenantal theology (Adeyemo, 2020). The parallels between Israelite social realities, tribal kinship structures, land-based economies, patron-client relationships, and those of many contemporary Nigerian communities are sufficiently robust to warrant sustained comparative examination.

Despite a growing body of scholarship on the intersection of religion and social welfare in Africa (Fasanya & Adebowale, 2023; Nwosu, 2021), few studies have systematically employed Old Testament social legislation as a theoretical or practical resource for addressing community care deficits in the Nigerian context. This article seeks to address that lacuna. It pursues four primary objectives: first, to map the key social support mechanisms inscribed in Old Testament texts; second, to situate these mechanisms within an African communalist and Ubuntu theoretical framework; third, to draw comparisons between ancient Israelite welfare institutions and contemporary Nigerian community support challenges; and fourth, to generate evidence-informed recommendations for policy, practice, and curriculum development.

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The significance of this enquiry extends beyond academic theology. Nigeria, with a population exceeding 220 million and a poverty rate estimated at over 40 per cent (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), urgently requires innovative frameworks for community care. Religious communities, particularly Christian and Islamic organisations, mediate approximately 60 per cent of social services in rural Nigeria (Obi & Chukwu, 2022). A theologically grounded understanding of communal welfare obligations in biblical antiquity therefore carries direct practical implications for contemporary faith-based social intervention.

2. Theoretical Framework

This article is theoretically located at the intersection of three complementary intellectual traditions: African communalism, Ubuntu philosophy, and covenantal theology. Together, these frameworks provide analytical lenses through which the social support systems of ancient Israel may be interpreted and applied to contemporary African contexts.

2.1 African Communalism

African communalism posits that the individual achieves meaning, identity, and fulfilment through participation in community life. Unlike liberal Western individualism, which frames rights and responsibilities as fundamentally personal possessions, African communalism constructs social obligation as constitutive of human being itself (Mbiti, 2019; Wiredu, 2020). The welfare of any single member is inseparable from the welfare of the collective, and conversely, community health depends upon the flourishing of its most vulnerable members. This ontological orientation underpins the vast majority of indigenous Nigerian social support practices, from the Igbo system of ilo communal assistance to the Yoruba concept of ajo cooperative savings groups (Adekunle & Oluwaseun, 2022).

2.2 Ubuntu Philosophy

Ubuntu, encapsulated in the Nguni aphorism umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu ("a person is a person through other persons"), has emerged as a pivotal theoretical resource in African social thought and increasingly in African development studies and social welfare discourse (Metz, 2021; Tutu, 2020). Ubuntu provides a moral philosophy centred on mutual recognition, interdependence, shared responsibility, and compassionate engagement

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with suffering (Eze, 2022). Nigerian scholars have increasingly employed Ubuntu frameworks to interpret local communal welfare traditions and to interrogate the adequacy of social welfare policy (Nwosu & Ikenna, 2023). Ubuntu resonates deeply with the Mosaic social vision articulated in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, where the welfare of the stranger, widow, and orphan is constituted as a community-wide covenantal obligation rather than an act of voluntary charity.

2.3 Covenantal Theology as Social Ethics

Covenantal theology, the interpretive framework that reads Israel's social and ethical obligations as flowing from its covenantal relationship with Yahweh, has long been recognised as the animating logic of Mosaic social legislation (Wright, 2021). In this framework, justice and mercy towards the poor are not peripheral acts of benevolence but central requirements of covenant fidelity. Nigerian theological scholarship has increasingly engaged this tradition as a resource for social critique and constructive ethics (Adeyemo, 2020; Okafor, 2023). Covenantal theology aligns with African communalism in its insistence that individual moral conduct must be assessed in terms of its impact on the communal fabric, particularly on the most vulnerable members of the social order.

The convergence of these three frameworks generates a productive analytical space within which the social support institutions of ancient Israel can be examined not merely as historical curiosities but as living resources for ethical reflection and practical social design in contemporary Nigerian and African contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in hermeneutical inquiry. Qualitative hermeneutics, as articulated by Ricoeur (1981) and more recently developed within African scholarly contexts by Ukpong (2022), focuses on the interpretation and contextualisation of textual meaning within specific social and cultural matrices. This design is appropriate because the primary data of this study consists of ancient textual sources, the Hebrew scriptures, which require careful contextualised interpretation rather than quantitative measurement.

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3.2 Data Sources

Primary data were drawn from selected Old Testament texts with explicit social welfare content, including the Covenant Code (Exodus 21-23), the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26), Deuteronomic social legislation (Deuteronomy 14-15, 24-26), selected wisdom literature (Proverbs, Psalms), and prophetic texts with welfare critique (Isaiah, Amos, Micah). Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed scholarly literature, with particular attention to sources from Nigerian and African academic contexts. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select textual materials and secondary sources that directly address the intersection of community care, social support, and communal obligation.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through a three-stage process. In the first stage, close reading and exegetical analysis were applied to the primary Old Testament texts to identify and characterize specific social support mechanisms. In the second stage, thematic analysis was employed to organise these mechanisms into coherent categories reflecting their social function. In the third stage, comparative analysis was conducted to draw out structural correspondences and divergences between ancient Israelite social support systems and contemporary Nigerian and African community care challenges. Throughout this process, the Ubuntu and African communalist frameworks served as interpretive lenses, sensitizing the analysis to dimensions of mutual obligation, kinship solidarity, and institutional welfare provision.

3.4 Rigour and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative biblical hermeneutics was ensured through several strategies. Credibility was strengthened by triangulating exegetical findings with secondary literature from diverse scholarly traditions, including African, European, and North American biblical scholarship. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear and documented analytical trail. Transferability was addressed by providing sufficiently thick descriptions of both the ancient textual context and the contemporary Nigerian application context to enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to their own settings (Okafor, 2023).

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4. Analysis and Discussion of Findings

4.1 Kinship Solidarity Networks: The Go'el Institution

Among the most significant social support mechanisms in ancient Israel was the institution of the go'el, commonly translated as "kinsman-redeemer." The go'el was a close male relative obligated by covenantal custom to intercede on behalf of family members who had fallen into debt, slavery, or destitution (Leviticus 25:25-55; Ruth 3-4). The go'el system functioned as a form of kinship-based social insurance, ensuring that economic catastrophe did not result in permanent exclusion from community life. The narrative of Ruth and Boaz exemplifies the system in operation: Boaz fulfils his go'el obligations by redeeming Naomi's land and marrying Ruth, thereby restoring two economically vulnerable women to social and economic security.

The resonance of this institution with Nigerian extended family support systems is striking. The Igbo institution of umunna (patrilineage solidarity), the Yoruba concept of ebi (family welfare obligations), and the Hausa-Fulani practice of zumunci (kinship reciprocity) all embody analogous principles of kin-based obligation to support vulnerable relatives (Adekunle & Oluwaseun, 2022; Fasanya & Adebowale, 2023). However, contemporary research documents the erosion of these systems under urban migration and economic individualization in Nigeria (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The go'el model thus offers not merely a historical parallel but a normative challenge: to reconstruct kinship solidarity in urbanised Nigerian contexts through intentional community and faith structures.

4.2 Agricultural Welfare Provisions: Gleaning, Tithes, and Sabbatical Release

Israelite agrarian legislation contained a sophisticated architecture of wealth redistribution mechanisms designed to mitigate the structural inequality generated by land-based economies. Three provisions are particularly germane to the present discussion.

First, the gleaning laws (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22) mandated that landowners leave the edges of their fields, fallen grain, and unharvested fruit for "the poor and the stranger." This was not framed as charity but as a divinely imposed property obligation. The landowner did not own the harvest margin; it belonged structurally to the poor. This subtle but profound institutional mechanism ensured that the most economically

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precarious members of Israelite society retained dignified access to subsistence resources without dependence on voluntary benevolence (Wright, 2021).

Second, the triennial tithe (Deuteronomy 14:28-29) designated every third year's tithe not for the sanctuary but for "the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow" within each community. This constituted a locally administered, systematized welfare fund, distributed at the community level and targeted at identifiable vulnerable populations. Nigerian scholars have noted the analogy between this provision and the community development levies administered through some Nigerian local government structures, though the biblical model's religious sanction and consistent enforcement mechanisms gave it greater efficacy (Obi & Chukwu, 2022).

Third, the sabbatical year (Deuteronomy 15:1-11; Leviticus 25:1-7) mandated the cancellation of debts among Israelites every seventh year and the release of indentured servants. Land was to lie fallow, and its spontaneous produce was to be available to all, including servants, strangers, and animals. This provision functioned as a structural corrective to the tendency of market economies to generate cumulative inequality through compound debt. The prophetic critique directed against those who refused to honour the sabbatical release (Jeremiah 34:8-22) reveals that the institution, however imperfectly observed, carried genuine social weight.

4.3 The Year of Jubilee: Structural Justice and Land Redistribution

The Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25 represents the apex of Old Testament social welfare thinking. Every fiftieth year, sold ancestral lands were to revert to their original family owners, debt slaves were to be freed, and the economic slate was effectively wiped clean. The theological rationale was explicit: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers" (Leviticus 25:23). Land, the primary productive asset in an agrarian economy, could not become the permanent possession of the wealthy through market accumulation. The Jubilee functioned as a constitutionally enshrined mechanism against the intergenerational entrenchment of poverty and wealth inequality.

The Jubilee's relevance to Nigerian land rights debates is substantial. The displacement of smallholder farmers through large-scale commercial land acquisition, the fragmentation of

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communal land through inheritance disputes, and the failure of land tenure reform to protect the rural poor have generated significant welfare deficits across Nigerian states (Adesanya, 2021; Nwosu, 2021). The Jubilee model offers a theologically grounded critique of land commodification and a normative resource for advocates of redistributive land tenure reform. Its influence has already been detected in the social encyclicals of Nigerian Catholic bishops and in the advocacy work of land rights NGOs affiliated with Nigerian mainline Protestant churches (Okonkwo & Eze, 2022).

4.4 Care for Marginalised Populations: Widows, Orphans, and Strangers

A striking feature of Old Testament social legislation is its repeated and emphatic focus on three overlapping categories of vulnerability: the widow (almanah), the orphan (yatom), and the stranger or resident alien (ger). These three groups share a structural characteristic: they lacked the patriarchal kinship networks that constituted the primary social safety net in Israelite society. The widow lacked a husband's economic protection; the orphan lacked a father's advocacy; the stranger lacked the clan membership that underwrote social inclusion. Their recurrence as objects of legislative concern across legal, prophetic, and wisdom literature signals that they represented a recognised and persistent welfare challenge in ancient Israel.

The prophetic tradition is particularly sharp in its insistence that the treatment of these vulnerable populations constitutes a litmus test of communal covenant fidelity. Isaiah 1:17 demands "seek justice, defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." Zechariah 7:9-10 identifies neglect of the widow and orphan as a primary cause of Israel's catastrophic judgment. This alignment of social welfare obligation with religious duty is directly applicable to the Nigerian context, where faith communities constitute the primary welfare actors. Nigerian Pentecostal and mainline churches have increasingly anchored their social ministries in prophetic theology, though the systematic nature of biblical welfare legislation remains underutilized as a programming resource (Adeyemo, 2020; Okafor, 2023).

4.5 Prophetic Welfare Advocacy and Structural Critique

The Hebrew prophetic tradition added a distinctive dimension to Israelite social welfare thinking: systematic critique of structural injustice. Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel did

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not merely exhort individuals to personal charity; they indicted entire social systems, corrupt markets, unjust courts, exploitative creditors, indifferent elites, as sources of communal welfare catastrophe (Amos 5:10-12; Micah 2:1-3; Isaiah 5:8-10). The prophetic critique presupposed that poverty was not simply the result of individual moral failure but of structural arrangements that systematically transferred resources from the poor to the wealthy.

This structural analysis resonates powerfully with the findings of Nigerian social welfare research, which consistently identifies corruption, inadequate public investment, and regulatory capture by economic elites as primary drivers of poverty and welfare deprivation (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Adesanya, 2021). The prophetic tradition thus offers not merely spiritual exhortation but a theologically grounded methodology for social welfare critique that Nigerian faith communities can employ in public policy advocacy. This dimension of Old Testament welfare thinking has been insufficiently integrated into Nigerian academic and ecclesial social welfare discourse (Nwosu & Ikenna, 2023; Ukpong, 2022).

4.6 Hospitality and Communal Feasting as Social Integration Mechanisms

Old Testament social support extended beyond material provision to include practices of hospitality and communal feasting designed to reintegrate marginalised persons into the social life of the community. The Deuteronomic injunction to celebrate the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles by including "you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the strangers, the fatherless and the widows living among you" (Deuteronomy 16:11, 14) reflects a theology of social inclusion in which shared festivity constitutes a form of community building that reinforces solidarity across economic and social boundaries.

The communal dimensions of these festivals parallel the social integration functions performed by traditional Nigerian communal gatherings, including New Yam festivals (Igbo), Egungun festivals (Yoruba), and Durbar celebrations (Hausa-Fulani), all of which historically involved redistributive feasting practices that reinforced community solidarity and provided material support for vulnerable members (Adekunle & Oluwaseun, 2022). The declining vitality of these traditions in urbanised Nigerian contexts, and the partial

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substitution of church harvest festivals and mosque eid celebrations, creates opportunities for faith communities to intentionally recover their social integration and welfare distribution functions (Fasanya & Adebowale, 2023).

4.7 Comparative Summary: Ancient Israel and Contemporary Nigeria

The analysis reveals substantial structural convergence between the social support architecture of ancient Israel and the informal welfare ecology of contemporary Nigeria. Both social systems: (a) operate primarily through kinship and community networks rather than centralised state bureaucracies; (b) embed welfare obligations within religious and moral frameworks rather than purely secular contractual arrangements; (c) identify structurally vulnerable populations, the widow, orphan, and stranger in ancient Israel; women-headed households, orphaned children, and internally displaced persons in Nigeria, as primary welfare targets; and (d) combine material provisions with social inclusion mechanisms designed to maintain the dignity and community membership of welfare recipients.

However, the analysis also reveals significant divergences. Israelite welfare legislation, at its textual ideal, was characterised by systemic enforceability, theological sanction, and redistributive mechanisms (gleaning laws, debt cancellation, Jubilee) that constrained the accumulation of structural inequality. Contemporary Nigerian community welfare practices, by contrast, are characterised by high voluntarism, insufficient systemic enforcement, and growing tension between traditional solidarity norms and market individualism. These divergences point towards the recommendations developed in the following section.

5. Recommendations and Conclusions

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are offered for stakeholders in Nigerian faith communities, academic institutions, and public policy.

First, Nigerian faith communities, churches, mosques, and other religious bodies, should develop structured welfare programmes explicitly grounded in covenantal ethics and communal obligation. Rather than treating social welfare as an optional charitable activity

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peripheral to primary religious functions, faith communities should integrate welfare provision into their core theological identity and institutional structure, drawing on the Old Testament model of welfare as a covenantal requirement. Such programmes should include systematic identification and support of structurally vulnerable members, widows, orphans, persons with disabilities, and migrants—rather than relying solely on crisis-response charity (Obi & Chukwu, 2022).

Second, Nigerian policy makers should explore the potential of faith community partnerships for expanding social welfare coverage in contexts where state capacity is limited. The Old Testament model of community-administered welfare funds (the triennial tithe), locally managed and targeted at identified vulnerable populations, offers a practical template for the co-design of community-based social protection schemes that leverage existing religious institutional infrastructure (Adesanya, 2021; National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Third, university departments of religious studies, theology, social work, and community development should incorporate the comparative study of Old Testament welfare ethics and African communalist philosophy into their curricula. Such integration would equip graduates with a theologically informed and culturally grounded framework for social welfare practice in Nigerian and African contexts. The Ubuntu and covenantal ethics frameworks articulated in this article provide accessible entry points for such curricular integration (Metz, 2021; Eze, 2022).

Fourth, Nigerian civil society organisations engaged in advocacy for land rights, debt relief, and structural poverty reduction should engage more intentionally with the prophetic welfare tradition of the Old Testament. The prophetic critique of structural injustice offers powerful theological resources for advocacy that resonates with the moral frameworks' operative in Nigerian communities where religious identity is central to public life (Nwosu & Ikenna, 2023; Okafor, 2023).

Fifth, researchers in Nigerian biblical studies, social welfare, and community development should pursue further empirical investigation of the practical implementation of Old Testament welfare principles in contemporary Nigerian faith communities. Comparative case studies of faith-based welfare programmes across Nigeria's geopolitical zones,

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examining the explicit or implicit influence of biblical and indigenous communalist welfare ethics, would provide empirical grounding for the theoretical connections drawn in this article (Ukpong, 2022; Adeyemo, 2020).

5.2 Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that the Old Testament contains a sophisticated, multi-dimensional architecture of social support systems grounded in kinship solidarity, covenantal obligation, legislative welfare provision, and prophetic advocacy for structural justice. These systems were designed to prevent the permanent exclusion of vulnerable members from community life and to constrain the structural accumulation of inequality through institutions such as the go'el, the gleaning laws, the triennial tithe, the sabbatical year, and the Jubilee.

When examined through the interpretive lenses of African communalism and Ubuntu philosophy, these ancient Israelite welfare institutions reveal profound resonance with indigenous Nigerian and African social welfare traditions. Both traditions share the foundational conviction that individual welfare is inseparable from communal health, and that the vulnerability of any member constitutes a moral obligation upon the community as a whole.

Contemporary Nigerian communities face welfare challenges, poverty, structural inequality, erosion of kinship solidarity networks, and inadequate public social protection, that are structurally analogous to those addressed by Israelite welfare legislation. The Old Testament model, far from being a museum piece of ancient near-eastern social history, offers a theologically grounded, communally embedded, and practically oriented resource for community care thinking and practice in Nigeria today.

This study is not without limitations. As a qualitative hermeneutical study, it does not provide quantitative empirical data on the effectiveness of Old Testament-informed welfare interventions in Nigerian contexts. Future research should supplement the theoretical and textual analysis offered here with empirical field studies examining the practical implementation of covenantal welfare ethics in Nigerian faith community programmes. Notwithstanding these limitations, the article makes a substantive contribution to the

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emerging field of African contextual biblical hermeneutics and its application to community development and social welfare practice.

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