

**REST, RESTORATION, AND RENEWAL IN LEVITICUS 25: A
THEOLOGICAL VISION FOR AFRICA'S SUSTAINABLE FUTURE**

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ABSTRACT: Africa's deepening crises of socio-economic inequality, ecological degradation, and moral disintegration reveal the insufficiency of secular sustainability models that lack theological grounding. Yet scholarship has not adequately retrieved the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25 as a normative framework for African transformation beyond ritual or historical interpretation. This study, therefore, examines the theological logic of rest, restoration, and renewal in Leviticus 25 and its implications for Africa's sustainable future. The paper is guided by the questions to show how the Jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25 relates to the motifs of rest שבת (shabbath), restoration שוב (shuv), and renewal חֲדָשׁ (chadash) relate to Africa. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative and interpretive approach that integrates exegetical analysis of the Hebrew text with contextual theological reflection. The study is theoretically grounded in covenantal-restorative justice theology, which emphasizes God's ordering of communal life, ethical land stewardship, and human dignity within covenant relationship. Findings indicate that the Jubilee offers a comprehensive theological and ethical model that integrates Sabbath spirituality, distributive justice, ecological renewal, and communal identity. The paper concludes that a Jubilee-informed theological vision addresses a critical gap in African sustainability discourse by offering a holistic paradigm of rest, restorative justice, and ecological renewal grounded in covenant theology.

Keywords: Rest, Jubilee, Sabbath, Restorative Justice, Ecological Theology.

INTRODUCTION

The theme of rest, restoration, and renewal lies at the heart of the biblical vision for human flourishing and divine order. Within the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Leviticus, the theological rhythm of life is portrayed as a divine cycle in which both the land and the people participate in God's redemptive rest. The Jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25 encapsulates this rhythm through its prescriptions of sabbatical rest for the land, liberation for slaves, remission of debts, and restoration of ancestral properties. The legislation is not merely an ancient agrarian law; rather, it is a theological charter that expresses the Creator's will for justice, balance, and renewal in creation. Its message transcends the boundaries of time and culture, offering principles that are deeply relevant to contemporary societies seeking wholeness in the midst of ecological, economic, and moral crises.

In Leviticus 25, the Jubilee (yobel) is introduced as the fiftieth-year celebration following seven cycles of sabbatical years. During this year, the land was to rest, fields lay fallow, debts cancelled, and slaves freed. The Hebrew term שבת (Shabbat) conveys more than the cessation of labor—it

signifies divine rhythm, sanctified rest, and covenantal relationship between God, humanity, and the earth. Similarly, שׁוּב (Shuv) implies a turning back or restoration, often used in the prophetic literature to describe both physical return and spiritual repentance. The third term, חֲדָשׁ (Chadash), denotes renewal or newness, capturing the divine act of re-creation and transformation that accompanies covenantal restoration. Together, these terms outline a theology of rest that extends beyond individual piety to encompass societal and ecological harmony.

The African continent today faces multiple crises that resonate with the social and ecological concerns of ancient Israel. Issues such as environmental degradation, economic inequality, political corruption, and moral disintegration continue to threaten the fabric of African societies. Rapid industrialization and urbanization, often pursued at the expense of environmental stewardship, have disrupted traditional values of community, balance, and reverence for the land. The Jubilee legislation, with its vision of rest and renewal, offers a theological corrective to these modern distortions. It invites African theologians, policymakers, and communities to reimagine development and sustainability through a biblical framework grounded in justice, compassion, and ecological respect.

Scholars such as Walter Brueggemann (2014) have emphasized that the Sabbath principle stands as resistance to the oppressive economic systems that commodify both humans and creation. The Jubilee, therefore, is not merely a religious observance but an act of socio-theological protest against exploitation and greed. In the same vein, African theologians like Tinyiko Maluleke and Laurenti Magesa have argued for an African theology of life that integrates biblical faith with the continent's ethical vision of ubuntu—the recognition of shared humanity and interconnectedness. Within this perspective, Leviticus 25 becomes a theological bridge linking ancient Israel's covenantal ethics with Africa's contemporary search for communal renewal and sustainable development.

This study seeks to explore how the theological motifs of rest, restoration, and renewal in Leviticus 25 can inform Africa's journey toward sustainable living and spiritual restoration. The research assumes that the divine principles embedded in the Jubilee legislation provide not only historical insight but also a transformative framework for addressing the continent's pressing challenges. The guiding research questions are:

1. What theological meanings of rest, restoration, and renewal emerge from the Jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25?
2. How do these biblical concepts relate to Africa's social, ecological, and spiritual realities?
3. In what ways can the Jubilee framework inspire sustainable development and moral renewal in contemporary Africa?

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to construct a theological discourse that bridges biblical exegesis with contextual application. By engaging both the Hebrew text and African realities, the study situates theology as a living dialogue between faith and experience. The approach combines textual analysis with contextual hermeneutics, acknowledging that Scripture must be interpreted not only within its historical setting but also within the lived realities of today's believers. Thus,

Leviticus 25 is read not as an ancient legal code but as a dynamic revelation of divine justice and renewal applicable to the African context.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the growing field of ecological and liberation theologies in Africa. The continent's struggle for social justice and environmental preservation calls for theological frameworks that transcend conventional development paradigms. The Jubilee message, with its emphasis on rest and restoration, challenges exploitative systems and reclaims creation as a sacred trust. It also provides a counter-narrative to modern capitalism's unrelenting pursuit of profit at the expense of community and the environment. In recovering the theological essence of rest (Shabbat), the paper advocates a spirituality of restraint, stewardship, and gratitude. Likewise, through the lens of Shuv (restoration) and Chadash (renewal), it envisions a rebirth of communal ethics rooted in covenantal fidelity and social equity.

In summary, this study argues that the Jubilee legislation provides a theological framework for Africa's sustainable future. It calls for rest, restoration, and renewal, reflecting a holistic vision of human life in right relationship with God, neighbor, and creation. This paper argues that Africa's quest for transformation must begin not merely with political or economic reform but with a spiritual and ecological renewal grounded in the covenantal theology of divine rest as revealed in Leviticus 25.

The central thesis of this study is that Leviticus 25 provides a covenantal-restorative theological framework that integrates rest (Shabbat), social restoration (Shuv), and ecological renewal (Chadash) into a viable paradigm for Africa's sustainable future—offering what current African sustainability discourse lacks: a theologically grounded, justice-oriented, and ecologically conscious vision of human flourishing.

This paper contributes to African theology and sustainability studies by proposing a fresh covenantal-restorative ecological theology rooted in the Jubilee tradition—moving beyond symbolic or liturgical readings of the text. Rather than merely reinterpreting an ancient tradition, it offers a constructive theological framework that integrates Sabbath spirituality, economic justice, and ecological ethics as a unified paradigm for African renewal. In doing so, it advances the emerging field of African ecological theology by grounding sustainability not in secular development theory but in biblical covenantal ethics that honor land, life, and community as sacred trust.

Biblical and Theological Background

The Jubilee legislation, as articulated in Leviticus 25, stands among the most radical socio-religious ordinances in the Old Testament. It embodies Yahweh's vision for justice, equity, and renewal within Israel's covenantal community. The chapter prescribes a sabbatical rhythm for the land and the people—a cyclical pattern of rest every seventh year culminating in the fiftieth-year Jubilee (yobel). This sacred rhythm reflects not only divine ownership of creation but also divine compassion for both human beings and the natural world. The Jubilee, therefore, is the practical outworking of Israel's theological confession that “the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof” (Ps. 24:1).

The theological foundation of Leviticus 25 is rooted in the principle of rest (שבת – Shabbat), which permeates the Pentateuchal narrative. The concept originates in the Genesis creation account, where God rests on the seventh day, blessing and sanctifying it (Gen. 2:2–3). This divine rest (menuhah) does not signify inactivity but a completed order—a state of equilibrium in creation. In the Exodus and Leviticus traditions, this rest becomes institutionalized as Sabbath observance, extending beyond personal piety to encompass communal and ecological well-being. The sabbatical year (shemittah) in Leviticus 25:2–7 is an extension of this creation theology. The land itself is granted Shabbat—a rest that acknowledges its participation in God’s covenant and its need for renewal. Thus, rest in the Jubilee context is both ecological and spiritual; it is the restoration of balance between Creator, creation, and community.

The Meaning of שָׁבַת (Shabbat) — Rest as Divine Rhythm

The Hebrew word שבת (Shabbat) literally means “to cease” or “to desist.” However, its theological meaning extends far beyond mere cessation of labor. In Leviticus 25, Shabbat connotes the restoration of divine order through rhythm and restraint. It sanctifies time by inserting divine boundaries into human productivity. The Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15 already linked rest to liberation—reminding Israel of deliverance from Egypt. In the Jubilee legislation, that liberation is extended to the land and society itself. Fields are left fallow, debts are cancelled, and servants regain freedom. The Shabbat principle thus embodies divine justice, ensuring that no human or ecological system is endlessly exploited.

Walter Brueggemann (2014) interprets Sabbath as a counter-cultural act—a declaration that creation and community do not exist for perpetual economic extraction. Instead, rest symbolizes trust in divine provision and a rejection of oppressive systems. The Jubilee rest, therefore, serves as a theological protest against social inequity. It interrupts cycles of greed and accumulation, reminding humanity that all resources ultimately belong to God. Within the African context, this idea resonates profoundly. The exploitation of land through unsustainable mining, deforestation, and industrial agriculture mirrors ancient Israel’s warning against overuse and disregard for divine balance. A theology of Shabbat invites Africa to rediscover the sacred rhythm of rest that honors both creation and Creator.

The Meaning of שׁוּב (Shuv) — Restoration as Return

The second Hebrew term integral to the Jubilee theology is שׁוּב (Shuv), commonly translated as “return” or “restore.” In the Hebrew Bible, Shuv often carries a dual connotation: physical restoration (as in the return to one’s land or property) and spiritual repentance (as in the return to God). The verb occurs over 1,000 times in the Old Testament, reflecting its centrality in Israel’s theology of covenantal renewal. In Leviticus 25, the restoration of land and liberty embodies both aspects of Shuv—a tangible recovery of what was lost and a moral-spiritual turning back to the divine covenant.

The Jubilee proclamation, “each of you shall return (tashuvu) to your own property and each of you to your family” (Lev. 25:10), employs Shuv as the essence of social healing. This restoration is not merely economic but deeply theological: it restores relationships fractured by sin and inequality.

As scholars such as Christopher Wright (2006) observe, biblical restoration re-establishes God's intended harmony in creation. Through Shuv, God calls His people to repentance and renewal, initiating cycles of redemption throughout history.

For African theology, Shuv provides a lens for reimagining social and moral restoration. The continent's colonial and postcolonial experiences have disrupted communal bonds, land ownership, and traditional moral values. The biblical call to Shuv challenges African nations to reclaim integrity, justice, and relational wholeness. It insists that authentic renewal must involve a moral and spiritual turning toward God, not merely structural reform. The Jubilee's theology of Shuv thus resonates with Africa's search for reconciliation, healing, and recovery of communal identity.

The Meaning of שָׁנָה (Chadash) — Renewal as Re-Creation

The third key term, שָׁנָה (Chadash), means “to renew” or “to make new.” While not explicitly used in Leviticus 25, its concept is implied in the Jubilee's theology of re-creation. The act of renewal is central to the prophetic hope that emerges from the covenantal vision. Isaiah speaks of a “new heaven and a new earth” (*shamayim chadashim we'etz chadashah*), where justice and peace prevail (Isa. 65:17–25). Similarly, Psalm 104:30 declares, “You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; and you renew the face of the earth.” Renewal in the biblical sense, therefore, is not merely cyclical but transformative—it inaugurates a new order under divine sovereignty.

Within the Jubilee framework, Chadash complements Shabbat and Shuv by completing the cycle of divine restoration. After rest (Shabbat) and return (Shuv), there comes renewal (Chadash): a rejuvenated life aligned with God's purpose. The Jubilee thus symbolizes not a regression to the past but a renewal of creation's covenantal destiny. It reflects God's ongoing activity of making all things new—a theme carried forward into the New Testament (2 Cor. 5:17; Rev. 21:5).

For Africa, Chadash offers theological grounding for the continent's aspiration toward sustainable development and moral renewal. It calls for a new creation that integrates spiritual transformation with ecological and social reformation. African theologians such as Kwame Bediako and John Mbiti have emphasized that Christian theology in Africa must be transformative—addressing the brokenness of both people and environment. The Jubilee's motif of renewal invites African societies to envision progress not as endless consumption but as regeneration of values, relationships, and ecosystems.

The Jubilee as Theological Integration of Rest, Restoration, and Renewal

Taken together, Shabbat, Shuv, and Chadash articulate a comprehensive theology of divine renewal. In the Jubilee legislation, these concepts interlock to form a holistic vision of life grounded in God's covenantal order. The land's rest reflects Shabbat; the return of people and property manifests Shuv; and the social rebirth that follows exemplifies Chadash. This trinity of theological action demonstrates that divine renewal encompasses every dimension of existence—spiritual, social, and ecological.

Leviticus 25, therefore, represents a theological charter for justice and sustainability. Its concern for the poor, the enslaved, and the land reflects a divine economy of grace, radically distinct from exploitative systems. The Jubilee interrupts accumulation and calls for redistribution, renewal, and rest. This vision aligns closely with African communal ethics, where land, kinship, and spirituality form the bedrock of identity. The Jubilee provides a biblical foundation for reimagining African social order around divine equilibrium rather than unrestrained growth.

In summary, the biblical and theological background of the Jubilee legislation reveals a profound divine pattern: rest (Shabbat) restores rhythm to creation; restoration (Shuv) reconciles human relationships; and renewal (Chadash) re-creates society in God's image. Together they form a theological triad of hope and transformation that speaks directly to the African context. Through the Jubilee, Yahweh invites humanity to participate in His ongoing work of renewal—a call as urgent today as it was in ancient Israel.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an integrative theological approach, specifically a hermeneutical synthesis that combines exegetical analysis of the Hebrew text with contextual interpretation within the African socio-ecological reality. It is qualitative and interpretive in nature, recognizing that biblical theology must be both textually rooted and contextually engaged. The methodology draws from exegetical theology to uncover the theological meanings of שבת (Shabbat), שוב (Shuv), and חדש (Chadash) within Leviticus 25, while contextual theological reflection interprets these motifs in light of Africa's contemporary struggles with economic inequality, ecological degradation, and moral fragmentation. This approach ensures a framework that is academically rigorous in its biblical grounding yet practically relevant for Africa's sustainable future.

Research Design

The research employs a qualitative and interpretive theological design, merging biblical-theological analysis with contextual inquiry. This approach reflects the conviction that theology is both textual and lived—it emerges from the intersection of Scripture, faith, and human experience. The study begins with textual exegesis of Leviticus 25, focusing on the linguistic and theological meanings of the Hebrew terms שבת (Shabbat), שוב (Shuv), and חדש (Chadash). The exegesis seeks to uncover the theological essence of rest, restoration, and renewal within the covenantal framework of the Pentateuch.

The second phase involves contextual analysis, which examines how these biblical principles speak to contemporary African realities—socially, economically, and ecologically. This phase draws upon insights from African theology, sustainability studies, and ethics to interpret the enduring relevance of the Jubilee vision. The integration of these two methodological streams—biblical exegesis and contextual theology—constitutes the study's mixed-methods structure. It ensures that theological reflection remains faithful to Scripture while addressing the lived realities of modern society.

Data Sources and Theological Method

The primary data source for this study is the Hebrew text of Leviticus 25, analyzed using biblical-theological and hermeneutical tools. Critical commentaries, lexicons (such as Brown-Driver-Briggs and Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament), and intertextual references within the Pentateuch and prophetic literature provide linguistic and semantic grounding. Secondary sources include theological works, journal articles, and African contextual writings that engage the themes of Sabbath, rest, ecology, and renewal.

The theological method employed follows a four-step interpretive process:

1. Textual Analysis – examining the historical and linguistic features of Leviticus 25.
2. Exegetical Synthesis – interpreting key terms and themes in light of biblical theology.
3. Contextual Correlation – relating biblical insights to Africa’s socio-economic and ecological conditions.
4. Theological Construction – articulating a coherent theological framework for rest, restoration, and renewal in African contexts.

This process is iterative and dialogical, allowing Scripture and context to illuminate each other. It reflects what Gerald West (2016) describes as a “hermeneutic of engagement,” where the biblical text becomes a partner in addressing contemporary concerns.

The Exegetical Component

The exegetical component of the study is grounded in literary and theological analysis of Leviticus 25. The text is read within its canonical setting and interpreted in light of the broader Pentateuchal theology of land, covenant, and holiness. Key to this approach is the recognition that Leviticus 25 belongs to the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26), where Yahweh’s holiness demands ethical reflection in social and ecological life. The Jubilee laws are thus interpreted not as isolated commandments but as integral expressions of divine holiness and justice.

The analysis of שבת (Shabbat) explores its role as a theological symbol of divine sovereignty and human limitation. The term’s usage across the Pentateuch and prophetic literature is examined to highlight its covenantal implications. Similarly, שוב (Shuv) is studied in its semantic range—from physical return to spiritual repentance—revealing how the Jubilee integrates both dimensions. Finally, חדש (Chadash) is examined as a theological motif of renewal, drawing connections with prophetic and wisdom texts that envision re-creation.

This exegetical process draws from the grammatical-historical method but transcends it by emphasizing theological meaning rather than mere linguistic precision. As Walter Kaiser (2007) and Christopher Wright (2006) note, exegesis in theological research must serve the broader purpose of uncovering the divine intention and its relevance for ethical and spiritual transformation.

The Contextual Component

The contextual dimension of the research is rooted in African theology, which emphasizes the dialogue between biblical revelation and African socio-cultural realities. The study recognizes that the theological message of Jubilee finds resonance in African communal values, such as ubuntu, communal ownership, and respect for the land. Therefore, contextual analysis seeks to interpret the Jubilee's call for rest and renewal as a divine response to Africa's postcolonial challenges—environmental degradation, poverty, and moral disintegration.

Qualitative insights are drawn from theological literature, case studies on sustainable practices in African communities, and church-based ecological movements. These sources are not treated as empirical data in a sociological sense but as theological voices contributing to an ongoing conversation about divine renewal. The method is thus hermeneutical rather than empirical, emphasizing interpretation and meaning-making rather than statistical generalization.

This approach aligns with Richard Osmer's (2008) practical-theological model, which identifies four core tasks of theology: descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic. In this framework, the study describes the biblical text (what is happening), interprets it within its context (why it is happening), articulates theological norms (what ought to be happening), and proposes practical implications for African renewal (how we should respond).

Integration of Methods

The integration of methods in this study follows what Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) describe as “theological triangulation”—a process in which different sources of data and interpretation converge to form a unified understanding. The exegetical findings provide the theological foundation, while the contextual analysis supplies relevance and application. The two are integrated through reflective synthesis, allowing insights from Scripture to inform African contexts and, conversely, allowing African realities to shed light on biblical interpretation.

This methodological synergy is critical in ensuring that theology remains both faithful to its sources and transformative in its application. It embodies the dual commitment to faithfulness (to the biblical text) and responsiveness (to human context). By doing so, the study models an approach that is academically rigorous, contextually relevant, and spiritually grounded.

Ethical and Hermeneutical Considerations

Given that theological research involves sacred texts and cultural contexts, ethical sensitivity is essential. This study approaches both Scripture and African traditions with respect, recognizing their sacred significance to their respective communities. The hermeneutical posture adopted is one of dialogue rather than dominance, avoiding any imposition of Western categories upon African thought. Furthermore, the study maintains academic integrity by referencing primary and secondary sources accurately and by acknowledging the limitations of contextual application.

Through exegetical rigor and contextual sensitivity, the research uncovers the theological depths of Shabbat, Shuv, and Chadash, and applies them meaningfully to Africa's quest for rest, restoration, and renewal.

Theological Analysis of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25)

Leviticus 25 presents one of the Old Testament's most comprehensive theological visions of divine justice and holistic restoration. The Jubilee is not merely socio-economic legislation but a covenantal framework integrating rest, restoration, and renewal as expressions of Yahweh's ordering of creation. Its theological substance is discerned through the interrelated motifs of שבת (Shabbat), שׁוּב (Shuv), and חֲדָשׁ (Chadash)—which collectively articulate the rhythm of divine governance over time, community, and creation.

1. Jubilee as a Theology of Rest (Shabbat)

Leviticus 25 opens by extending Sabbath beyond human rest to the land itself: “the land shall observe a Sabbath to the Lord” (Lev. 25:2). Shabbat, meaning cessation or interruption, functions here not as ritual observance alone but as a divinely instituted ecological and theological limitation. It asserts that creation is sustained not by uninterrupted productivity but by submission to divine sovereignty (Wirzba, 2003). Sabbath rest becomes a theological critique of economic absolutism by reordering time toward dependence rather than exploitation. In African contexts marked by extractive economic practices, Shabbat offers a corrective theological vision of sustainability grounded in restraint and divine trust.

2. Jubilee as a Theology of Restoration (Shuv)

The second theological pillar of Leviticus 25 is restoration, expressed through שׁוּב (Shuv) — “to return” or “to restore.” The command that “each of you shall return to your property, and each of you to your family” (Lev. 25:10) frames Jubilee as a divinely structured interruption of permanent socio-economic inequality. Shuv functions simultaneously as economic restitution and covenantal repentance. The return of land is not merely redistribution but a theological reordering of ownership under Yahweh's sovereign claim (cf. Lev. 25:23). Wright (2006) identifies this as a safeguard against accumulation and generational dispossession, restoring equilibrium to covenantal community.

Within African postcolonial realities—marked by land alienation, corruption, and systemic inequality—Shuv offers a theological model for structural repentance. It redefines justice not as humanitarian relief but as covenant faithfulness, demanding renewal of relational, economic, and spiritual order rather than the preservation of exploitative systems.

3. Jubilee as Theology of Renewal (Chadash)

Although the term חֲדָשׁ (Chadash) does not appear explicitly in Leviticus 25, its theological substance permeates the Jubilee structure. Renewal here is eschatological — a periodic re-creation of covenantal life, anticipating prophetic visions of new creation (Isa. 65:17; Jer. 31:31–34).

Chadash represents divine initiative, signaling that restoration is not merely human reform but participation in God's renewing activity. The Jubilee thus functions as ritualized covenant renewal — a cyclical reorientation of land, people, and economy under divine sovereignty.

In New Testament fulfillment, Christ identifies His mission as the Jubilee made present (Luke 4:18–19), universalizing Chadash beyond Israel toward cosmic renewal. For Africa, burdened by moral decay, ecological devastation, and institutional collapse, Chadash constitutes a theology of spiritual and systemic transformation rather than mere modernization — calling for renewal that begins theologically, not technologically.

The Unity of Rest, Restoration, and Renewal

Although Shabbat, Shuv, and Chadash are distinct theological motifs, their coherence in Leviticus 25 forms an integrated vision of divine renewal. Rest without restoration risks passivity, restoration without renewal lacks enduring transformation, and renewal without rest becomes unsustainably activist. The Jubilee unites the three as a covenantal rhythm of grace — cessation, return, and re-creation — reflecting the very character of Yahweh, who rests, restores, and renews.

This triadic unity offers a paradigm for African theological imagination: sustainability cannot be divorced from justice, nor justice from spiritual renewal. The Jubilee thus resists fragmented development paradigms and proposes a holistic theological anthropology and ecology, where time, land, and communal life operate under divine rhythm rather than economic expediency.

The Jubilee and the Ethics of Land and Ecology

Leviticus 25 presents land not as a neutral economic asset but as sacred trust under divine ownership (Lev 25:23: “the land is mine; you are but aliens and tenants”). The Jubilee interrupts extractive accumulation by re-synchronizing land with God's rest and liberative intent. Land is granted for habitation, not exploitation — embedded in covenant, not capitalism.

Jubilee land ethics displace any model that treats land as a mere commodity. It affirms land as liturgical space, where social justice and worship converge. The resting of the land (vv. 4–5) is not an agricultural technique but a theological proclamation: creation is given dignity apart from productivity.

This ecological theology challenges African contexts where land is often seized, industrialized, or sacredly feared rather than covenantally stewarded. The Jubilee relocates ecology from technical policy to covenantal fidelity, asserting that environmental justice is first a theological, not merely economic, obligation.

Jubilee as Economic Reversal and Protection of the Vulnerable

The Jubilee is not symbolic charity — it is structural reversal. Its logic dismantles systems that normalize inequality by ensuring that poverty cannot become permanent, hereditary, or identity-

defining. Debts are cancelled, ancestral land is returned, and people sold into servitude are released — not as discretionary benevolence, but as covenantal obligation.

The oppressed are not merely “assisted”; they are reinstated into full covenant membership. The Jubilee does not tolerate a social order where wealth hardens into domination or poverty into destiny. In its economics, all accumulation is temporary; all power is accountable; all ownership is stewardship.

Such a system stands in direct judgment over African contexts where corruption, land monopolization, and predatory lending trap communities in multi-generational dispossession. Jubilee declares that God interrupts economic history, making justice not idealistic aspiration but required recalibration of reality.

Contextual Application for Africa’s Sustainable Future

Rest (שבת – Shabbat): Toward a Theology of Sustainable Rhythm

Africa’s social and economic restlessness reflects a deeper spiritual crisis—the loss of rest in God. The relentless pursuit of wealth, industrial growth, and urban expansion often comes at the cost of environmental and human wellbeing. In many African societies, productivity has become idolized, leading to exploitation of both people and resources. Against this backdrop, the Jubilee principle of Shabbat provides a countercultural theology of rhythm and restraint.

The Sabbath year and Jubilee commanded rest not only for individuals but also for the land, animals, and social systems. This rest was not an invitation to idleness but a divine reordering of life according to God’s time. As Brueggemann (2014) observes, Sabbath is resistance—it interrupts the tyranny of production and consumption. For Africa, practicing Shabbat means reclaiming the sacred rhythm of life where creation is valued beyond its economic utility.

Theologically, this rest represents dependence on divine providence. In the Jubilee year, Israel was commanded not to sow or reap, trusting that God would provide. Likewise, Africa’s sustainable future depends on cultivating faith-based ecological ethics that trust divine abundance over exploitative extraction. The continent must rediscover the sacredness of rest in both spiritual and ecological dimensions: rest as worship, rest as justice, and rest as ecological restoration.

Practically, this could translate into promoting Sabbath-based environmental practices—periodic land fallowing, community rest days, and reduction of industrial overuse of resources. Faith communities could model ecological Sabbath observance, reminding society that sustainability begins with reverence for creation. Spiritually, the theology of rest challenges the church and the state to reject economic models that devalue human dignity and creation’s integrity.

Restoration (שׁוּב – Shuv): Economic and Social Renewal

The Jubilee command that “each of you shall return to your property and each of you shall return to your family” (Lev. 25:10) embodies a theology of economic justice and social restoration. It

reveals God's concern for equality, community, and redemption from structural bondage. In ancient Israel, the restoration of land and liberty prevented generational poverty and maintained social balance.

In modern Africa, Shuv offers a powerful theological vision for addressing persistent inequality, corruption, and social alienation. Many African nations suffer from economic systems that favor the powerful few while disenfranchising the poor. Land dispossession, resource exploitation, and economic injustice have created modern forms of bondage similar to those the Jubilee sought to correct. The principle of Shuv calls for systemic repentance—a return to just and equitable structures.

From a theological standpoint, restoration involves more than economic redistribution; it is the renewal of relationships based on covenantal ethics. It invites governments, churches, and citizens to “return” to God's order of justice and compassion. African theologians such as John Mbiti and Mercy Amba Oduyoye have long emphasized community as the heart of African ethics. The Jubilee affirms this communal principle, showing that divine justice is inherently relational—it restores people to one another and to creation.

Practical application of Shuv can take several forms:

1. Economic Restitution by Encouraging fair land reforms, ethical governance, and equitable wealth distribution.
2. Social Reconciliation by Promoting forgiveness and community healing in post-conflict societies.
3. Institutional Integrity through Returning governance, business, and church leadership to transparency and accountability as expressions of divine justice.
4. Spiritually, Shuv demands repentance. The moral renewal of Africa must begin with the church leading by example—confessing complicity in systems of greed and corruption and embracing a theology of justice. The return to God must precede the restoration of the land, for as in Israel's story, social renewal flows from spiritual repentance.

Renewal (חֲדָשׁ – Chadash): Hope and Transformation

The third pillar, Chadash, signifies renewal and recreation—the emergence of new life out of decay. For Africa, burdened by histories of colonial exploitation, political instability, and moral decline, Chadash embodies hope for a divinely initiated transformation. The Jubilee reminds us that God's renewal is cyclical and perpetual; every fifty years represented a divine invitation to start anew.

In Scripture, renewal is both divine and participatory. God initiates renewal, but His people must respond in obedience. The prophets envisioned a new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) and a renewed creation (Isa. 65:17), while Christ fulfilled these hopes by proclaiming “the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:19). Thus, the theology of Chadash is deeply Christological—it points to Christ as the ultimate restorer and renewer of creation.

In the African context, Chadash calls for transformation on three levels:

1. **Spiritual Renewal:** A reawakening of faith and moral consciousness. Africa's revival must transcend emotional spirituality to become ethically transformative. Churches must lead in renewing the moral fiber of society through discipleship and prophetic witness.
2. **Ecological Renewal:** Africa's ecological future depends on repentance from exploitative attitudes toward nature. The renewal of forests, rivers, and soils is a spiritual act, acknowledging the Creator's ongoing work in sustaining life.
3. **Institutional Renewal:** Renewal must also touch governance, education, and development policies. A Jubilee-inspired leadership model emphasizes servant leadership, communal accountability, and moral renewal.

Renewal, in the biblical sense, is not modernization but transformation—becoming new in alignment with divine purpose. It challenges Africa to envision progress not merely as technological advancement but as spiritual and ecological harmony.

The Jubilee as a Paradigm for African Theology

The integration of Shabbat, Shuv, and Chadash offers a comprehensive paradigm for African theology. It suggests that Africa's sustainable future cannot be achieved through secular development models alone but through a theological reorientation rooted in divine principles of rest, restoration, and renewal.

African theology, as Kwame Bediako (2000) emphasizes, must always be incarnational—speaking the Word of God in the cultural idioms of the people. The Jubilee aligns with this task by resonating with African communal ethics, reverence for the land, and spiritual interconnectedness. The Hebrew vision of land as divine trust parallels African notions of communal ownership, while the concept of rest aligns with African rhythms of life marked by seasons, festivals, and sacred pauses.

The Jubilee theology also provides a framework for the theology of resistance and liberation. It calls the church in Africa to challenge systems that perpetuate inequality, exploitation, and ecological destruction. It empowers communities to envision development not as domination but as stewardship—working with creation rather than against it.

In this sense, the Jubilee represents not only divine grace but divine justice. It demands the dismantling of oppressive structures and the establishment of systems that reflect God's reign of equity and peace. The church must therefore become both a prophetic voice and a practical agent of Jubilee transformation.

Toward a Theology of Sustainability

The global discourse on sustainability often focuses on technological innovation and policy reform. However, Leviticus 25 offers a theological foundation for sustainability rooted in spiritual values rather than mere economic efficiency. True sustainability, from the Jubilee perspective, integrates ecology, economy, and ethics within a covenantal relationship with God.

For Africa, this means that sustainability must be spiritual before it is environmental. The Sabbath principle teaches ecological restraint. The restoration principle teaches economic justice, and the renewal principle teaches spiritual hope. When these are held together, a holistic vision of sustainable life emerges. This honors God, uplifts humanity, and preserves creation.

The contextual application of Leviticus 25 demonstrates that the theology of Jubilee—rooted in Shabbat, Shuv, and Chadash—offers a divinely inspired model for Africa’s sustainable future. It calls the continent to embrace rest as an ecological and spiritual rhythm, restoration as a social justice, and renewal as a divine transformation. This triadic vision integrates faith with life, theology with development, and spirituality with sustainability.

Africa’s renewal, therefore, is not merely an economic or political project but a spiritual journey back to divine rhythm. The Jubilee invites Africa to enter God’s cycle of grace, where rest heals creation, restoration rebuilds communities, and renewal rekindles hope for generations to come.

Contextual-Theological Discussion for Africa’s Reality

Africa’s contemporary realities reveal structural distortions that resonate deeply with the concerns addressed in Leviticus 25. While the continent is endowed with vast natural and human resources, its socio-economic and ecological systems are increasingly shaped by extractive development models that prioritize profit over human dignity and environmental stewardship. Within this context, the Jubilee vision of Shabbat (rest), Shuv (restoration), and Chadash (renewal) becomes not merely a historical curiosity but a constructive theological paradigm that can reframe Africa’s search for sustainable transformation.

Socio-Economic Injustice: Beyond Developmental Imbalance

Africa’s widening economic disparities—manifested in land dispossession, debt dependency, and elite accumulation—echo the material inequities Jubilee was designed to prevent. The principle of Shuv challenges economic systems that permanently alienate people from land and livelihood, insisting instead on reversibility and redistribution. In this light, Jubilee offers a theological corrective to Africa’s current models of development that prioritize GDP expansion without equity. It proposes an ethic of restorative economy—one that recalibrates development towards covenant accountability, communal well-being, and protection against generational poverty. Rather than romanticizing precolonial systems, the Jubilee paradigm provides Africa with a theologically grounded economic imagination that resists the structural permanence of inequality.

Ecological Exploitation: Challenging Anthropocentric Progress

Africa’s ecological crisis—from deforestation and mining degradation to polluted water systems—reveals an instrumental exploitation of land divorced from sacred responsibility. The Jubilee principle of Shabbat reframes land not as a passive commodity but as a covenant participant that must be granted rest. This disrupts prevailing exploitative models by rooting ecology in relational theology rather than technocratic management. Jubilee therefore offers African environmental discourse a theological grammar for sustainability—grounded not in preservation for future

consumption, but in honoring land as divine trust. This theological repositioning calls for integrating Sabbath-rest ethics into agricultural policy, land tenure systems, and ecological governance.

Moral-Communal Fragmentation: Restoring Covenant Identity

Rapid urbanization, political disillusionment, and socio-cultural disintegration have weakened Africa's communal ethos. The Jubilee motif of Chadash envisions renewal not as adaptation to modernity, but as the recovery of covenantal identity rooted in relational justice. Unlike individualistic reform models, Jubilee renewal presupposes the healing of community before the success of structures. It offers African theology a framework for moral reorientation—grounded in covenant loyalty (hesed), reparative memory, and the re-sanctification of social relationships. Rather than nostalgia, this renewal is future-oriented, envisioning a society animated by solidarity, restraint, and interdependence.

Exegetical-Theological Findings

This section presents a theological-exegetical exploration of the Jubilee concepts in Leviticus 25, focusing on the Hebrew categories of שבת (Shabbat, rest), שׁוּב (Shuv, restoration), and חֲדָשׁ (Chadash, renewal). Each theme is examined as a theological construct emerging from Israel's covenantal imagination rather than as a mere socio-economic policy, revealing its enduring significance for divine order and communal life.

Rest (Shabbat)

The concept of Shabbat in Leviticus 25 functions not merely as cessation from labor, but as a theological reordering of time under divine sovereignty. It signals a return to God-centered temporality, where production is interrupted so that creation is reoriented toward worship, dependence, and relational wholeness. Shabbat thus embodies a theological protest against perpetual productivity and the dehumanization of economic absolutism. It reframes existence as a gift rather than a possession, grounding identity in divine rhythm rather than human achievement.

Restoration (Shuv)

The term Shuv extends beyond legal restitution to express a covenantal vision of relational repair. Its Jubilee application envisions the reversal of dislocation, where persons, land, and identity are returned to their rightful place. This is not a mechanistic economic reset but a moral and spiritual realignment that reaffirms belonging, kinship, and covenantal responsibility. Restoration in this sense is fundamentally relational and redemptive, requiring structures that protect dignity and prevent permanent marginalization.

Renewal (Chadash)

Chadash in the Jubilee context signifies not innovation but re-sanctification—a reconsecration of life, land, and community to God's original intention. It is a movement toward structural and

spiritual re-creation, where oppressive cycles are interrupted, and the community is invited into a renewed ethical imagination. Renewal here is not merely reform but reorientation toward divine purpose, anticipating a future where creation flourishes under righteousness and justice.

Theological and Practical Implications

The findings of this study reveal that the Jubilee vision of Leviticus 25 is not merely an ancient socio-religious institution but a theologically generative paradigm capable of reshaping Africa's discourse on sustainability, justice, and communal renewal. Its theological significance lies not in reproduction of ancient legislation but in its capacity to reform the theological imagination—redirecting Africa's development concerns from secular policy frameworks toward covenantal responsibility rooted in divine-human-earth relationality.

Contribution to African Theology

This study advances African theology by proposing Jubilee as a hermeneutical lens that integrates spirituality, communal ethics, and ecological consciousness within a single covenantal framework. Rather than treating ecological and socio-economic issues as separate themes, Jubilee theology reunites worship, land, and justice as inseparable elements of divine order. It challenges existing African theological models that have focused predominantly on political liberation or individual moral renewal, instead calling for a covenantal-restorative theology that redefines sustainability as faithfulness to the divine rhythm. This signals a methodological shift—from reactive theology to constructive theological imagination rooted in biblical temporality and covenantal ethics.

Contribution to Sustainability Discourse

In the sphere of sustainability studies, Jubilee offers an alternative to technocratic and market-driven paradigms that treat development as economic expansion. Its emphasis on Shabbat (ecological restraint), Shuv (restorative justice), and Chadash (regenerative renewal) grounds sustainability in theological time rather than capitalist time. This reframes sustainability not as environmental management but as ethical participation in divine order, where land and community are not resources to be optimized but sacred trusts to be honored. Such a vision critiques extractive development models and instead promotes a theology of limits, redistribution, and relational accountability as essential to Africa's future.

Summary

This qualitative and interpretive study has explored the theological and ethical dimensions of rest (שבת – Shabbat), restoration (שוב – Shuv), and renewal (חדש – Chadash) in the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25, and their relevance for Africa's sustainable future. Through an integrative theological approach or hermeneutical synthesis combining exegetical and contextual analysis, the research has demonstrated that the Jubilee is far more than a socio-economic institution—it is a divine framework for holistic renewal that encompasses the spiritual, ecological, and social dimensions of life.

The analysis revealed that Shabbat represents divine rest, calling creation to a rhythm of dependence and reverence; Shuv embodies restoration, emphasizing justice, restitution, and reconciliation; while Chadash signifies renewal, reflecting God's ongoing work of re-creation and transformation. Together, these concepts form a triadic theology of divine renewal—one that unites worship with justice, spirituality with ecology, and divine grace with human responsibility.

In the context of Africa, the Jubilee provides a profound theological response to the continent's existential crises. Africa's struggles with economic disparity, environmental degradation, and moral decay mirror ancient Israel's need for periodic restoration. The Jubilee thus serves as both a critique of exploitative systems and a vision of hope for sustainable living. It calls Africa to return to the rhythm of divine rest, to restore justice and community, and to participate in God's work of renewal.

The implications of this study are both spiritual and practical. Spiritually, it challenges Africa to rediscover the theology of rest and renewal as central to her faith identity. Practically, it invites African societies to build economies and communities that reflect divine justice, ecological balance, and moral integrity. The Jubilee vision thus serves as a prophetic call for Africa's holistic transformation in the twenty-first century.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and theological insights of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for theological education, church practice, and policy development across Africa:

1. Theological Education and Research

Incorporate Jubilee Theology into Curricula: Seminaries and universities should integrate the theology of rest, restoration, and renewal into biblical studies, ethics, and ecology courses.

Promote Contextual Hermeneutics: Encourage African biblical scholars to engage Leviticus 25 using African cultural lenses, emphasizing the synergy between biblical and indigenous ecological ethics.

Foster Interdisciplinary Dialogue: Theological institutions should collaborate with environmental, economic, and social sciences to develop a holistic theology of sustainability rooted in Scripture.

2. The Church and Ecclesial Practice

Reclaim Sabbath Spirituality: Churches should teach and model Sabbath rest as spiritual formation and ecological care—encouraging days of rest, community reflection, and environmental stewardship.

Advocate for Justice and Restitution: Churches must be prophetic voices advocating for economic fairness, anti-corruption, and land justice in line with Jubilee ethics.

Integrate Jubilee Programs: Congregations can initiate Jubilee-inspired projects—such as debt relief, agricultural renewal, micro-loan schemes, and community reconciliation initiatives.

3. Socio-Economic and Policy Implications

Policy Frameworks for Restorative Justice: African governments and NGOs should explore policies inspired by the Jubilee—periodic debt cancellation, equitable land redistribution, and social reintegration of the marginalized.

Sustainable Land Management: Policy makers should recognize the theological basis for land rest and adopt agricultural practices that allow ecological regeneration and biodiversity conservation.

Faith-Based Environmental Action: Encourage collaboration between church networks and environmental agencies to address climate change, deforestation, and waste management through community-based action.

4. Spiritual and Moral Renewal

Cultivate a Culture of Repentance: Renewal begins with returning to God (Shuv). The church must lead national repentance movements that confront greed, corruption, and moral decay.

Encourage Moral Leadership: Theological institutions should emphasize servant leadership rooted in Jubilee ethics—leaders who embody justice, humility, and compassion.

Promote Hope and Resilience: The theology of Chadash should inform pastoral care, inspiring resilience among communities facing despair, poverty, and ecological disaster.

5. Continental Collaboration

Establish a Pan-African Jubilee Network: Theological associations, churches, and universities can collaborate to research and implement Jubilee principles in various sectors—economy, environment, and governance.

Annual Jubilee Conferences: These could provide platforms for dialogue on faith-based sustainability, justice, and peacebuilding across African nations.

Public Theology for Policy Impact: Scholars and church leaders should engage policymakers with Jubilee-based arguments for sustainable and ethical governance.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Shabbat in Leviticus 25 embodies a rhythm of trustful rest that reorders human–creation relations under divine sovereignty; Shuv enacts restorative return that dismantles structural injustice; and Chadash unveils renewal as covenantal transformation grounded in God’s faithfulness. Together, these motifs reveal Jubilee not as economic legislation alone but as

theological recalibration and communal healing. The exegesis demonstrates that Jubilee is fundamentally a hermeneutic of trust, return, and re-creation.

The implications for Africa — and Nigeria in particular — are profound: Jubilee confronts extractive economies with Sabbath-disciplined restraint, calls political systems to repentance through restorative justice, and empowers communities to imagine renewed identity beyond trauma and dispossession. It offers a theological grammar for ecological healing, land restitution, and socioeconomic reorder grounded not merely in policy but in worship, memory, and moral imagination.

This study has been limited by its exclusively textual and theological method, without empirical testing or engagement with lived African Sabbath practices. Future research should include empirical theological studies on Sabbath-informed ecological or agrarian movements, comparative work with indigenous African ethics of rest and land stewardship, and interdisciplinary exploration of Jubilee within contemporary policy and economic frameworks. Such work would deepen and verify Jubilee's transformative potential in concrete African realities.

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