



Methods for poverty alleviation in Malawi using the principles of jubilee in the Old Testament

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Abstract

Africa faces a number of obstacles when it comes to the quality of life. In Malawi, more than two-thirds of the population lives in extreme poverty, almost all of whom rely on small-scale farming for their livelihoods. Despite efforts by both the government and religious and nonreligious organizations to address the issue, poverty is pervasive in Malawi. This article is guided by the question “What should be done to alleviate poverty in Malawi? Historically, the Church has taken over helping the poor and caring for widows, the destitute, and orphans. On the other hand, the law of jubilee in Leviticus 25 shows that the year of jubilee was a levelling of real assets that occurred every fifty years. This practice mitigated economic inequality making it possible for families not to live in the circle of poverty for generations. This article provides a response by analysing the literature on poverty and relating it to the jubilee principles of the Old Testament in order to propose possible methods for enhancing poverty alleviation in Malawi.

Keywords

church pervasive; poverty alleviation; jubilee principles; Old Testament; Malawi

Introduction

The biblical assertion that the poor will always exist (Dt 15:11; Jn 12:8) is not only evident but also corroborated by the increasing severity of poverty. Globally, the issue of poverty is currently one of the greatest challenges facing human societies, predominantly in Africa (World Bank 2020a). Theuri (1999:230) correctly asserted that the cries of desperation of numerous impoverished people – those who lack a roof over their heads,

adequate food, and clothing – reach across the globe with such ferocity that neither Africans nor any other community can ignore them.

Traditionally, the Christian church has been at the vanguard of giving freely to the poor, caring for widows, taking in needy orphans, visiting the sick and caring for the dying (Kaiser 2015). According to Myers (2017:175), during the time between Christ's ascension and second coming, the history of the church demonstrates that, through its theological anthropology and moral vision, it encouraged the emergence of changes that improved the living conditions of humanity. Sunshine (2015:22) confirmed the pioneering role of the Christian church by noting that the early church was unquestionably involved in caring for the poor.

Despite this lengthy history of aiding the poor and destitute, the evangelical church halted or diminished such ministry in the years following 1925 (Kaiser 2015:40). Myers (2010:119) argued that American evangelicals took a hiatus from social action throughout the 1920s. This was the result of wounds inflicted by the modernist-fundamentalist debate (Myers 2010:119). Kaiser (2015:40) stated that this downturn was likely a result of the “emphasis on the ‘Social Gospel’ in liberal theology which evangelicals began to view with deep suspicion as evidence of attempts to procure salvation by works rather than evidence of social concern in the church.” As a result, evangelicals retreated behind the principles of the faith and the unique priority of evangelism and remained on the defensive for nearly 50 years (Myers, 2010:119). Keller (2010) claimed that assisting the poor is now largely regarded as a secondary obligation, as some churches continue to debate whether evangelism or social action should take precedence. Nevertheless, as stated by Paul in Galatians 2:10, aiding the needy is and should be an integral element of every Christian church (Longenecker, 2010:159–170). According to Wright (2005:81), the church's social involvement demonstrates her gratitude for what God has done and her trust in what He is doing. The church is to imitate the character of God, whom she worships, both socially and personally.

The fundamental question that this article dwells on is: how can the church in Malawi be effective in addressing poverty based on the principles gained from the Old Testament jubilee?

Poverty background context of Malawi

According to the World Bank (2020b; 2021a) and World Population Review (2023), Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. Among other reasons for poverty persistence in Malawi, depending on failed agriculture (Marriot, Hamer & Coffey 2018:5; Dossani 2012:20), low levels of education, capital constraints, technological restrictions, and donor dependence (Dunga 2014:97; Tsoka 2013:8) are mentioned as main causes of poverty in the country. Malawi's economy is heavily dependent on agriculture (Arndt et al. 2014:85; Ngwira 2018:4; Kubalasa 2004:2; Mucavele 2009:8). According to Arndt et al (2014:85), NSO (2012), Bastoe (2017:22) and Malawi Government and UNDP (2017:1), agriculture accounts for approximately one-third of Malawi's gross domestic product (GDP), half of the country's export earnings, and two-thirds of the country's employment. This demonstrates the significance of agriculture in Malawi (Malawi Government & UNDP 2017:1; IMF 2017:3; Chirwa 2008:1). According to Record et al. (2018:27) and Devraj (2017:328), agriculture in Malawi is crucial to achieving the country's economic development goals and combating poverty. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (2015) provides an excellent summary of Malawi's agricultural dependence:

Agriculture is considered the engine of Malawi's economic growth since, between 2005 and 2011; more than 80 percent of the country's total exports were agricultural commodities, primarily tobacco, sugar, and tea. Tobacco alone, however, represents an average 60 percent of Malawi's total exports. The manufacturing and agricultural sectors work together in their contribution to the overall growth of the economy, which in 2013/14, registered an average GDP growth rate of 5.2 percent (2015:1).

Due to factors such as drought and floods, this dependence on agriculture has had a negative impact on economic growth (Pauw et al 2010:1). El Nino caused floods in 2014 and droughts in 2014 and 2016 hampered agricultural production and left millions of Malawians without access to food. Malawi has the ability to expand its economic base through multiple sectors, such as energy and industry, as opposed to relying solely on agriculture (Malawi Government 2012:7). For instance, the tourism industry has the potential to expand the nation's economy and help millions of people escape abject

poverty (World Bank 2018:47). Matita and Chirwa (2019:1), citing the World Bank (2008), assert that agriculture has been unsuccessful in lifting Africa out of poverty. According to the World Bank (2008:26), there are numerous success stories of agriculture as an early driver of economic growth and as a major force in reducing poverty. Nonetheless, the World Bank (2008:26) noted the numerous failures that have occurred in most regions of the world to get agriculture moving and how most countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, are experiencing low agricultural growth. The World Bank's statement (2008:26) does not imply that agriculture is an ineffective tool for reducing poverty. However, when agriculture is poorly managed in developing nations, economic growth will fail, resulting in the prevalence of poverty.

The Old Testament jubilee and its purpose

The Old Testament jubilee is found in the book of Leviticus chapter 25. Leviticus 25 belongs to the law of holiness section, which begins with chapters 17 through 26. The dominant theme of this block is that Israel must be set apart from all other nations, just as her God is holy and set apart from all other beings (Lev 20:24, 26). The second theme of chapters 17–26 is that they are to maintain this holiness through strict observance of divine laws. Leviticus 25 addresses economic and social relationships. The chapter consists of regulations governing property and labour relations. The jubilee was to occur after seven years of Sabbath, which corresponds to the 49th year. Barker (2003:702) notes that some scholars, such as Chirichigno, contend that the jubilee coincided with the Sabbatical year, which explains its absence from the remaining Old Testament books. After the seven Sabbath years, there was to be a special year. This was the jubilee year, which occurred every fifty years. It began with the sounding of the trumpet on the Day of Atonement (v 9). The purpose of the jubilee year was to proclaim liberty to all inhabitants of the land (v10). Deror is the Hebrew word that is translated as liberty in verse 10. This word is a feudal term derived from the Accadian (an) duraru, which means “freedom” or “liberty” (Barker 2003; Whinston 1964:iii). Here in Leviticus 25 is the proclamation that deror should regularly and automatically occur in the jubilee year at the command of Yahweh, the proprietor of all land (v23)

(Barker 2003). This law was to apply to all inhabitants of the country. God's decision to begin this year on the Day of Atonement, when the entire nation had just received forgiveness for their sins, is astounding. In a sense, God intended the year of jubilee to be a true reflection of what he has done for the entire nation of Israel in pardoning their sins, which should also be reflected by his people in pardoning the debts of others (Harrison 1980). God intended this jubilee legislation for both physical and spiritual liberty (Sider 2005:65).

Sider (2005:65) argued that God requires radically transformed economic relationships among his people because sin has estranged us from both God and one another. Individual egotism, structural inequality, and economic oppression are the results. God gave the Israelites the laws in order to protect the covenant community's poor, as Sider explained. Leviticus 25 describes God's desires regarding wealth and poverty (Sider 2005:67; Harrison 1980:223). Sider (2005:67) explains that because Israel was a holy nation, they had to focus their thoughts on God and his holiness and not on accumulating wealth for themselves, lest they become as materialistic as the surrounding nations. Therefore, the laws of Leviticus 25 serve as a check on the wealthy so that they do not increase their holdings at the expense of the poor (Harris 1994:160; Wright 1990:178). Tidball (2005) asserted that:

The entire year was to be characterised by the twin ideas of liberty and return. Freedom from labour and freedom from debt were to go hand in hand with restoring broken family ties and repossessing lost family property. The hope of returning to one's roots at the jubilee would sustain many who had fallen on hard times (p. 295).

God wanted His people to live in freedom as Tidball (2005:292) sees that the main purpose of the year of jubilee, outlined in Leviticus 25 is "to provide a way out for those who fell into debt.

Determining whether the Israelites ever put Leviticus 25 into practice is crucial. There is nowhere in the Old Testament where the jubilee year is mentioned explicitly. Tidball (2005:300), arguing that the concept of jubilee was never realized in the Old Testament, stated emphatically "absence of evidence is never evidence of absence."

Several passages in the Old Testament indicate that the principles of the jubilee year were implemented. While there are doubts as to whether the legislation for the jubilee year was ever implemented during the time of the Old Testament, the story of Nehemiah stands out as one of the few instances where the jubilee principles may have been implemented. King Cyrus issued a decree ordering the exiled Jews to return to Palestine (Ezra 1:1–11). The Israelites had to rebuild everything, including the temple and the city walls and gates. Nehemiah relates a story in which he himself petitioned King Artaxerxes to return to Palestine to rebuild the city's walls and gates (Neh 2:1–8).

After a period of being thwarted by their enemies, the returned exiles were engaged in the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls. However, their lives were threatened by something other than the city's physical structure. A financial crisis forced some Jews into slavery, while others mortgaged their homes. Chapter 5:1–5 records the problem and describes a classic illustration of the disparity between the wealthy and the poor, as well as the tendency of the wealthy to control circumstances so that they become richer while the poor become poorer, a trend that the laws of jubilee tended to curb. This was a case of pure exploitation, made worse by the fact that it did not occur between other nations and Jews. However, this occurred within the Jewish community among those who ought to have assisted one another.

The book of Ezra describes those who returned from exile with numerous material possessions. Ezra gave a record of their possessions, reporting in summary that they were fifty-four hundred articles of gold and silver (Ezra 1:11). (Ezra 1:11). Moreover, King Cyrus himself had opened his treasury and contributed to the articles of the Lord's Temple that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem (Ezra 1:7). Once in Jerusalem, a large number of Jews were either wealthy enough or had prospered enough to panel their homes, a once-royal privilege (Hag 1:4). When the Temple was finished, the people gave generously for its embroidery (Neh 7:71–72).

By the time of reaching Chapter 5, things had changed. There was a famine in the land as a result of the lack of rainfall, which caused the failure of crops. Another problem was also the King's taxation. While all these things were happening, the people's complaints were genuine. Nehemiah left the

peripherals behind and went to the heart of the problem. Barber (1991:89) says “Outward circumstances can easily be rectified, but unless the root cause is dealt with the problem will only recur.” After evaluating the circumstance, the thing that Nehemiah saw as the root was exploitation. The wealthier Jews had exploited the less fortunate to the point of reducing some to slavery (v5). Nehemiah confronted the wealthy Jews, saying, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?” (Neh 5:9).

Nehemiah reminded those wealthy individuals who were exploiting the poor that their actions were contrary to the God-fearing lifestyle. By this time, the phrase “the fear of the Lord” was very familiar to those who had returned from exile. It was the term used throughout the Torah and the Prophets to describe obedience to God’s commandments (Dt 6:13). It is assumed that Nehemiah pointed out that what these wealthy individuals were doing was contrary to the Old Testament. Almost certainly, he was referring to Leviticus 25:35; 39–41.

The measures taken by Nehemiah are identical to those in the jubilee legislation. Nehemiah demanded the immediate cancellation of all debts and interest owed, as well as the return of any property used for repayment. He demanded the abolition of loans secured by collateral (v. 10), which could so easily result in the loss of property and debt servitude. By doing so, he highlighted the essence of the jubilee law, which mandates equality among Israelites. By what he demanded of the people, he also demonstrated that within the community, generosity is preferred to personal gain.

The second place to investigate regarding the reference to the jubilee year’s principles is the book of Isaiah. It is evident that the Israelites had a difficult time adhering to the jubilee laws. However, God does not compromise His word. He does not alter what He has spoken because of our failure to keep His word. His word accomplishes the objective for which He sent it (Isa 55:11).

In Isaiah chapter 5, the prophet admonishes the wealthy for exploiting the poor by seizing their land. He cried out against the system of his day, “Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no space left and you are forced to live alone in the midst of the land!” (v8). What was transpiring was that the wealthy were endlessly expanding

their ownership of their homes and fields, thereby putting all land in danger of becoming theirs (Ridderbos 1985:70). In addition, this injustice contradicted God’s will, according to which the land was evenly divided among the Israelite tribes as their inheritance.

Israel was an agricultural nation, so acquiring more land meant depriving others of their means of subsistence. As a result, “a citizen’s legal independence and the fulfilment of his obligations to the Lord were both bound up with the possession of house and field” (Ridderbos 1985:70). The narrative of Naboth in 1 Kings 21 illustrates this point more vividly. This story illustrates the significance of fields in the lives of the Israelites. The exploitation of the wealthy by acquiring land unjustly led to God punishing the entire family of Ahab for taking Naboth’s field and life. In this passage of Isaiah, God threatens to destroy the people for their unjust accumulation of houses and fields (5:9). Isaiah also reminded them of their commitment to obey the law that God had given them. In this rebuke of the wealthy, the prophet had the jubilee legislation in mind. The land grab violated a fundamental principle of the Law of Moses. According to Leviticus 25:23, the land belongs to the Lord, and all His people should receive an equitable share of it. It is evident that these people became arrogant in listening to Isaiah or that they rationalized their actions (Isa 5:18–20).

Another passage in the book of Isaiah, which alludes to the laws of the jubilee, is Isaiah 61:1–4. In this text, the prophet reinterprets the jubilee year eschatologically:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’S favour and the day of vengeance of our God (*NIV*)

This passage illustrates the liberty principle that God intends for His people. For those who object to the practical aspect of the jubilee year in the Old Testament, this passage reveals that the jubilee year was an ideal to be realized by the coming Messiah (Webb 1996:234). The 61st chapter of Isaiah is about an anointed preacher who is charged with proclaiming the Lord’s year. Old Testament scholars agree that this passage refers to the jubilee year described in Leviticus 25. According to Leviticus, the jubilee

year was the year in which debts were forgiven, slaves were set free, and people who had been forced to sell their property were given it back. The anointed preacher's proclamation of liberty uses the exact same Hebrew as the command in Leviticus 25:10 (Webb 1996:234). In the context of this passage, this was the prophecy about the future of the Israelites after the exile. This prophecy was intended to encourage the Israelites in their particular circumstance. Their liberation from captivity and return to their homeland signified the Lord's favour. In this prophecy, the Israelites will find consolation and healing for their broken hearts and lives through the forgiveness of their sins.

According to the New Testament, at the beginning of His ministry in Galilee, Jesus Christ cited this passage and stated that its fulfilment had arrived in Luke 4. Regardless of what the jubilee represented in the Old Testament; its fulfilment is found in Christ Jesus (Col 1:17).

One of Minor Prophets' themes was social justice (Yilpet 2006:1049). This is found in the repeated word of judgment against the prevalent social injustice among Israel's children.

In Hosea 5:8–12, God threatens to annihilate Judah because of what they did in fighting for Benjamin's border (Carew 2006:1019). By forcibly annexing the territory of Benjamin, the kings of Judah attempted to extend their northern border. This was equivalent to moving boundary stones (5:10). Carew (2006:1019) stated that these stones denoted the extent of a family's land and that moving them amounted to land theft, which would deprive people of their means of subsistence. This is why the practice is severely condemned by God in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, as well as here.

In the time of the prophet Amos, Jeroboam had led the nation of Israel to great prosperity and prestige, largely through trade, agriculture, and the reclaiming of land from its enemies. However, its material triumph had been more than matched by spiritual tragedy, as the Bible says of Jeroboam's forty-one-year reign: "... he did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord" (2 Kgs 14:24). Amos drew attention to those who owned both a 'winter house' and a 'summer house' to others who had 'ivory houses' (Amos 3:15), to others who had constructed the "hewn houses" (5:11). This demonstrates how lavishly the wealthy lived at the expense of those who were struggling

financially at the same time. This way of life infuriated God because He disapproves of the exploitation of the poor (Blanchard 2012:77–79).

As evidenced by the preceding discourse, the primary objective of jubilee was to provide a means for impoverished individuals to escape their circumstances, thereby restoring their assets and dignity (Sider, 2005). The Year of jubilee, as initiated by God, can be argued to have been primarily motivated by the issue of poverty. This assertion finds support in biblical texts, specifically in Leviticus 25:8–13, which outlines the principles and objectives of the Year of jubilee. According to this passage, the Year of jubilee was intended to address economic disparities and alleviate poverty among the Israelites. Leviticus 25:8–13 states that during the Year of jubilee, the land was to be returned to its original owners, debts were to be forgiven, and slaves were to be set free. Malawi, a country in southeastern Africa, grapples with the pervasive problem of poverty, necessitating urgent attention and intervention (World Bank, 2020b; World Population Review, 2023; Marriot, Hamer & Coffey, 2018). The World Bank (2020b) highlights the significance of this issue, emphasising the need for comprehensive strategies to combat poverty in Malawi. Additionally, the World Population Review (2023) underscores the persistent nature of poverty in the country, further emphasising the urgency of addressing this challenge. Marriot, Hamer, and Coffey (2018) contribute to the discourse by shedding light on the multifaceted dimensions of poverty in Malawi, providing valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders. The Old Testament jubilee, with its principles of economic redistribution and social justice, presents a potential solution for addressing poverty in Malawi. The jubilee, as outlined in Leviticus 25, was a year of release and restoration that occurred every 50 years in ancient Israel. It involved the cancellation of debts, the return of ancestral lands, and the liberation of slaves. This concept of jubilee holds relevance for contemporary societies grappling with poverty and inequality. The jubilee's emphasis on economic redistribution is particularly pertinent to Malawi, a country plagued by high levels of poverty and income disparity. According to the World Bank, over half of Malawi's population lives below the national poverty line. The implementation of jubilee principles could help alleviate this issue.

Is the Old Testament jubilee relevant today?

Ongoing debate has surrounded the question of whether Leviticus 25 is still applicable today. Bergsma (2007:1) notes that the ancient Israelite jubilee has had a significant impact on the religious imagination of Jews and Christians. When one examines the African American spiritual tradition, the cultic calendar of the Catholic Church, and the writings of contemporary liberation theologians, the year of jubilee serves as the central symbol of spiritual and material freedom, as well as the motivation for striving to attain it.

Regarding the contemporary relevance of jubilee, however, there are some scholarly disagreements. Harbin (2011:698) and Lindsley (2015:64) have argued that the institution of jubilee in the Old Testament is no longer applicable today. Harbin (2011:696) argues, among other things, that there is no connection between an agrarian society in which all families owned land and were largely self-sufficient and today's highly integrated post-industrial society, in which many have few, if any, capital assets to lease out. Thus, the current concept of the "jubilee principle" is not a valid interpretation of the Old Testament institution because it violates hermeneutical principles of text interpretation (Harbin 2011:696). Chilton (1981:34) stated that there is no direct connection between Leviticus 25's sabbatical and jubilee laws and contemporary society. According to Scheffler (2013:7), Pentateuch does not present the law as having universal inclusive applicability, but rather as the laws that are to be obeyed within the context of Israel, which is conceptualised as a family. This statement by Scheffler implies that the sabbatical and jubilee laws of Leviticus 25 should never be interpreted outside the context of Israel.

However, scholars such as Sider (2005:73) and Bergsma (2007:1) argue that while there are no direct connections between the specific provisions of the year of jubilee and the modern technological society, the year of jubilee's principles are still relevant today. Barry (2011:895) concurs with Sider and Bergsma that the Old Testament concepts of the sabbatical and jubilee years are neither obsolete nor marginal aspects of the biblical canon. Rather, they are an integral part of the whole and one of the hermeneutical keys to understanding it. Therefore, they are still relevant today.

This study examines the enduring validity of the entire Old Testament, as Blomberg (1999:39) stated “every command [from the Old Testament] reflects principles at some level that are binding on Christians (2 Tim 3:16).” Therefore, Leviticus 25 is relevant to the extent that we can extract some principles and apply them to the present.

The application of jubilee principles to the church in Malawi to enhance poverty alleviation

The theological basis for establishing the laws of the jubilee year is found in Leviticus 25:23, where God says, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me.” The first principle that follows from this is that God is the ultimate owner of all property on earth. People should invest their assets (wealth) in God’s affairs. God graciously permits people to occupy the property for a time, but they are forbidden from using it to exploit the poor and amass great wealth for themselves. Kiuchi (2007) states:

In conformity with this, the institution of the jubilee year is designed to inculcate in the mind of the Israelites the realisation that they possess nothing in this world and that the land and its produce are only a gift from the Lord. In a true sense, this truth means that in the year of jubilee the Israelites are to return to the state they had when they were redeemed from the land of Egypt (465).

The second principle is community solidarity, which is expressed in the command “You shall not wrong one another” which appears twice in verses 14 and 17. God is protecting those who have fallen on hard times and had to sell their property to survive so that others do not bully them. This could easily undermine the “social foundations of Israel and their respect for one another as equals” if one were in debt (Hartley 1992: 424). God considers all His people to be equal, and He enacted the Laws of jubilee to ensure this equality among His people. It is evident from the laws of jubilee that God defends the cause of the disadvantaged and poor. He not only sympathizes with His people’s predicament but also provides them with a concrete means of escaping it. God is the One who prohibits the exploitation of others. Instead, He desires that all individuals demonstrate

compassion for one another. He is completely opposed to taking advantage of financially vulnerable individuals. At the time of the jubilee, the economic and social disparities that were leading to feudalism were to be restored to a decentralized, open balance.

Significantly egalitarian were the social consequences of the jubilee redistribution of land. Ideally, the jubilee legislation was intended to reduce a clearly defined social stratification and prohibit the landowners' exploitation of the poor. Reading the books of the major and minor Prophets, it is evident that the Israelites did not observe the jubilee law – if they did so at all. The prophets Isaiah and Amos, who served in the eighth century B.C., confronted the wealthy who exploited the poor with vehemence.

The third principle is that God desires his people to promote social justice. He disapproves of slavery among the brothers. In Malawi, many poor people are exploited by being forced to work hard jobs for long hours for very low pay, a practice condemned by James in the New Testament (Jas 5:1–6). This is wicked. God desires that justice prevail in the world (Amos 5:24). Although slavery was not abolished in ancient Israel, several laws were enacted to limit its impact. Exodus 21:2 records:

If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything (*NIV*).

When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh, he shall go out a free person, without debt (*NRSV*).

When someone in the ancient world went bankrupt, he was frequently forced to sell himself or his children into slavery to pay off his debts (cf. 2 Kgs. 4:1–7; Neh 5:5). So, it is stipulated that an Israelite who is so disadvantaged as to become a slave of another Israelite may be held for no longer than six years before being freed. In other words, he would not be a permanent slave in the strictest sense of the term, but rather would enter a temporary contract as a bonded labourer ('hired worker', *NIV* for a limited period of time (cf. Lev 25:39–43). This rule is quite distinct from the one that applied to foreign slaves, who were typically held for life (Lev 25:44–46).

When the Israelites escaped Egyptian slavery, they became a free nation. The Lord God granted this liberty, as the prologue to the Israelite constitution

recalls (Ex. 20:2). As a result, they were prohibited from oppressing the weak within their own society (Exodus 22:21-23:9) or enslaving fellow Israelites (Lev 25:38–42). Unfortunately, in both the ancient and modern worlds, there have always been those who sought to control and restrict others, thereby limiting their freedom. Freedom is one of the major themes of the sabbatical and jubilee years in the Bible (Merrill 1966:89). God's people should be able to enjoy the freedom he has granted them, and if this is not the case, steps must be taken to restore this liberty. Several related measures are associated with the holy year. The liberation of slaves and the provision of capital so that they could begin a new life as free men and women are among the most essential factors. Similarly, if debtors are unable to repay their debts by the time the holy year arrives, the debts must be forgiven so that they are relieved of a burden that it has become evident they cannot bear.

The integrity with which God regards the family and clan is shown where the property was to be returned to those who had sold it in order to preserve the integrity of Israel's family and clan structure. Inasmuch as the indebtedness had the potential to cause a rift between property and family, a debt-free state was required for the return and, by extension, the restoration of the original order of things. This is what Gane (2004) observed:

Not only does the land rest; it returns to its original owner. Not only do agricultural workers rest by not planting or harvesting; they return to their own clans and land. Not only does the economy rest; debts that have kept people under obligation claim them no more. This legislation stresses the desirability of economic self-sufficiency and the need to treat people undergoing economic hardship with kindness and respect (443).

The purpose of the jubilee year is to prevent the rich from becoming wealthier at the expense of the poor, who, in turn, become poorer. All the principles underlying the jubilee year have a strong connection to the principle of preventing the rich from becoming wealthier at the expense of the poor, who then become poorer. God intended the jubilee year to put a limit on people's avarice. Socialism asserts that nobody shall own property,

whereas the message of Leviticus is that nobody shall lose property. Chapter 25 of Leviticus is fundamentally about equality.

Lastly, the principle of providing the disadvantaged with opportunities for success. No one is permitted to be cruel to the poor. Instead of taking advantage of the poor, there should be means to give them a fresh start (Deyoung & Gilbert 2011:151). The jubilee laws went beyond merely providing reactive assistance (which might be called for in some circumstances). The jubilee provided opportunities for the poor. It provided them with access to land as capital. It provided them with new liberties. This was knowledgeable support. Instead of giving every poor person a handout, it is preferable to provide them with opportunities that make economic independence feasible. According to Deyoung and Gilbert (2011:152), “the year of jubilee didn’t do for the people what they needed to do themselves. But it gave the poor tribes, clans, and families another opportunity, by God’s grace, to make something of them.” Therefore, it is necessary to provide opportunities for the poor to flourish.

These principles show what God’s desire is for the poor in His word. They are timeless principles that can be applied to the poverty issue in Malawi. I was fortunate to be born and raised in Malawi. In 1993, I had the privilege of witnessing Malawi’s political transition from a one-party system to a multi-party system, or democracy, if you prefer. In 1994, I witnessed the removal of the so-called “Life President, Ngwazi Dr H. Kamuzu Banda” from office. After Kamuzu Banda, who ended British colonial rule in 1966, I have also had the honour of observing all the leaders who have succeeded him.

Despite having been independent for close to 60 years, an estimated 68% of Malawi’s roughly 20 million inhabitants live below the international poverty line of US\$1.90 per day (World Bank 2021b:254). Despite the efforts of the government, churches, and foreign aid, the situation in Malawi continues to deteriorate year after year. I have witnessed the Catholic Church, various mission organizations, non-governmental organizations, and numerous other organizations attempt to initiate anti-poverty programs without tangible success.

This article suggests that despite all these efforts, there has been a flaw in the way poverty has been addressed. While this article does not dismiss the

efforts that have been made to combat poverty in Malawi, it does propose a more effective strategy for poverty alleviation.

What is the issue with Malawi?

The above must be the initial question asked. The quickest response to this question will describe the physical causes of Malawi's poverty, such as its reliance on failing agriculture, inadequate education system, lack of minerals, and overpopulation. I concur that these factors do contribute to Malawi's poverty to some degree. However, we wish to use the jubilee principles as a stethoscope to examine the actual issues in Malawi.

I have identified two factors as the primary causes of poverty, not only in Malawi but in nearly the entire African continent. First, there is the problem of greed. How could you discuss alleviating poverty when the entire group of political leaders is consumed by greed? Those in positions of authority in the government exploit the poor and amass wealth for themselves. All Malawian presidents are the wealthiest individuals in the country. There have been court cases against the first democratic president, Dr Bakili Muluzi, for taking government funds for his own use. Professor Bingu wa Mutharika passed away with millions of dollars in his residence. The current government led by Dr Lazarus Chakwera is being accused of squandering government money through corruption (Chunga & Nedi 2022). Government ministers become wealthy within a month, so it is not surprising that they vie for positions in Malawi. Many Malawian politicians are not interested in nation-building, but rather in amassing wealth for themselves (Mbaku 2007:64). Consequently, corruption is associated with politics in Malawi. According to the World Bank (2018), endemic corruption is an obstacle to Malawi's economic development. Strasser (2016:309) asserted that research has demonstrated that corruption is institutionally entrenched, systemic, and escalating to the point that donor-driven legislative and institutional reforms were insufficient to eradicate or control it. The cash gate, maize gate, and jet gate are instances of high levels of corruption in Malawi, where, according to Strasser (2016:303–336), \$356 million in donor and taxpayer funds were stolen. Corruption in the political sector cannot be attributed to low pay or the need to support their families. Instead, avarice and a lack of ethical values are significant

motivators (Daka 2013:35; Myint 2000:40). As a result, many Malawians fell into poverty as donors withdrew budget support. It is disappointing to see that the Malawian government continues to engage in such conduct. While it is true that half of Malawi's population lives below the poverty line, it is also true that those who are wealthy are extremely wealthy, and the gap between the poor and the wealthy in Malawi is enormous. According to Marriot et al. (2018:5), Malawi is "stuck in a rut of unevenly distributed slow growth, where poverty and inequality are two sides of the same coin." The gap between the 10% of wealthy individuals and the 40% of chronically poor individuals continues to widen (Mussa 2017:4, Marriot 2018:5). Mussa (2017:4) notes that consumption inequality is increasing in Malawi. Comparing the richest and poorest 10% of the population reveals that the consumption of the richest 10% in 2004 was approximately 22 times that of the poorest 10%. In 2011, this number multiplied by thirty-four (Mussa 2017:4; Marriot 2018:5). The disparity between the rich and the poor in Malawi is staggering. According to Nkuna et al. (2018:13), Malawi's per capita Gini coefficient rose from 0.39 in 2004 to 0.45 in 2011. The purpose of this article is to provide a clear picture of how the church can effectively contribute to reducing poverty in Malawi. Beginning with programs that focus on material aid is not the best way to combat poverty in Malawi.

By examining the jubilee principles, we have discovered that God opposes social injustice among His people. In Malawi, a large proportion of the population lives in poverty due to oppression. For the church to effectively combat poverty in Malawi, it must address the issue of oppression. This is what the message of the minor prophets reveals. They dealt with social injustice sins but did not initiate poverty alleviation programs.

We then examine the issue of slavery in Malawi. The Thangata system, which required people to work on farms without pay, has been abolished in theory but remains in practice. Permit me to clarify what I mean. People without qualifications are accustomed to working, and their pay is equivalent to the cost of a bag of corn. How would you describe it? The result is that the poor become even poorer and have no hope of escaping their situations. Applying the jubilee laws in Malawi would necessitate closing the gap between rich and poor. If the wealthy in Malawi were to pay their servants a reasonable wage, I believe it would be a step in the right direction toward

alleviating poverty there. God is against exploitation in the jubilee laws, and the church can speak prophetically against the exploitation of the poor.

The Bible eloquently demonstrates God's compassion for the disadvantaged. In the Old Testament, God instituted the Sabbath, jubilee, and all other laws pertaining to the poor in order to ensure that the impoverished and marginalised members of society are cared for and not exploited. Given that human institutions and sin are largely responsible for Malawi's poverty, the church must take the initiative to find solutions (Magezi & Nanthambwe 2022:7).

How might the church achieve this? The church must primarily proclaim the gospel and combat Christian nominalism within the nation. Numerous individuals claim to be Christians, but their actions contradict this claim. The statement by Statham and Voeltz (2014:1) that "Christianity in Malawi is a river one mile wide and one inch deep" is accurate and sobering. A predictable correlation exists between sin and poverty (Kakwata 2016:273; Myers 2007:86; Wyngaard 2013:244). Sin exists not only on an individual level but also on a communal level. According to Mathole (2005:135), the experiences of the poor extend beyond their economic circumstances. Consequently, finding better economic solutions is not a guarantee that the problems societies are facing will be resolved. Therefore, the gospel cannot be limited to addressing only economic concerns. Instead, the gospel must holistically address all aspects of human existence (Nanthambwe 2020:125).

Second, the church should play a prophetic role in advancing social justice in Malawi by advocating for the voiceless. The church must publicly condemn vices such as avarice and corruption, which have impeded the nation's economic growth. Sider (2020:19) made a crucial point when he stated that because people have rebelled against God, they have become self-centred and have created unjust social structures that oppress the poor. Therefore, the church should support efforts to combat selfishness, which encourages all individuals to use their power for their own benefit.

Thirdly, the church should speak prophetically against the pervasive inequality in the nation. According to Marriot et al. (2018:5, the disparity between the rich and the poor in Malawi is not primarily due to natural causes). They result from institutional systems' exploitation or oppression of the impoverished. In this regard, the church must address issues of

pervasive inequality that exacerbate the plight of the poor and the socially disadvantaged.

Conclusion

The article provides an analysis of the potential application of the concepts of jubilee from the Old Testament to the context of Malawi, with the aim of improving poverty alleviation efforts. The article commences by providing an overview of the poverty context in Malawi. The data demonstrates the profound and widespread nature of poverty in Malawi. The subsequent section of the article engages in an analysis of the underlying objective behind the enactment of the Year of jubilee legislation. The initiation of the Year of jubilee can be attributed to God's compassionate regard for the impoverished. The relevance of the Old Testament jubilee in contemporary times is also discussed. The article begins by examining the significance of the jubilee principles from the Old Testament in relation to modern society. It then proceeds to explore how these ideas might be applied within the context of the church in Malawi, with the aim of improving efforts to alleviate poverty.

The article posits that the ideals of jubilee advocate for the provision of assistance to impoverished individuals within our society. Therefore, this article does not discourage the practice of benevolence. The church has historically been called to participate in acts of kindness, a vocation that dates back to the early church. This article expresses dissatisfaction with the programs implemented by churches in the context of poverty reduction, highlighting their inadequate efforts in effectively addressing the issue of poverty among less privileged individuals. Hence, the article effectively promotes the pivotal function of the church as a prophetic voice within the ecclesiastical landscape of 21st-century Malawi. This role is deemed vital in facilitating genuine emancipation for the populace, rather than mere illusions or fanciful notions.

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