

YAHWEH'S INJUNCTION ON WAGES IN DEUTERONOMY 24: 14-15 IN NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

This paper examines Yahweh's injunction on wages in Deuteronomy 24: 14-15 in the context of wages in Nigeria. After analyzing the text, the study surveyed the various uses of the word wages in the Old Testament and Nigeria. The study explored the issue of minimum and living wages in Nigeria. The method used for the study is historical. It was discovered that as it was in ancient Israel, it is in Nigeria today. Employers of labour in both contexts are involved in economic injustice, as evident by how they exploit their workers. A minimum wage represents the lowest legal remuneration employers can offer their workers, aiming to ensure a basic standard of living. In contrast, a living wage considers the actual cost of living, enabling individuals to meet essential needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare, thereby providing a dignified quality of life. Workers are usually not paid wages commensurate to the nation's economic reality. Many Nigerian workers, particularly in the informal sector, earn below this threshold, exacerbating poverty and economic disparity. This is why strikes or industrial actions have become a recurrent decimal among labour unions in Nigeria today. Church is to advocate for social justice, which includes fair wages and economic equity. The study concludes that adopting a living wage in Nigeria would align with biblical principles of justice and fairness and foster social stability, economic growth, and improved quality of life for workers.

Keywords: Minimum Wage, Living Wage, Nigeria, Economic Justice.

Introduction

Wages are a global phenomenon because every establishment and nation has condition of service for different categories of their staff. Wages are different from one organization to the other. While organizations pay their staff well, others pay theirs poorly. On the other hand, humans are to earn their living by doing what they do with their hands. It is clear from the biblical literature that God expects humans to work. This is why God told Adam to care for the garden. In ancient Israel, God was against sloth or laziness but always for

those who worked hard. In Nigeria, wages have become a serious matter. Government, workers and different organizations have engaged in debate at other times.

It is held in some quarters in Nigeria that most employers of labour are not fair to their workers in terms of the wages they pay them. This is why organized unions or labour unions in Nigeria strike actions. The wages paid to many workers in Nigeria are not proportional to the present economic realities. There have been agitations from many quarters that the minimum wage in Nigeria should be reviewed to improve her citizens' lives. Also, establishments in Nigeria should pay living wages and not minimum wages. This study examines the injunction of Yahweh on Wages in Deuteronomy 24: 14-15 in Nigeria. Historical and African Biblical Hermeneutics were used for the study.

Concept of Wages

A Wage is a regular amount of money a person earns, usually weekly, for work or services rendered (Hornby, 2015). In other words, it is money paid to an individual for a job done. This suggests that before the work or service is done, the employer and the employee must have talked and agreed on the amount to be paid. The employer and the employee fix wages. It is, therefore, the responsibility of both of them to fulfill their obligations. A minimum wage is the lowest remuneration employers can legally pay their workers, the price below which workers may not sell their labour. This wage is often set by governmental legislation to ensure employees' basic standard of living. According to the International Labour Organization, minimum wage laws aim to protect workers against unduly low pay and can help ensure fair competition among businesses (Wage Report 2020-21, ILO, 2021, 14).

In contrast, a living wage is the wage level that allows an individual or family to afford adequate shelter, food, and other necessities. The living wage goes beyond the minimum wage by considering the cost of living and ensuring that workers can meet their basic needs and live with dignity. It includes considerations like healthcare, education, and savings for unexpected expenses. The concept of living wage is not merely about survival but about enabling a decent quality of life (Anker, 2011).

The Bible provides a robust framework for understanding justice and fairness in the context of wages. For instance, Leviticus 19:13 states: "Do not defraud or rob your neighbour. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight" (NIV). This verse is a warning from Yahweh to labour employers. It explicitly condemns withholding wages from workers, emphasizing timely and fair compensation. The historical context of this command highlights the economic vulnerabilities of day labourers who depended on daily wages for survival. By ensuring prompt payment, this commandment upholds the dignity and rights of workers, preventing exploitation (Wenham, 267).

The Old Testament also contains laws to protect workers and ensure fair treatment. Deuteronomy 15:12-15 addresses the release of Hebrew enslaved people: "If any of your people—Hebrew men or women—sell

themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year, you must let them go free. And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. Supply them liberally from your flock, threshing floor, and winepress. Give to them as the Lord your God has blessed you" (NIV). This law mandates the fair treatment of servants, ensuring they are freed and provided with resources to start anew, reflecting God's justice and generosity. This passage underscores the principle of compassionate justice, recognizing the vulnerability of servants and the responsibility of masters to act with kindness and fairness. It highlights the importance of providing for the economic well-being of workers, ensuring that they are not left destitute upon the termination of their service. This approach aligns with broader biblical themes of social justice and the protection of the marginalized.

In the New Testament, the dignity of labour and the right to fair compensation are further emphasized. 1 Timothy 5:18 quotes the Old Testament, stating, "The worker deserves his wages" (NIV), affirming that labourers are entitled to their earnings as a matter of justice. This verse underscores the value of work and the ethical obligation to compensate workers fairly, reflecting God's justice. James 5:4 offers a stark warning against exploiting workers: "Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty" (NIV). This passage vividly illustrates the consequences of unjust labour practices, portraying withheld wages as a grievous injustice that calls for divine retribution. It emphasizes the moral gravity of fair compensation and employers' ethical responsibility to uphold workers' rights.

The concept of the Jubilee Year, outlined in Leviticus 25, represents a profound biblical principle of economic justice and social equity. Every fifty years, the Jubilee was a time of liberation and restoration, during which debts were forgiven, enslaved people were freed, and the land was returned to its original owners. This institution aimed to prevent the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few and to ensure that all members of society had the opportunity to start afresh, thereby promoting social and economic balance (Hartley, 1992). Leviticus 25:10 states: "Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and your clan" (NIV). This mandate highlights the biblical vision of a just society where economic practices are regulated to prevent exploitation and systemic poverty. The Jubilee Year is a radical call for economic justice, emphasizing the importance of periodic economic resets to maintain fairness and equity (North, 1990).

Several countries have implemented living wage policies that have significantly improved the economic well-being of workers. The Living Wage Foundation in the United Kingdom has been at the forefront of the living wage movement. The campaign, which started in 2001, aims to ensure that workers receive a wage that reflects the actual cost of living. By 2020, more than 7,000 employers, including major corporations, had committed to paying a living wage (D'Arc & Finch, 2017). The success of this campaign is

attributed to a combination of grassroots activism, public pressure, and collaboration with businesses and local governments.

In New Zealand, the living wage campaign has also seen significant success. The Living Wage Aotearoa New Zealand movement was established in 2012 and has increased, gaining support from both the public and private sectors. By 2019, several cities and over 100 employers had adopted the living wage standard, resulting in higher wages for thousands of workers (King & Waldegrave, 2012). The movement's success highlights the importance of strong advocacy and community support in driving wage reforms. The Fight for \$15 movement began in 2012 in the United States and has significantly driven higher minimum wages. Initially, The campaign focused on fast-food workers but expanded to include other low-wage sectors. By 2021, several states and cities had adopted a \$15 minimum wage, positively impacting millions of workers (McAlevey, 2016). The campaign's success demonstrates the power of organized labour and persistent advocacy in achieving wage increases.

Interpretation of Deuteronomy 24: 14-15

14 לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂק שִׂכִּיר עֲנִי וְאֶבְיֹן מֵאַחֲיָהּ אֹי מִגֵּרָה אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצְךָ בְּשַׁעֲרֶיהָ:
15 בְּיוֹמוֹ תַּמְּנוּ שְׂכָרָו וְלֹא־תָבוֹא עָלָיו הַשֹּׁמֵשׂ כִּי עֲנִי הוּא וְאֵלָיו הוּא נָשָׂא אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ וְלֹא־יִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ אֶל־הָהָה
וְהָיָה כִּהְיִיתָ חָטָא

(Deu 24:14-15 WTT)

"Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise, they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin" (NIV).

In verse 14, Yahweh's injunction begins with "Do not take advantage" or do not rob לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂק this suggests the possibility of cheating a person because they have nobody to fight for them. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight. This verse comprises two distinct but related prohibitions, each addressing critical aspects of social justice and economic ethics. Do not rob or exploit your neighbour because he is poor or powerless. The Hebrew phrase לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂק is generally translated as "do not oppress" or "do not defraud." This term encompasses a range of unjust economic practices, from deceptive business dealings to exploiting workers. Sarna emphasizes that this commandment is a broad prohibition against any form of economic injustice that harms one's neighbour (Sarna, 1989: 136). The second term, וְלֹא־תִגְזֹל, translates to "do not rob." While similar to oppression, this term specifically refers to taking something by force or deceit. Hartley notes that this term extends to all forms of theft and wrongful acquisition, underscoring the comprehensive nature of the prohibition against economic exploitation (1992).

In ancient Israel, the poor were marginalized and oppressed by the rulers and the rich because they had nobody to fight for them. The word שָׂכַר (¹kar) hire and שָׂכָר hire, wages שָׂכִיר (¹kîr) hired. מַשְׁכֶּרֶת (ma'kœret) wages are used for an agreed amount that is paid to an individual for the job or services rendered. The basic idea of the word is engaging the services of a person in return for pay or reward as agreed. It does not matter whether the one hired is an Israelite or not. The injunction suggests fairness for all and sundry. The various contexts in which this verb appears in Biblical literature add colour to the meaning. For instance, in 2Sam 10:6, 2Kings 7:6, 1Chr 19:6, and 2Chr 25:6, it is used to hire an army to help deliver from enemies. The word is used to employ skilled workers for a particular job (2Chr 24:12; Isa 46:6) or counsellors for advice (Ezr 4:5). Leah "hires" the privilege of sleeping with her husband, Jacob, by giving Rachel the mandrakes of Reuben (Gen 30:16). Balaam is hired to curse Israel (Deut 23:5; Neh 13:2) and thereby becomes an example of false religious leaders who proclaim a message for money (Jude 1:11). The Niphal indicates that one hires himself to another for a price (1Sam 2:5). The reflexive idea of receiving wages for one's work is found in Hag 1:6. The word occurs only in Isa 19:10 and Prov 11:18. The prophet Isaiah uses the phrase "those who work for wages" as a description of the working class. The writer of Proverbs uses the sure or certain wages of those who sow righteousness in contrast to the uncertain or disappointing recompense of the wicked (TWOT, 2264).

In verse 15, Yahweh said: "Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor" שָׂכָרוֹ וְלֹא-תְבֹאָה (Deu 24:15 WTT). This suggests that the wages should be paid so that the concerned persons can meet their daily needs. It also indicates that these persons לֹא הָיָה נִשְׂא אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹ (Deu 24:15 WTT) have no other means of income and as such their entire life depends on it. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight (לֹא-תִלֵּין). The directive לֹא-תִלֵּין פְּעֻלַּת שָׂכִיר אֶתְּךָ עַד-בֹּקֶר (פְּעֻלַּת שָׂכִיר אֶתְּךָ עַד-בֹּקֶר). The directive לֹא-תִלֵּין פְּעֻלַּת שָׂכִיר אֶתְּךָ עַד-בֹּקֶר is particularly concerned with the timely payment of wages. In the agricultural economy of ancient Israel, workers were often paid daily, and withholding wages could result in immediate and severe hardship. Wright explains that this law ensured that employers acted justly and with compassion, acknowledging the daily dependence of labourers on their earnings (1999: 142).

Yahweh continues that if they cry to God וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵיךָ (Deu 24:15 WTT) it will be counted as sin for the employer. This indicates the consequences of not paying wages when due are serious before Yahweh. To Yahweh, it is sin and oppression. That was why Yahweh took the pain to explain it to Israel. This injunction of Yahweh guides the nation in the best and most acceptable conduct of employers toward employees. Clines notes that this command underscores the ethical obligation to ensure workers receive their due without delay, reflecting a broader concern for justice and equity (1993).

In ancient Israel, labour relations were guided by principles aimed at protecting workers' rights and ensuring fairness. The economy largely depended on agricultural labour, with many individuals working as day labourers. Meyers notes that in such a subsistence economy, the prompt

payment of wages was crucial for daily survival. Any delay could lead to severe consequences for workers and their families (1988: 65). Deuteronomy 24: 14-15 directive aligns with other ancient Near Eastern laws, such as those found in the Code of Hammurabi, which similarly emphasized the importance of timely wage payment. Levine argues that these parallels indicate a shared cultural value placed on economic justice and the protection of labourers (1989). As mandated in Leviticus, the ethical treatment of workers is part of a broader covenantal framework that seeks to establish a just and equitable society. Matthews and Benjamin add that these laws were designed to reflect God's justice, ensuring that economic practices aligned with divine principles of fairness and compassion (1993).

Deuteronomy 24: 14-15 addresses social and economic ethics and has profound theological implications. Including these ethical mandates within the Holiness Code highlights that living a holy life involves just and fair treatment of others, particularly in economic matters. Hartley explains that the prohibition against defrauding and robbing one's neighbour aligns with the biblical command to love one's neighbour as oneself (1992). This connection emphasizes that true holiness is reflected in ethical conduct and social justice. Milgrom underscores that the ethical treatment of workers is a divine command integral to the Israelites' covenant relationship with God (Milgrom, 2000). This perspective reinforces the idea that holiness encompasses all areas of life, including economic interactions. By ensuring fair treatment of labourers, the Israelites were called to embody God's justice and compassion. Wright argues that these principles remain relevant for contemporary discussions on economic justice and labour rights. The ethical imperatives outlined in Deuteronomy 24: 14-15 challenge modern readers to consider how their economic practices reflect biblical values of justice and fairness.

This passage extends the obligation of fair treatment to all workers, regardless of their social or ethnic background, highlighting the universal applicability of justice in labour practices. It underscores the moral responsibility of employers to provide fair and timely wages, recognizing the critical dependence of workers on their earnings.

Yahweh's Injunctions on Wages in Deuteronomy 24: 14-15 in the Nigerian Context

With its vast population and diverse economy, Nigeria faces significant challenges in establishing fair wage standards. The National Minimum Wage Act of 2019 set the minimum wage at 30,000 Naira per month (Wage Act, 2019). However, this amount has been widely criticized as insufficient to meet the basic needs of workers, especially considering the high cost of living and inflation rates in the country (Olurounbi, 2021). Many Nigerian workers earn below the official minimum wage, particularly in the informal sector, which comprises a large portion of the economy. Research by Adeyemi (2020) indicates that over 60% of Nigerian workers earn below the poverty line, struggling to afford essentials such as food, housing, and healthcare.

Additionally, disparities in wage distribution are evident, with significant differences between urban and rural areas, and between various industries and sectors. The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) has been vocal in its advocacy for a living wage, arguing that the current minimum wage fails to provide workers with a decent standard of living. The NLC's position is supported by numerous studies highlighting the inadequacy of the minimum wage in addressing the economic realities Nigerian workers face. Addressing wage issues from a biblical perspective adds a moral and ethical dimension to the economic argument. The Bible emphasizes justice, fairness, and the dignity of labour, providing a framework for understanding the importance of fair wages. In the Christian tradition, economic justice is not merely a social or political issue but a spiritual and moral imperative. The Bible declares in Deuteronomy 24: 14-15:

Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise, they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin (NIV).

The command above is about timely payment of wages, emphasizing the importance of not withholding the pay of workers. In ancient Israel, daily wages were crucial for survival, as labourers relied on this income to meet their immediate needs. By ensuring that wages were paid promptly, the law sought to protect workers from exploitation and ensure their dignity and well-being (Wenham, 1979). This verse underscores several vital principles. Firstly, it emphasizes justice and fairness, as the directive not to oppress or rob a neighbour aligns with broader biblical themes of justice and equity, calling for fair treatment of workers and ensuring they receive what is due to them without delay. Secondly, it acknowledges the dignity of labour by mandating prompt payment, recognizing the value of the worker's labour and the importance of addressing their immediate financial needs. Thirdly, it reflects ethical conduct, highlighting a standard of behaviour that goes beyond legal obligations and underscoring the moral responsibility of employers to treat their workers justly.

In verse 14, the phrase "Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor" is significant in the Nigerian context. Like in ancient Israel, the rich and the government, the central labour employer in Nigeria, always take advantage of the poor. People with low incomes are exploited, cheated and dehumanized in their efforts to make two ends meet. The plight of Nigerian workers underscores the urgent need for living wage policies. Here are some real-life stories highlighting these challenges: Mary works in a textile factory in Lagos and earns a monthly national minimum wage of ₦30,000. Despite working long hours, she struggles to cover basic expenses such as rent, food, and transportation. Mary's situation is exacerbated by the high cost of living in Lagos, where housing and utilities are costly. She often has to take on additional jobs to supplement her income, which leaves her exhausted and affects her overall well-being (Eboh, 2019). Also, John is a security guard in Abuja and earns ₦45,000 monthly.

With this income, he supports his wife and three children. John struggles to pay for his children's school fees and healthcare expenses. The stress of financial insecurity takes a toll on his health and family life. John's story is common among low-wage workers in Nigeria, who often face similar economic pressures (Ekong & Ekong, 2016). Amina works as a domestic worker in a household in Kano. She earns ₦20,000 monthly, barely enough to cover her basic needs. Amina sends some of her income to her family in her home village, leaving her with even less. She has no access to social security or health benefits, making her vulnerable to financial crises in case of illness or other emergencies (Okeke & Ugwu, 2013). From the above examples, the employers of labour in Nigeria are taken advantage of by the workers or poor, and this is against the injunction of God.

Also, in verse 15, Yahweh commanded: "Pay them their wages each day before sunset because they are poor and are counting on it". This means that the workers are to be paid as when due. In the Nigerian context, some workers are owed salaries for months by their employers. Sometimes, it is not that they do not have enough money to pay. They withhold workers' wages for no cause. Besides, employers of labour in Nigeria have turned a deaf ear to agitations from workers to pay wages commensurate to economic realities. Implementing a living wage in Nigeria has the potential to yield significant economic and social benefits. Paying workers a living wage can boost economic growth by increasing consumer spending. Workers earning higher salaries have more disposable income to spend on goods and services, stimulating demand and driving economic activity (Dauda, 2019).

Additionally, higher wages can improve worker productivity and reduce turnover, as employees are more motivated and loyal to their employers (Hassan, 2018). A living wage can also play a crucial role in reducing poverty. Many Nigerian workers live below the poverty line due to inadequate wages. By ensuring that wages are sufficient to cover basic living expenses, a living wage can lift workers and their families out of poverty, improving their quality of life (Okafor, 2010). This can also positively affect public health and education, as families can better afford healthcare and schooling for their children (Nwagbara, 2011).

Economic inequality and poverty are significant sources of social unrest. A living wage can help address these issues by promoting a more equitable income distribution. This can lead to more excellent social stability and reduce the incidence of crime and violence, which are often driven by economic desperation (Ocheni, 201). In many cases; women are disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs. A living wage can help empower women by ensuring they receive fair compensation for their work. This can contribute to gender equality and enhance women's economic independence, allowing them to better support their families and communities (Olurounbi, 2021). Higher wages can also lead to better health outcomes for workers and their families. With increased income, workers can afford better nutrition, healthcare, and living conditions. This can reduce the prevalence of illnesses and improve overall public health. Moreover, the stress

associated with financial insecurity can harm mental health, which can be alleviated by ensuring fair wages (Adegoke, 2020).

Yahweh concluded that the consequence of defaulting on wages is that the poor may cry to God for justice, which will be considered a. The situation in Nigeria has made many poor people and workers cry. Today, not many Nigerians can afford three square meals in a day. Mark poverty is a stark reality in Nigeria today (Awojobi, 2021). The cost of living has gone up, and bills are becoming difficult to pay to ordinary citizens of this country. The rich are getting richer at the expense of the poor. It has become survival of the fittest as there appears to be an unending struggle among Nigerians to retain or gain advantages over fellow Nigerians (Abdullahi, 1986). The poor in Nigeria suffer materially, socially, culturally and politically (Abogunrin, 2001). The poor in Nigeria continued to cry to God for intervention.

The Church of Christ in Nigeria has a significant role in the matter under review. The Church has a strong tradition of advocating for social justice, including fair wages and economic equity. The Bible provides numerous teachings that call for justice, fairness, and care for the poor and marginalized, forming the basis for the Church's involvement in wage advocacy. Historically, the Church has been a significant voice in championing workers' rights. In the encyclical "Rerum Novarum," Pope Leo XIII emphasized the need for just wages, stating that workers deserve compensation sufficient to support themselves and their families in a reasonable and frugal comfort (1891: 34). This encyclical laid the groundwork for modern Catholic social teaching on labour and economic justice. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has been vocal about the need for fair wages in Nigeria.

CAN has consistently called on the government to ensure that workers are paid living wages, reflecting the biblical mandate for justice and the dignity of labour (2018: 29). The association has stressed that paying fair wages is not just an economic issue but a moral obligation rooted in Christian teachings (Akinyemi, 2019). Christian leaders and organizations have used various platforms to advocate for fair wages. For instance, Bishop Kukah has been a prominent voice in calling for social and economic reforms, including fair wages, through his speeches and writings. Similarly, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), with significant Christian membership, has partnered with church leaders to advocate for wage increases and better working conditions.

Conclusion

The exploration of minimum wage and living wage standards within Nigeria reveals significant socio-economic challenges that impact the quality of life for many workers. The current national minimum wage falls short of providing a basic standard of living, particularly in the context of high living costs and inflation. Disparities in wage distribution across urban and rural areas and various sectors compound this inadequacy. The biblical perspective on fair wages, as illustrated through the analysis of Deuteronomy 24: 14-15, emphasizes justice, fairness, and the dignity of labour. This ethical framework

supports the advocacy for a living wage and underscores the moral imperative for employers and policymakers to ensure fair compensation for workers.

A living wage in Nigeria could bring profound economic and social benefits. By aligning wages with the cost of living, workers would gain the financial stability needed to meet their basic needs and support their families, ultimately lifting many out of poverty. The potential increase in consumer spending from higher wages could stimulate economic growth, while improved worker productivity and reduced turnover could enhance business efficiency. Moreover, addressing wage inequality and ensuring fair compensation can contribute to social stability, gender equality, and better health outcomes. The role of Christian organizations and the Church in advocating for fair wages and learning from successful living wage campaigns in other countries highlights the collective effort needed to achieve economic justice in Nigeria.

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