

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**Between Religion and Agriculture: A Roadmap to Revamping
Nigeria's Economy**

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated "Between Religion and Agriculture: A Roadmap to Revamping Nigeria's Economy." Religion is meant to affect all facets of life both at the individual and community levels. This applies equally to the economy of nations including Nigeria as a sovereign state. Petroleum which has been Nigeria's mainstay economically over the past five decades has proved to be not a sustainable means of income to the country in recent times. With the fluctuation in oil price with its attendant nose-diving, Nigeria is bound to have a rethink over her means of economic stay. This informs the thrust of this paper which looks at revamping Nigeria's economy from a religious perspective. Using the creation accounts in Genesis Chapter one and two, this paper which looks at the original divine mandate given to humanity in the days of creation; it concludes that this economic mandate was agriculturally based. Hence, this paper, using the hermeneutical approach to the study of scripture and content analysis research methodology calls on all ecclesial bodies to promote the agricultural sector not only as of the way of revamping Nigeria's economy but as a positive response to the divine mandate. Apart from adding to the body of interpretations of the texts under review, the contribution of this paper to knowledge is its application of these texts to the Nigerian economy.

Keywords: Religion, Agriculture, Nigeria's Economy.

INTRODUCTION

George Santayana reminds us that those who fail to learn from the mistakes of their predecessors are destined to repeat them (Eleazu xvii), this may be a good pointer to the reflection of the Nigerian Economy from the Biblical perspective. By October 2015, Nigeria will be celebrating her fifty-five years of independence as a nation from Britain. Uma Eleazu rightly points out that, “At independence in 1960, Nigeria was number one in the production and export of palm produce and groundnuts, and second only to Ivory Coast in the production of cocoa...as well as agricultural products that contributed to the wealth of the country” (ix).

It is good to note that oil production started in Nigeria in 1958 and by the year 1970, Nigeria has become the 6th largest world producer of crude oil in the world, which thus made her a rich country. Paradoxically, fifty-five years down the line, Nigeria has remained a potentially rich country amid poverty. Economically, Nigeria cannot compete with those countries she was once at par with. One of the main reasons for this is that Nigeria has departed from the primary God-given potentials and assignment economically and is now heavily dependent on what was discovered only at the close of the first half of the twentieth century.

The market price of crude oil has dropped recently from \$65 per barrel to \$56 with even the threat by the United States of America proposing to see to it that it has gone down to \$25. The question is, with the present state of things in the crude oil sector, what is the hope for the Nigerian economy? Can religion proffer a solution to this nose-diving of the nation's economy? It is on this note that this paper proposes a synergy between religion and agriculture as the roadmap to revamping the Nigerian's ebbing economy.

By simple definition, agriculture is the —art, science, and industry of managing the growth of plants and animals for human use. In a broad sense, agriculture includes cultivation of the soil, growing and harvesting crops, breeding and raising livestock, dairying, and forestry (Microsoft DVD). Our reflection will pivot mainly at the cultural mandate in Genesis Chapters One and Two as the central point of discussion using hermeneutics and biblical exegesis as theories and content analysis as a research methodology.

THE CREATION ACCOUNTS AND AGRICULTURAL MANDATE

Our texts of consideration in this paper fall under the first book of the Hebrew Scripture whose title is Genesis coined from —the Latin Vulgate, which in turn is borrowed or transliterated from Greek LXX (Harrison and Hubbard 1). The name of the book, therefore, comes from the first word תְּשֵׁבֵת (Bereshit), which is simply the first word in the book. According to Harrison & Hubbard, —this follows the custom of

naming the books of the Pentateuch on either their first or two words or an expression near the beginning of the first verse(1). The Book of Genesis is not a scientific treatise about the beginning of creation, humanity, sin, God's dealing with humanity, etc., but a religious book, though not without raising some complex questions whose answers are too obscured for mortals to have.

The entire Book of Genesis deals with not only the history of the Jewish Patriarchs (12-50) but also gives the mythical origin of the world and the things therein (1-11). It sets the stage for the agenda of the world by laying the foundational principles therein. According to Benhard W. Anderson, the Jewish —patriarchs may have brought with them from their Amorite homeland some of the traditions that were later transformed and incorporated into the religions now found in the first eleven chapters of Genesis (29), and the story of the Creation was part of this tradition. Lawrence Boadt points out that, “the Israelites were no different from other ancient people around them. Even the order of creation is very similar to the Babylonian account of creation, which we call *Enuma Elish*.” (116).

There are two different records of the account of creation in the Book of Genesis – the Priestly account (1:1-2:4a) and the Yahwist account (2:4b-25). These accounts of the origin-stories are not peculiar to the Hebrew people. Hence Hook reiterates that “in the early literature of Egypt, Babylon, and Canaan, and indeed among most so-called primitive people, similar stories are to be found, purporting to give an account of the beginning of things” (Hook 177). Such stories are mythical not history – myth doesn't profess to be the record of events that happened in a particular place and time. It represents “a kind of truth which cannot be expressed in historical categories” (177). Though these accounts look different in detail they press home the same points when synchronized, a case in point is the mandate given to humankind in respect of what should be human being's relationship to the economy.

ANALYSIS OF THE TWO CREATION ACCOUNTS

In the account of creation in Genesis Chapter One, creation was completed in six days comprising of evening and morning each day. The first three days were used for the creation of the aquatic, aerial, and terrestrial spaces respectively, while the next three days (i.e. day four to six) were used in ornamenting each of these spaces. Hence on the third day, the dry ground which was called land appeared and the vegetation was produced – “seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds” (v.12), while on the sixth day, “the land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds.” (v. 24). This was the agricultural setting that God put in place before the creation of human beings. Worthy of note is the fact that, immediately

after setting this agricultural scene, God created human beings and gave them instruction to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground and gave them every green plant for food (vv. 28-30)

A clear understanding of the creation account as put forth by the Priestly source (1:1-24a) shows that the creation of human beings has a direct bearing with agriculture. That must have accounted for human beings not being created until there was vegetation. Worthy of note is the fact that we are expected to eat from the produce (agricultural produce) from the land. Turning to the creation account by the Yahwist source (2:4b-25), it is glaring that there was no agricultural activity until (אָדָם 'adam) was created. It was Yahweh's intention not to allow the agricultural process to begin because there was no one to till the earth (v. 5). The later part of the account puts it that, (אָדָם 'adam) was placed in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (v.15). On this note, David Atkinson explains that —the Garden is a park of trees, and the man is the park keeper. He is God's estate manager. His task is 'to till and to guard' (2:15) that is: to cultivate and protect" (60). Apart from the task of tilling and guarding the garden, the main source of human livelihood was expected to be from the garden. Hence he was to eat from the trees in the garden (v. 16).

From the foregoing, it means that creation, human sustenance, and livelihood are all tied to agricultural pursuit. God's intention for humanity's sustenance was primarily from the land and precisely from agricultural pursuit. This is even seen when God declared judgment on Adam after the fall, Adam was still expected to eat from the plants of the field (Gen. 3:18) and the expression 'thorns and thistles' are farming expression. The first children of Adam and Eve were agriculturally oriented beings dealing with farming and husbandry – Cain being involved in farming while Abel was involved in husbandry. Hence, agriculture was not just Adam and Eve's mainstay economically, but that of the succeeding generation of God's covenant community.

RELIGION AND AGRICULTURE IN THE BIBLE

In the Bible, the record of agricultural pursuits as noted earlier in this work began with the mandate given in the Garden of Eden to "till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). The Israelites seem to have had a repeated pattern of nomadic or semi-nomadic shepherd's lifestyle, moving into the arable land around the Mediterranean area and taking up agricultural occupations. Apart from the Rechabite's family (Jer. 35:6-10), the societal pattern of Israelites' life reflected that of a farming community. Hence, J. A. Patch & C. E. Armerding aver that,

It is most significant, however, that from earliest times the pattern of Israel's religious observances (cf. Ex 23:14-16; Lev 23) is based on an

agricultural rather than a nomadic and pastoral calendar. The basis of society was clearly dependent on the cultivation of crops, and every major success or failure — religious, military, or economic — was tied up in some way with this fact (DVD).

In the same vein M. G. Easton points out that, —after the Israelites entered into the possession of the Promised Land, their circumstances favoured in the highest degree a remarkable development of this art (i.e. agriculture). Agriculture became indeed the basis of the Mosaic commonwealth.”(DVD). Worthy of note is the fact that the biblical references to the methods of agriculture bear a close similarity to that of our present age — grain growing, care for vineyards, orcharding, and raising of flocks. Some families owned fields (farmlands) and richer ones also went into the raising of livestock. The description of biblical Job (Job 1) shows that he was engaged in all these levels of agriculture. The recording of king Hezekiah's wealth in 2Chron 32:27- 29 also shows that he must have ventured into all these branches of agriculture. Hence the description of his wealth thus,

Hezekiah had very great riches and honor, and he made treasuries for his silver and gold and his precious stones, spices, shields, and all kinds of valuables. He also made buildings to store the harvest of grain, new wine and oil; and he made stalls for various kinds of cattle, and pens for the flocks. He built villages and acquired great numbers of flocks and herds, for God had given him very great riches. (NIV)

In the overall scheme of Israelites' economy and religious life, agriculture played a pivotal role to the point of not just having agricultural laws but as J. L. Kelso and F. N. Hepper rightly put it that, The Levitical laws of Moses laid down certain agricultural principle... and these were often sound agricultural principles for soil conservation, e.g. fallow in the seventh year (Lev 25), or social reasons, e.g. having the residual grain for the poor to glean (Lev 23:22) and for the covenant people of God(20).

Apart from the Levitical principles, there were agrarian laws relating to landed property and cultivated land, including laws concerning the preservation of soil, regulation of irrigation, and protection rights concerning landed property. The agrarian laws in the Old Testament form a very important part of biblical institutions. Despite the opinion that these institutions and the agrarian laws are of a later date, their antiquity must be upheld. They are linked in biblical sources to the oldest parts of legal jurisprudence. In this sense, Jewish festivities were intrinsically tied to agriculture; hence the Sabbath, Pentecost, first-fruits celebration and some other feasts were all agricultural. It is on this note that if God's laws were kept, there was the certainty of productivity in the agricultural sector, if not drought and consequently famine was imminent as evident in the writings of the prophets.

What accounted for such an interest in agriculture by the Jewish community to such an extent that Howard F. Vos opines that, the people "grew their food on the soil and exchanged the surplus for metals, timber, and other things they could not produce"(8). This assertion is not only true in regards to the old Jewish community, but to the current state of Israel which has agriculture as one of her economic mainstays apart from tourism. It is axiomatic that,

The earliest Zionist settlers in Palestine viewed agriculture as a key ingredient of successful colonization, for meeting food needs and for fostering an ideological bond between Jews and the land. Since independence, the Israeli government has promoted agriculture to attain self-sufficiency and to provide new immigrants with food and employment. Between 1948 and the late 1990s the land area under cultivation has almost tripled, in large part because of modern irrigation, mechanization, and other technologies. (Bernard DVD)

What really accounts for the Jewish involvement in agriculture as one of their major source of the economy? Understanding this principle which is based on the creation of accounts in Genesis Chapters One and Two can help the Nigerian economy in a time like this.

BRIEF REVIEW OF NIGERIAN ECONOMY

In the late 1950s when crude oil was discovered in commercial quantity in Nigeria, the economic mainstay of the country was changed from the traditionally based agriculture and trade to crude oil. From the late 1960s to 1970s, the petroleum industry in Nigeria was so strong that it increased the export earnings of the country thereby allowing massive developments in the country. On the other hand, other economic sectors like agriculture suffered great setbacks. Given Nigeria's dependents on crude, her gross domestic product (GPD) varies widely, depending on the oil market. Example of this could be seen in the figure presented as follows, "\$81 billion in 1985, \$33.2 billion in 1994, \$40.5 billion in 1996, \$112.25 billion in 2006, \$208.06 billion in 2009, \$169.48 billion in 2010, and the latest being \$522.64 billion in 2014"(Trading Economics). —In 2006 Nigeria's GDP per capita was only \$797, among the lowest in the world and well below the average for sub-Saharan Africa."(Stock DVD).

The poor have been especially hard hit by Nigeria's economic problems, notably by the devaluation of the currency, which makes basic imported goods, such as food, more expensive. Cutbacks in services and increases in fees for services have become the norm in the country and this to a great extent has affected the economy negatively. This is because, for some years now, Nigeria has been running a seemingly mono-product economy.

AGRICULTURE AND OIL IN NIGERIA

With the discovery of oil in Nigeria, agriculture suffered a great setback. Groundnuts, cocoa, palm product, rubber, cotton, etcetera, which were the main agricultural products of the country went on a recession. Currently, with the drastic reduction in the price of crude oil in the international market, the discovery of alternative power supply in solar energy and the likes, the drying up of commercial oil wells in Nigeria, e.g. —Oloibiri oil well shows that it is already dried up, after only 50years of continuous production (Patrick Erhabor 3), there is need for Nigeria to redirect her economic potentials to some other sectors apart from the oil since the crude oil is non-renewable.

It is good to note that over the years, successive Nigerian governments have been involved in various developmental initiatives and programmes as a way to improve the standard of living in the country. This includes (but not limited to) the following, National Accelerated Food Production (NAFP), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Agricultural Development Programme (ADP), Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme (ACGS), National Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA) and recently Agricultural Transformation Action Plan (ATAP) which is aimed at revolutionizing the agricultural sector within the shortest possible time, and thus maximize the full potentials of the agricultural sector for the overall economic growth and development on the country.

AGRICULTURE AND NIGERIA'S ECONOMY – THE WAY FORWARD

With the foregoing, there is already a shift from crude oil back to the agricultural sector in the Nigerian economy. What should be the response and role of religion in this all-important economic transformation plan which is geared towards revamping the crumbling economy of the nation? This brings us to the point of maintaining that agriculture and religion have been equally yoked fellows from time immemorial, especially in Africa where gods are tied to nature and have to be appeased/consulted before and after each farming season. Looking at the above issue, the Nigerian economy needs to learn from the agricultural mandate given to humanity at the creation which was carried out by the covenant people in the Bible till the modern Israeli nation of 1948. This is then a call on Nigeria to go back to agriculture as her mainstay of the economy and not depend on the oil sector with its attendant downward economic slope. The various ecclesial bodies in the country should be at the forefront of calling and encouraging the nation to go back to agriculture. Agriculture will not only generate export products for the country but will be locally self-sustaining to both citizens and foreigners in the country.

Agriculture now should not be business as usual, because if not the socio-economic situation in the nation will continue and will get worse if we continue to navigate the same "old map" we have been operating from mechanistic paradigm developed centuries ago" (Godfrey 1). It should be new wine in a new wineskin, there is a need for a new road map, a new compass to navigate the agricultural sector in the nation to enhance the national economy. Ecclesial bodies should teach on this divine mandate, encourage their members to be actively involved in the agricultural sector. Churches should encourage their members to go back to the villages where there are adequate farmlands and engage in large scale agriculture instead of bringing them to the town in the name of promising them miracles and financial breakthroughs; instead of preaching messages of witchcraft infiltration in the villages, thereby scaring members from going to the villages, the power of God over the works of darkness should be proclaimed and the people encouraged to go back to their villages and engage in large agriculture as a response to God's creation mandate.

On the other hand, instead of building edifices in the name of worship centres, churches can re-direct their finances into agricultural projects as part of supporting the government's venture in this direction. In this way, the churches will be partnering with the government and non-governmental bodies to revamp the agricultural sector of the economy. Agriculture should be plowed into using new technological know-how with the mind of not only using agricultural products locally but as one of the major exports of the country. On the theoretical aspect, the church's theology should be extended to cover environmental issues. The churches' emphasis on Systematic theology which is more of indoctrination of her confessions, pastoral theology, ecumenical theology, third world theology, etc., should be broadened to include environmental theology – not just as an elective course, but a foundational and introductory part of to be made compulsory. The curriculum should be well crafted to handle the usage and maintenance of the eco-system in which Agriculture with its relevant sub-themes are explored to enhance adequate knowledge in this dimension. This will become a blessing to the entire nation at the end.

CONCLUSION

Agriculture is a divine economic mandate given to humanity right from creation. If properly harnessed using new technological know-how, it will revamp Nigeria's economy. The ecclesial bodies using the scripture as the basis should teach, encourage and participate fully in the agricultural sector not only as a way of revamping Nigeria's economy but as a positive response to God's creation mandate to humanity.

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