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**THE DILEMMA OF THE CHURCH AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
IN LAND DISPOSSESSION TO ISLAM: RECLAIMING GENESIS
2:15 (AVAD AND SHAMAR) AS A COVENANTAL THEOLOGY
OF FIDEICOMMISSUM FOR THE SURVIVAL OF ETHNIC
NATIONALITIES**

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Abstract

The paper aims to present a biblical paradigm for leadership selection grounded in Deuteronomy 17:14–15, which explicitly commands Israel to appoint “one from among your own brothers” as king and prohibits the enthronement of a foreigner. Drawing from the creational mandate in Genesis 2:15 — where humanity is commanded to “work” (avad) and “keep/guard” (shamar) the land — the study argues that responsible Christian political engagement in Nigeria must be rooted in these foundational texts. The Church, as an extension of biblical Israel, bears a theological responsibility to steward the land and influence governance in alignment with God’s covenantal principles rather than secular or pragmatic considerations. The paper critiques the Nigerian Church’s historical missteps, particularly in the 2015 and 2023 elections, where support for non-indigenous leadership contributed to the erosion of Christian voice, indigenous land rights, and security, turning farmlands into sites of violence. This study examines the theological and socio-political dimensions of territorial governance by contrasting biblical land models with contemporary political realities. The paper, in referencing Walter Brueggemann (2002), would help to encourage Nigerian Christians and indigenous people that Nigerian future elections must view land as a divine gift to be nurtured

*through covenant memory and stewardship by electing their own who understands land covenant relationship. The study urges Nigerian Christians and indigenous communities to urgently recover these biblical mandates in their political theology and electoral decisions. By embracing Genesis 2:15 and Deuteronomy 17:14–15 as guiding principles for leadership selection, the Church can fulfill its missional calling to occupy and steward the land faithfully until Christ's return (Luke 19:13), ensuring governance that honors God's design for His people and their inheritance. This biblical approach offers a prophetic alternative to prevailing political patterns and calls for renewed theological education among Christian politicians and voters. To prevent further disenfranchisement, the Church and indigenous communities must actively educate the electorate and Christian politicians on biblical paradigms of leadership selection, ensuring chosen leaders are committed to preserving the community's territorial and covenantal heritage. Looking at the contemporary Nigerian state, the study argues that the Christian electorate's failure to apply these biblical benchmarks in the 2015 and 2023 general elections resulted in severe political marginalization and widespread territorial insecurity. The persistent loss of land and political autonomy among indigenous communities and Christian populations often stems from a deficient theological understanding of land stewardship. Historically rooted in Judaism, the Christian Church possesses a foundational mandate—expressed through the Hebraic concept of *shamar* (Genesis 2:15)—to actively manage, guard, and govern territorial spaces rather than treating land as a merely secular concern.*

Keywords: Church, indigenous peoples, Islam, Genesis, covenantal theology, fideicommissum, ethnic nationalities

Introduction

The historical trajectory of human governance and territorial stewardship begins with the divine assignment in Genesis 2:15, where humanity was placed in the Garden of Eden to "work" (*avad*) and "keep/guard" (*shamar*) the land (Beale, 2004; Brown et al., 1906/2000; Walton, 2001). As early Old Testament traditions show, this Edenic mandate was never a simple agrarian directive, but a foundational covenantal framework in which land serves as a sacred trust, a meeting place with God, and a proto-temple requiring active service and vigilant protection (Beale, 2004; Davidson, 2015; Wenham, 1987). Throughout biblical history, from the patriarchs to the establishment of Zion, Israel's covenant relationship with God was intrinsically bound to its relationship with the land as a divine gift rather than a mere secular commodity or coercive possession (Brueggemann, 2002; Habel, 1995; Wright, 1990). Within this Hebraic paradigm, the dual principles of *avad* (generative service, labor, and worship) and *shamar* (protective custody, boundary maintenance, and institutional vigilance) established the structural architecture for ordered human society (Abarim Publications, 2014; Beale, 2018). This biblical framework of deliberate, communal guardianship finds a notable political analogue in classical antiquity, specifically within the administrative structures of the Greek *polis*, where democratic citizenship and rotating public offices served as a secular attempt to institutionalize a shared keeping (*shamar*) of the political realm (Clement, 1936).

However, historical developments demonstrate that whenever covenantal communities neglected this dual mandate—treating land as a disposable asset or adopting a purely quietist, "pilgrim" spirituality that detached faith from territorial responsibility—they suffered severe political, cultural, and territorial erosion (Brueggemann, 2002; Katongole, 2011; Wright, 2006). This pattern of territorial loss is vividly illustrated in the historical decline of major early Christian heartlands under successive waves of Islamic expansion. In North Africa, Alexandria, Libya, and Nubia, once-vibrant Christian civilizations that produced foundational theologians like Athanasius, Cyril, and Augustine gradually lost demographic dominance, institutional continuity, and control over their ancestral lands (Adams,

1977; Frend, 1979; Ibrahim, 2020; Lapidus, 1988). Similarly, in Anatolia (modern Turkey), the progressive Seljuk and Ottoman conquests systematically dismantled Byzantine ecclesiastical infrastructure, culminating in the 1453 fall of Constantinople and the conversion of the iconic Hagia Sophia into a mosque—a stark symbol of sacred space and political dominance being transferred away from Christian custodianship (Morris & Ze’evi, 2019; Runciman, 1965; Vryonis, 1971). These historical collapses underscore how internal theological amnesia, coupled with a failure to guard the physical and institutional boundaries (*shamar*) of the community, inevitably leads to disenfranchisement and exile (Brueggemann, 2002; Kim, 2010).

In contemporary times, this historical dynamic resurfaces in multi-ethnic and multi-religious contexts such as Nigeria, where Christian populations and indigenous communities face widespread territorial insecurity, land dispossession, and political marginalization (Kukah, 1993; Suberu, 2001; Turaki, 1997). The persistent failure of the contemporary Church to integrate land governance into its core theological and missional frameworks has left farmlands vulnerable to violence and communities displaced (Gifford, 1998; Ojo, 2006; Turaki, 1999). This vulnerability was further compounded in the 2015 and 2023 Nigerian general elections, where the Christian electorate disregarded the biblical benchmark for leadership selection articulated in Deuteronomy 17:14–15—which prohibits the appointment of a foreigner and mandates selecting a leader from "among your own brothers" who shares the community's covenant memories and land ethic (Wright, 1996). In response to these ongoing crises, a recovery of Genesis 2:15 (*avad* and *shamar*) offers an urgent covenantal theology of *fideicommissum*—a trust held for future generations—calling communities to active stewardship, legal vigilance, intergenerational education, and political discernment to ensure the survival and flourishing of ethnic nationalities until the ultimate fulfillment of God's dwelling with humanity in the new creation (Beale, 2004; Brueggemann, 2002; Luke 19:13; Revelation 21:1–4; Sailhamer, 2011).

The history of the old city began with God’s intention to create land and designate a garden in the east of Eden, which became, in modern geographical discipline. Several scholars posit that this was a foreshadowing of the temple concept, a place where Yahweh Elohim would interact with his followers (Beale, 2004; Walton, 2001). We must remember that when the Garden of Eden was created, Adam was given the task to “Tend” and “Keep” this garden. The words translated as Tend and Keep are *Avad* and *Shamar*. The word *Avad* comes from the root word that is primarily translated as “Work,” “Worship,” and “Service” (Brown et al., 1906/2000; Strong, 1890), while the word *Shamar*, although easily translated as “keep” or “guard” essentially carries the connotation that one must “keep” or “guard” that which has been entrusted to him/her with so much care, that nothing wrong or evil happens to it (Abarim Publications, 2014; Brown et al., 1906/2000). Even when Adam fell, the Garden was not destroyed; rather, Adam was driven out of the Garden, and subsequently, he lost his physical meeting place with God. To understand the relationship between God, humanity, and creation, this treatise begins by exploring Walter Brueggemann’s land theology.

Walter Brueggemann’s Land Theology: An Exploration

Walter Brueggemann, a prominent Old Testament scholar and theologian, has made the theme of “land” one of the central foci of his work. His seminal book, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (first published 1977, revised 2002), argues that land is not merely a backdrop to the biblical narrative but a primary category of biblical faith — arguably the central theme alongside or even surpassing covenant (Brueggemann, 2002; Habel, 1995).

For Brueggemann (2002), the biblical story is fundamentally a dialectic between landlessness (wilderness, exile, rootlessness) and landedness (possession, promise, gift). Land represents:

- Rootedness and identity — a place of belonging, security, and covenantal life (Brueggemann, 2002).

- Fertility and life — the physical source of blessing, abundance, and community (Brueggemann, 2002).
- A profound theological symbol that addresses both ancient Israel's experience and modern issues of dislocation, consumerism, and anxiety (Brueggemann, 2002).

Key Dynamics: Gift vs. Possession

One of Brueggemann's (2002) most influential distinctions is between land as gift and land as possession:

- **Land as Gift:** The land is given by Yahweh unconditionally as promise (to the patriarchs) but held conditionally upon covenant obedience (Brueggemann, 2002; Wright, 1990). It is never fully "owned" by Israel; it belongs to God. Israel is a tenant or steward. Management of the land must reflect covenant values — justice for the poor, widow, orphan, and stranger; Sabbath observance; rejection of idolatry and exploitation (Brueggemann, 2002).
- **Land as Possession:** When Israel (especially kings and elites) treats land as a commodity to be grasped, accumulated, or controlled through power, coercion, or royal bureaucracy, it leads to injustice, syncretism, and ultimately land loss (exile) (Brueggemann, 2002). Examples include Ahab and Jezebel's seizure of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) and the prophetic critique of those who "join house to house and add field to field" (Isaiah 5:8; Micah 2:1–2; Brueggemann, 2002).

This tension runs throughout Israel's history:

- Landlessness → Promise (Abraham, Egypt/wilderness) (Brueggemann, 2002).
- Landedness → Risk of Loss (monarchy, where kings often act like the surrounding nations) (Brueggemann, 2002).
- Loss (Exile) → New Possibility (Jeremiah and Ezekiel see exile not as the end but as a creative space for renewal and return to covenant faithfulness) (Brueggemann, 2002).

Brueggemann (2002) highlights that periods of landlessness (wilderness, exile) were often the most formative for Israel's faith, fostering dependence on God rather than self-sufficiency.

Relevance to Leadership and Governance (Deuteronomy 17 Context)

In relation to the document provided earlier, Brueggemann (2002) emphasizes that legitimate kingship in Israel must be consistent with the character of the land as gift. A true Israelite king:

- Comes from "among your brothers" (Deut 17:15) — one nurtured in Israel's covenant memories (barrenness to birth, slavery to freedom, hunger to manna) (Brueggemann, 2002; Wright, 1996).
- Views power through the lens of gift and task, not coercion or control (Brueggemann, 2002).
- Manages the land to enhance covenant life rather than reduce people to slaves or treat territory as a personal possession (Brueggemann, 2002).

This aligns directly with the biblical paradigm against appointing a "foreigner" whose worldview and land ethic differ from Israel's covenantal one (Wright, 1996).

Broader Implications

- **Theological:** Land theology calls for a life of faithfulness, justice, and gratitude (Brueggemann, 2002). It counters modern "rootlessness" caused by mobility, technology, and consumerism.
- **Ethical/Political:** Possession without covenant leads to exploitation (Brueggemann, 2002; Habel, 1995). Brueggemann applies this critically to issues of power, including modern conflicts over territory, though his views on contemporary Israel/Palestine distinguish biblical Israel (covenant people) from the modern nation-state.
- **New Testament:** The pattern continues in Jesus — the meek inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5); Jesus embodies the true "place" of God's presence; the church experiences a form of spiritualized "landedness" in Christ while living as sojourners (Beale, 2004; Wright, 2006).

Why It Matters Today

Brueggemann's (2002) work challenges the Church (especially in contexts like Nigeria) to recover land theology as a doctrinal and missional priority (Katongole, 2011; Turaki, 1999). The paper encourages or urges believers to engage politics and stewardship not through raw power or ethnic exclusion for its own sake, but through covenant faithfulness: electing and supporting leaders who treat land and people as divine gifts to be guarded (*avad*), worked (*shamar*), and shared justly. The details of the exegetical analysis of these two Hebraic words are explained below:

Hebraic Meanings of *Avad* (עָבַד) and *Shamar* (שָׁמַר)

In Genesis 2:15, Yahweh Elohim places the man in the garden of Eden “to work it and keep it” (ESV) or “to dress it and to keep it” (KJV). The Hebrew verbs are *‘ābad* (*avad*) and *šāmar* (*shamar*) (Brown et al., 1906/2000).

Avad (עָבַד) primarily means “to work,” “to labor,” “to till,” or “to cultivate” (Brown et al., 1906/2000; Strong, 1890). It also means “to serve” (as a servant or subject) and, in theological contexts, “to worship” or “to serve God” (Brown et al., 1906/2000). The related noun *avodah* denotes labor, service, or liturgical ministry. *Avad* (עָבַד) from a Hebraic perspective, *avad* is a rich root whose core idea is to work, labor, till, cultivate, serve, or be a servant (Brown et al., 1906/2000). It is used for agricultural labor (tilling the ground, Gen. 2:5; 3:23; 4:2), for service rendered to a human master or king, and—crucially—for religious service and worship of God (Brown et al., 1906/2000). When directed toward God, *avad* describes joyful, liberating service rather than bondage (Exodus 3:12; Psalm 22:30). In priestly texts it refers to the service of the tabernacle and temple (Numbers 3:7–8; 8:25–26; Beale, 2018). The same verb describes Israel's forced labor in Egypt and the priestly service of the Levites in the tabernacle/temple. Derivatives include *‘ebed* (servant/slave/worshiper) and *‘ābōdā* (service, labor, or cultic worship) (Brown et al., 1906/2000). Thus, *avad* inherently joins productive work, devoted service, and worship; the object of the verb determines whether the service is agricultural, social, or sacred.

Avad as Functional Service and Cultivation

Avad supplies the active, generative dimension. It is the work that improves, serves, and orients life toward God and neighbor.

- **Worship – Altar / Temple / Church:** The primary theological meaning of *avad* as service/worship finds institutional expression in the gathered people of God (Beale, 2004; Wenham, 1981). Churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship continue the Edenic vocation of mediating God's presence and offering corporate service.
- **Agriculture and Productive Labor:** The original agricultural sense remains: cultivating the earth so that it yields fruit (Genesis 2:5; 3:23). In modern terms this expands to all legitimate economic activity—farming, manufacturing, entrepreneurship—performed as service rather than pure extraction.
- **Broader Vocational Service:** Every legitimate calling can be *avodah*—work offered as worship when done for the glory of God and the good of neighbor (Colossians 3:23–24; Wright, 2006).

Shamar (שָׁמַר) fundamentally means “to exercise great care over,” “to guard,” “to watch,” “to preserve,” “to keep,” or “to observe” (Brown et al., 1906/2000). Its concrete picture is a shepherd forming a thorn-hedge sheepfold to protect the flock at night; the related word *shamir* means “thorn” (Abarim Publications, 2014; Brown et al., 1906/2000). Its fundamental idea is attentive, diligent safeguarding so that nothing harmful befalls the object. It is used of guarding a garden (Gen. 2:15), a flock, a house, property in trust, a covenant, commandments, or the heart (Brown et al., 1906/2000). It encompasses keeping watch, protecting from harm or decay, observing commandments and covenants, treasuring knowledge, and restraining evil. In priestly contexts *shamar* describes guarding the sanctuary against intrusion or impurity (Numbers 1:53; 3:7–8; 18:5–7; Beale, 2018; Wenham, 1981). It is the same verb used when the cherubim are stationed “to guard the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24). Related forms include *mišmār* (guard, prison, watch) and terms for night watches

(Brown et al., 1906/2000). In priestly contexts the verb appears with *avad* to describe the Levites' dual duty of serving and guarding the sanctuary (Num. 3:7–8; 8:25–26; 18:5–6; 1 Chron. 23:32; Ezek. 44:14; Beale, 2018; Davidson, 2015). *Shamar* therefore carries connotations of vigilant protection, boundary maintenance, careful observance, and preservation against evil or disorder.

These two verbs, *avad* and *shamar*, when paired, frequently describe priestly ministry (Beale, 2004; Davidson, 2015; Wenham, 1981). Scholars such as G. K. Beale (2004, 2018) and Gordon Wenham (1981, 1987) therefore see Adam's commission as more than horticulture: he functions as a priest-king in a sacred space that anticipates the later tabernacle and temple. Eden is portrayed as the archetypal sanctuary where humanity was to serve God and guard the holy garden against intrusion. Scholars such as G. K. Beale (2004, 2018), Richard M. Davidson (2015), and John H. Walton (2001) have demonstrated that the paired verbs *avad* and *shamar* appear together elsewhere in the Pentateuch almost exclusively in descriptions of priestly service in the tabernacle or of Israel's dual duty to serve Yahweh and keep His word (Numbers 3:7–8; 8:25–26; 18:5–7; Deuteronomy 13:4; Joshua 22:5). This linguistic link supports reading Eden as a proto-temple and Adam as the first priest-king charged with both serving and guarding sacred space.

***Shamar* as Foundational Structure for Societal Organization: Defense, National Security, Science and Technology, Geo-politics, Education, Justice, Boundary Concept**

Shamar is the primordial human concept of ordered care. It is the biblical root of the idea that society requires deliberate guarding of what has been entrusted (Abarim Publications, 2014; Wright, 1990). This impulse appears in the Greek *polis*—the organized city-state that establishes boundaries, laws, and mutual defense so that citizens may flourish. The same structural logic appears in modern governmental forms: constitutions that set limits, separation of powers that prevent concentration of force, and institutions charged with preserving the common good. *Shamar* is therefore not merely defensive; it is the positive architecture of human community.

Structurally, *shamar* underwrites the institutions that establish and maintain secure boundaries: armed forces and intelligence services (defense and national security), diplomatic and strategic apparatus (geo-politics), courts and law-enforcement (justice), educational systems that transmit and protect cultural and intellectual inheritance, and scientific-technological infrastructures that safeguard life, health, and environment.

Functionally, each of these domains exercises the vigilance, restraint, and protective care inherent in *shamar*: In a democratic civilized society, this structural dimension translates into concrete functions:

- **Defense and National Security:** Guarding territorial integrity, citizens, and constitutional order against external and internal threats. The state exercises *shamar* by maintaining armed forces, intelligence, and border control while remaining under the rule of law.
- **Justice and the Boundary Concept:** Courts, police, and legal codes “keep” rights, contracts, and personal boundaries. Justice is the societal expression of preventing evil from overrunning what has been entrusted.
- **Education:** Transmission and preservation of knowledge, moral formation, and cultural memory. Teachers and institutions “keep” the intellectual and ethical inheritance so that successive generations do not lose it.
- **Science and Technology:** Careful stewardship of discovery and innovation—guarding against misuse while preserving the integrity of inquiry and its fruits for human flourishing.
- **Geo-politics:** Observing and maintaining international boundaries, treaties, and balances of power so that nations may coexist without descending into chaos.

In each case, *shamar* functions as the structural precondition: without vigilant keeping, the garden (or the *polis*) reverts to disorder. This is continuous with the biblical pattern in which failure to *shamar* the garden leads to expulsion, and later priestly failure to guard the sanctuary brings judgment (Beale, 2004; Davidson, 2015). H.A. Clement's work on Greek City-States provides his audience with Greek polis administrative policy that derives its function and structure from the biblical *shamar* structure and function, which is the foundation of modern world democratic

practices (Clement,1936). He outlines the three main forms of government among the ancient Greeks:

- **Monarchy:** rule by one person (a king).
- **Aristocracy:** rule by a few (wealthy noble families).
- **Democracy:** rule by the people.

Early Greek city-states (*poleis*) began under kings. By about 700 BC, most cities expelled their kings as more people demanded a share in power; monarchy gave way to aristocracy. Aristocratic rule proved equally unsatisfactory because the poor were often oppressed. After a phase of tyranny (in the later sense of oppressive one-man rule), many cities adopted democracy around 500 BC. Greek democracy was radical for its time: because the cities were small, all citizens could meet in person to decide important matters rather than elect representatives. Day-to-day administration was handled by officials who often rotated, while major decisions were taken by the assembled citizen body. The author notes that citizens in these *poleis* held more direct power than people in modern representative systems.

Greek *polis* democratic concept

The classical Greek *polis* (especially Athens after the reforms of Cleisthenes and later Periclean developments) practised a form of **direct democracy**. Key features of its administrative foundation included:

- The *ekklēsia* (assembly of all adult male citizens) as the sovereign body that debated and voted on war, peace, laws, finance, and foreign policy.
- A smaller council (*boulē*) that prepared the agenda and supervised administration; membership was typically by lot and short-term, preventing permanent elites.
- Magistrates and officials chosen largely by lot or brief election, often serving in rotation so that ordinary citizens took turns exercising executive functions.
- Accountability mechanisms (scrutiny before and after office, popular courts) that kept office-holders answerable to the citizen body.

The underlying idea was that the community itself “keeps” and governs its own common life; power is not permanently alienated to a distant ruler or closed class.

Alignment with biblical *shamar* (Genesis 2:15)

Genesis 2:15 states that the LORD God placed the man in the garden of Eden “to work it and keep it” (*‘abad* and *shāmar*). The verb *shāmar* means to guard, watch over, preserve, protect, or exercise careful charge over something entrusted to one’s care. It is an administrative and stewardly responsibility: the human is not the owner but the appointed guardian who must actively maintain, protect, and order the garden so that it flourishes according to its divine purpose. The administrative foundation of the Greek democratic *polis* can be read as a political analogue of this *shamar* mandate:

- Just as Adam is set within a defined space (the garden) and given the duty to *shamar* it, the citizens of the *polis* are set within a defined community and given the collective duty to “keep” its common life.
- The rotation of offices and direct assembly participation ensure that stewardship is not monopolized by a permanent elite (the failed aristocracy of the text) but is shared; every citizen in turn exercises the watchful care that *shamar* requires.
- The purpose is preservative and constructive: to protect the *polis* from internal corruption or external threat and to order its affairs so that the community can flourish—mirroring the dual task of cultivating and guarding the garden.
- Both arrangements treat governance as a trust rather than a possession. Authority is derivative and accountable: Adam answers to the Creator; the democratic magistrates and assembly answer to the citizen body and, ultimately, to the laws and customs that embody the common good.

Thus, the Greek experiment in direct, rotating, citizen-based administration can be seen as a historical attempt to institutionalize a form of communal *shamar*—the careful, shared keeping of the political “garden” entrusted to the people themselves.

The Dual Foundations of Governance Revolves Around: *Avad* and *Shamar*

To secure land and preserve territorial identity, human communities require a theological and structural framework for governance (Habel, 1995; Katongole, 2011). The Hebrew paradigm of stewardship (*oikonomia*), rooted in the creation account of Genesis 2:15, establishes that humanity was placed in the Garden to cultivate/serve (*avad*) and keep/guard (*shamar*) (Beale, 2004; Walton, 2001).

The Hebrew root *Avad* (עָבַד) denotes generative action, physical labour, resource development, and sacred service (*Avodah*). *Avad* serves as the operational driver of civilization, powering economic enterprise, agriculture, and civic contribution. Complementing *Avad*, *Shamar* (שָׁמַר) provides the protective, preservative, and legal architecture required to maintain institutional integrity and territorial security (Brown et al., 1906/2000; Strong, 1890).

As detailed by Abarim Publications (2014), *Shamar* extends beyond passive observation to include four operational functions:

1. **To Preserve and Maintain:** Protecting the core vitality and legal integrity of an asset or covenant over time.
2. **To Observe and Exercise Vigilance:** Maintaining active oversight like a watchman (*shomer*) stationed upon a boundary wall (Brown et al., 1906/2000).
3. **To Hedge About with Thorns:** Etymologically derived from pastoral practices (*shamir*), constructing a protective perimeter to keep external threats out and safeguard internal assets (Brown et al., 1906/2000).
4. **To Hold in Custody and Restrain:** Safekeeping institutional trusts while exercising self-control and enforcing legal boundaries against lawlessness (Abarim Publications, 2014).

Integration under Biblical Stewardship

The biblical foundation of stewardship unites the two verbs. Humanity is not absolute owner but entrusted caretaker (Brueggemann, 2002; Wright, 1990). *Shamar* keeps the trust intact (boundaries, justice, security, knowledge); *avad* develops and offers the trust back to the Giver (cultivation, worship, productive service). In a democratic society this dual mandate supports limited yet vigorous government, civil society institutions, family, church, and free economic activity—all ordered toward the flourishing of persons made in God’s image. Failure in either dimension—neglect of protective structure or reduction of work to mere exploitation—distorts the original vocation given in Genesis 2:15. Thus, *avad* and *shamar* remain living categories: the structural guarding that makes ordered liberty possible, and the functional service that fills that order with life, productivity, and worship.

Structural and Functional Dimensions in Contemporary Democratic Society

These two words supply a biblical foundation for stewardship that shapes both the structure (institutions, boundaries, order) and function (active service, cultivation, worship) of civilized life (Wright, 1990; Wright, 2006). *Shamar* provides the foundational protective and ordering structure; *avad* supplies the productive, cultic, and service-oriented function. Together they underwrite a theology of stewardship that can inform democratic institutions without collapsing into theocracy.

The theological architecture of *avad* and *shamar* articulated in Genesis 2:15, together with Brueggemann’s insistence that land functions as divine gift rather than absolute possession, is not an abstract biblical ideal; it finds stark historical verification in the progressive dispossession of the Church from its former heartlands. Precisely where Christian communities in North Africa,

Alexandria, Nubia, and Anatolia ceased to treat territory, institutional memory, and cultural continuity as a covenantal trust to be cultivated and vigilantly guarded, the garden was overrun: military conquest, *dhimmi* subordination, demographic attrition, and the conversion of sacred space (most emblematically Hagia Sophia) completed a process already prepared by internal neglect of the dual mandate. The same pattern of theological amnesia—reducing land to a secular or purely pilgrim concern—reappears in the contemporary Nigerian experience of farmlands turned into zones of violence and indigenous Christian voice eroded through electoral choices that disregarded Deuteronomy 17:14–15. Thus, the historical record of ecclesial collapse under successive Islamic expansions stands as the concrete outworking of the failure to keep and work the inheritance entrusted in Eden, furnishing both diagnosis and urgent summons for Nigerian Christians and indigenous peoples today.

The Demise of the Church and Its Land in Anatolia under Ottoman Rule and in Alexandria: A Failure of *Avad* and *Shamar*

Introduction: Eden, Temple, and the Dual Mandate of *Avad* and *Shamar*

The history of ordered human place begins with God’s intention in creating land and designating a garden “in the east, in Eden” (Gen 2:8). Several scholars posit that this garden functioned as a foreshadowing of the temple—a sacred space where Yahweh Elohim would interact with his image-bearers (Beale, 2004; Wenham, 1987; Davidson, 2015). When the Garden of Eden was established, Adam was given the dual task “to work it and keep it” (Gen 2:15, ESV). The Hebrew verbs are *‘ābād* (*avad*) and *šāmar* (*shamar*).

Avad primarily means “to work,” “to labor,” “to till,” or “to cultivate.” It also means “to serve” and, in theological contexts, “to worship” or “to serve God.” The related noun *avodah* denotes labor, service, or liturgical ministry. When directed toward God, *avad* describes devoted service rather than bondage (Exod 3:12). In priestly texts it refers to the service of the tabernacle and temple (Num 3:7–8; 8:25–26). Thus, *avad* unites agricultural cultivation, vocational labor, and cultic worship into a single vocation of devoted service (Beale, 2004, 2018; Walton, 2001).

Shamar fundamentally means “to exercise great care over,” “to guard,” “to watch,” “to preserve,” “to keep,” or “to observe.” Its concrete picture is attentive, diligent safeguarding so that nothing harmful befalls the object. It is used of guarding a garden (Gen 2:15), a flock, a house, property in trust, a covenant, commandments, or the heart. In priestly contexts, *shamar* describes guarding the sanctuary against intrusion or impurity (Num 1:53; 3:7–8; 18:5–7). The same verb is used when the cherubim are stationed “to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen 3:24). Scholars such as G. K. Beale, Richard M. Davidson, Gordon Wenham, and John H. Walton have demonstrated that the paired verbs *avad* and *shamar* appear together elsewhere in the Pentateuch almost exclusively in descriptions of priestly service (Beale, 2004; Davidson, 2015; Wenham, 1987; Walton, 2001). This linguistic link supports reading Eden as a proto-temple and Adam as the first priest-king charged with both serving and guarding sacred space.

Even after the Fall, the Garden was not destroyed; rather, Adam was driven out and thereby lost his physical meeting place with God. Shadows of that meeting place reappear in Jacob’s staircase, the burning bush at Sinai, the tabernacle in the wilderness, and finally the temple in Zion/Jerusalem. The dual mandate of *avad* and *shamar* therefore supplies a theological grammar for ordered human life: productive service joined to vigilant guardianship of what has been entrusted.

Walter Brueggemann’s Land Theology

Walter Brueggemann has made the theme of “land” a central focus of his work. In *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (1977/2002), he argues that land is not merely a backdrop to the biblical narrative but a primary category of biblical faith—arguably the central theme

alongside or even surpassing covenant. For Brueggemann, the biblical story is fundamentally a dialectic between landlessness (wilderness, exile, rootlessness) and landedness (possession, promise, gift). Land represents rootedness and identity, fertility and life, and a profound theological symbol that addresses both ancient Israel's experience and modern issues of dislocation, consumerism, and anxiety (Brueggemann, 2002).

One of Brueggemann's most influential distinctions is between land as gift and land as possession. Land as gift is given by Yahweh as promise but held conditionally upon covenant obedience; it is never fully "owned" by Israel, who remain tenants or stewards. Management of the land must reflect covenant values—justice for the poor, widow, orphan, and stranger; Sabbath observance; rejection of idolatry and exploitation. When land is treated as a commodity to be grasped, accumulated, or controlled through power or coercion, the result is injustice, syncretism, and ultimately land loss (exile). Classic examples include Ahab and Jezebel's seizure of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) and the prophetic critique of those who "join house to house and add field to field" (Isa 5:8; Mic 2:1–2) (Brueggemann, 2002).

In relation to leadership and governance, Brueggemann emphasizes that legitimate kingship in Israel must be consistent with the character of the land as gift. A true Israelite king comes from "among your brothers" (Deut 17:15)—one nurtured in Israel's covenant memories—and views power through the lens of gift and task rather than coercion. This aligns directly with the biblical paradigm against appointing a "foreigner" whose worldview and land ethic differ from Israel's covenantal one.

The entire text is a reflection on Genesis 2:15, focusing on the two Hebraic words that shape the verse: *avad* and *shamar*. In light of these two words, we will consider the following observations and offer solutions to the contemporary church. First, we begin by looking at what could have been responsible for the demise of the church and its land in Turkey during the Ottoman reign and the conquest.

In light of the first paragraph, the demise of the church can indeed be seen as negligence and lack of understanding of the biblical injunctions and stewardship of land, which carried both warning and command in Genesis 2:15. We had earlier done an exegetical analysis of these two Hebrew words, *Avad* and *Shamar*. The same fate seemed to have befallen the church in Alexandria, the seat and birthplace of theology, a place that advanced and championed Christian theology, where the likes of Augustine of Hippo, Origen, Tertullian, and other great Africans laid foundations that shaped modern church theology.

The dual mandate of *avad* (to work, serve, cultivate, and worship) and *shamar* (to guard, keep, protect, and exercise vigilant care) was never merely horticultural. As Beale (2004, 2018) has demonstrated, these paired verbs elsewhere describe the Levites' priestly service and guardianship of the sanctuary (Num. 3:7–8; 8:25–26; 18:5–7). Eden functioned as the archetypal temple, and Adam as priest-king charged with expanding sacred space while protecting it from intrusion (see also Wenham, 1987; Davidson, 2015; Walton, 2001). When the church later treated land and territory as secular or peripheral rather than covenantal trust, it abandoned this vocation. Brueggemann (2002) insists that land in biblical faith is gift, promise, and challenge—held conditionally under covenant, never absolute possession. Failure to *shamar* the trust invites disorder; failure to *avad* it reduces service to extraction or idolatry.

Historical Patterns of Ecclesial and Territorial Loss: Lessons from the Early Islamic Conquests

In light of the dual mandate of *avad* and *shamar*, it is necessary to ask what factors contributed to the demise of the Church and the loss of Christian-controlled land in regions where the faith once achieved maximum dominance. The historical record of Christianity's near-disappearance from

North Africa, Egypt (Alexandria), Libya, Nubia (present-day Sudan), and Anatolia (Turkey) under successive waves of Islamic conquest and rule offers a sobering case study.

North Africa, Alexandria, Libya, and Nubia

Prior to the seventh-century Arab-Muslim conquests, North Africa (including the regions that became modern Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and parts of Morocco) and Egypt were among the most thoroughly Christianized territories of the late Roman and Byzantine worlds. Alexandria was a premier seat of Christian theology, the intellectual home of figures such as Clement, Origen, Athanasius, and Cyril, and a major center that shaped the doctrinal foundations of the wider Church. Christianity had been practiced in Nubia for centuries and continued for over six hundred years before its eventual eclipse. Yet within a few centuries after the conquests that began around 637–711 AD, the Church in these regions suffered progressive demographic collapse, loss of institutional control over land and cities, conversion of populations, and, in many areas, virtual annihilation as a public presence.

Historians emphasize that the process was neither instantaneous nor solely the result of forced conversion at the point of the sword. Multiple interlocking factors were at work: military defeat and the collapse of Byzantine and local defenses; pre-existing internal divisions (notably the Donatist controversy in North Africa and tensions between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian communities); the imposition of the *jizya* poll tax and other legal disabilities under the *dhimmi* system, which created strong economic incentives for conversion; social and administrative advantages accruing to Muslims; emigration of Christian elites; demographic shifts through settlement and intermarriage; and, over time, the decay of indigenous ecclesiastical structures and pastoral care (Lapidus, 1988; Bulliet, 1979). In North Africa, the near-absence of a robust Berber-language Christianity further weakened resilience compared with the more durable Coptic and Syriac traditions farther east. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, bishoprics that had once numbered in the hundreds had dwindled to a handful, and Christian presence in much of the Maghreb became marginal or extinct.

Alexandria and Egypt after the Arab Conquest

Alexandria, cradle of Christian theological reflection, suffered a parallel trajectory after the Arab conquest of 639–642. The native Christian population, already strained by Byzantine internal divisions, entered *dhimmi* status. Heavy *jizya* and *kharaj* (land tax), periodic destruction or conversion of churches, social disabilities, and the economic advantages of conversion produced a long, grinding attrition (Ye’or, 1996; Ibrahim, 2020). By the medieval period the once-dominant Christian majority had become a minority; the Melkite (Chalcedonian) community shrank dramatically, and even the Coptic church, though more resilient, lost dioceses, property, and cultural hegemony. The Arabization of administration and the redirection of land revenues toward Islamic institutions further eroded the material base of Christian life.

Again, the pattern is theological as well as political. Where the church neglected the *shamar* mandate—vigilant protection of sacred space, institutional integrity, and territorial trust—and failed to practice *avad* as covenantal service rather than mere survival under alien rule, the garden was progressively overrun. Historical precedents such as Jezebel’s seizure of Naboth’s vineyard or the foreign influence of Doeg the Edomite (already noted in the earlier analysis of Deuteronomy 17) illustrate the danger when leadership lacks shared covenantal memory of land as gift to be guarded and cultivated.

Anatolia and the Conversion of Hagia Sophia

A parallel trajectory unfolded in Anatolia. The Byzantine Empire, which had long controlled Asia Minor and maintained Constantinople as the “New Rome,” suffered catastrophic territorial losses beginning with the Seljuk victory at Manzikert (1071) and culminating in the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The great cathedral of Hagia Sophia—constructed under Justinian in the

sixth century and for nearly a millennium one of the most magnificent churches in Christendom—was immediately converted into a mosque by Sultan Mehmed II. It remained a mosque until its secularization as a museum in 1934 and was reconverted to mosque status in 2020. The conversion of Hagia Sophia stands as a potent symbol of the transfer of sacral and political space from Christian to Islamic control. Over the intervening centuries, the Christian population of Anatolia, once a substantial majority, was reduced through war, emigration, conversion, and the population exchanges of the early twentieth century to a small remnant.

Anatolia under Ottoman Conquest and Rule

The Christian heartland of Asia Minor, once densely episcopal and theologically vibrant, experienced progressive dispossession from the Seljuk incursions of the eleventh century through the Ottoman consolidation. Vryonis (1971) documents how the prolonged, chaotic nature of the Turkish conquest and settlement converted large areas into a *dar al-harb*—a zone of continuous disruption. Church lands, revenues, and buildings were systematically seized; bishops and metropolitans were expelled or barred from their sees (seats), its *lati* word is (*sedes*) for decades; the episcopal structure collapsed from hundreds of sees (seats) to a handful by the fifteenth century. The waqf system further harnessed land, manpower, and revenue to Islamic institutions, impoverishing the Christian community (Vryonis, 1971; see also Leiser’s analysis of deliberate institutional displacement).

Under the Ottomans the *millet* system and *jizya* permitted survival under subordination, yet high taxation, population transfers, *devshirme*, and social-legal pressures steadily reduced the Christian demographic share. By the early modern period Anatolia had become overwhelmingly Muslim; the final demographic unraveling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries completed the near-erasure of the historic Christian presence (Morris & Ze’evi, 2019; Akçam, 2012). The church’s inability to maintain territorial guardianship (*shamar*)—boundary, property, institutional continuity—and its failure to cultivate a robust covenantal memory of land as divine gift (*avad*) left it vulnerable. Leaders who no longer viewed the land through the lens of shared covenant memory treated territory as commodity or spoils rather than entrusted inheritance (cf. Brueggemann, 2002, on land as gift versus possession, illustrated historically by the Naboth narrative).

Negligence of Biblical Stewardship

Could the demise of the Church in these regions be interpreted, at least in part, as a failure to understand and enact the biblical injunctions of stewardship codified in Genesis 2:15? The historical evidence suggests a complex interplay of external military and political pressures with internal theological and ecclesial weaknesses. External conquest and the structural disadvantages of *dhimmi* status were decisive. Yet internal factors—doctrinal division, neglect of pastoral formation, elite emigration, and, crucially, a deficient theology of land and political responsibility—left Christian communities less resilient than they might otherwise have been. The organic (gathered, worshipping) Church and the physical land it occupied are not separable in the biblical vision. Failure to “keep” (*shamar*) the territorial and institutional inheritance entrusted to the community contributed to the eclipse of Christian public presence. Where the Church treated land and political order as secondary or merely secular concerns, it forfeited the capacity to guard the spaces in which its members lived, worshipped, and transmitted the faith to successive generations.

Pilgrim Theology and the Neglect of the Creation Mandate

A further theological factor that has historically weakened Christian engagement with land and governance is an over-emphasis on the identity of believers as “strangers and sojourners” (1 Pet 2:11; Heb 11:13) at the expense of the creational mandate to cultivate and guard the earth. Christian doctrine rightly holds that the ultimate homeland of the people of God is the new creation and the heavenly city (Heb 11:16; 13:14; Rev 21–22). Believers are therefore called to live as pilgrims whose citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). This eschatological orientation is non-negotiable. However, when the pilgrim motif is absolutized into a quietist or purely otherworldly posture, it can produce a

practical dualism in which land, political authority, and territorial stewardship are regarded as outside the Church's proper concern. The result is a failure to exercise the dual vocation of *avad* and *shamar*. Scripture holds the two realities together: the people of God are sojourners *and* stewards; they seek a better country while remaining responsible for the garden-land entrusted to them in the present age (Lev 25:23; Gen 1:28; 2:15). Brueggemann (2002) and Beale (2004) both insist that land theology and temple theology are integral to biblical faith; they cannot be spiritualized away without loss.

In historical terms, communities that internalized a purely pilgrim ethic without a corresponding theology of responsible occupation and guardianship proved more vulnerable to displacement. The Church that neglects *shamar*—the vigilant keeping of boundaries, institutions, knowledge, and justice—risks the gradual erosion of the very spaces in which the gospel is proclaimed and lived. Conversely, a recovery of the Edenic mandate equips the contemporary Church to engage politics, land rights, and leadership selection without collapsing into either theocratic nationalism or apolitical withdrawal.

Structural and Functional Dimensions of Avad and Shamar in Contemporary Society

The dual mandate supplies a biblical foundation for stewardship that shapes both the structure (institutions, boundaries, order) and function (active service, cultivation, worship) of civilized life. *Shamar* underwrites the institutions that establish and maintain secure boundaries: defense and national security, geo-politics, justice systems, education that transmits cultural and intellectual inheritance, and science and technology oriented toward human flourishing and environmental care. Functionally, each domain exercises the vigilance and protective care inherent in *shamar* so that “nothing wrong or evil happens” to what has been entrusted.

Avad grounds the cultic community (altar, temple, church) and the productive economy centered on land and creative work. Worship is the explicit *avad* of God; agriculture and productive labor constitute the earthly *avad* of the garden. When *avad* is severed from worship it degenerates into drudgery or idolatry; when *shamar* is severed from service it becomes sterile control or fear. Held together, the two verbs portray a society that both cultivates and protects, serves and guards, worships and works—mirroring the original vocation given in Eden and later institutionalized in Israel's sanctuary (Beale, 2004; Wenham, 1987).

Application to Nigerian Christianity and Indigenous Communities

The lessons of North Africa, Egypt, Nubia, and Anatolia are not remote antiquarian curiosities; they constitute a prophetic warning for the Church in Nigeria and for indigenous peoples facing land dispossession. The Christian electorate's failure to apply the biblical benchmarks of Deuteronomy 17:14–15 and Genesis 2:15 in the 2015 and 2023 general elections contributed to severe political marginalization and widespread territorial insecurity, turning farmlands into sites of violence. Leaders lacking shared covenantal understandings of land as divine gift rather than commodity have historically exploited both land and people.

Recovery requires that land governance be reinstated as an essential doctrinal item in theological education and missional programs. The Church must educate the electorate and Christian politicians that legitimate leadership is exercised by those “from among the brethren” who understand the land-covenant relationship, who view territory as a trust to be worked (*avad*) and guarded (*shamar*), and who resist the reduction of land to a possession to be coerced. Brueggemann's framework remains prophetic: it warns against both naïve universalism that ignores particularity and grasping nationalism that ignores conditionality and justice. It calls for a peculiar people whose relationship to place reflects God's own character.

The Demise of the Church in Historical Heartlands and the Neglected Mandate of Genesis 2:15

The history of Christianity in regions once marked by deep-rooted presence and theological vitality reveals a recurring pattern of territorial and institutional erosion under successive waves of Islamic expansion. In Anatolia (modern Turkey), the Byzantine Church, which had flourished for centuries with monumental expressions such as Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, experienced progressive marginalization following the Seljuk and Ottoman advances. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Hagia Sophia was immediately converted into a mosque, symbolizing the transfer of sacred space and political dominance (Runciman, 1965; Vryonis, 1971). Over subsequent centuries, Christian populations in Anatolia declined sharply through conversion pressures, demographic shifts, and later genocidal violence against Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians between 1894 and 1924, reducing Christians from roughly 20 percent of the population in 1900 to under 1 percent by mid-century (Morris & Ze'evi, 2019). Scholars have attributed this not solely to external military force but also to internal ecclesiastical weaknesses, including corruption, political entanglement, and a diminished capacity to guard communal identity and resources (Kim, 2010).

A parallel trajectory unfolded in Alexandria, the intellectual cradle of early Christian theology and home to figures such as Origen, Athanasius, and Cyril. The Arab conquest of Egypt (641–646 CE) placed the Church under dhimmi status, subjecting it to special taxation, legal disabilities, and gradual demographic attrition. Although Coptic Christianity persisted as a minority, the city's classical and Christian intellectual institutions suffered irreversible contraction, and Greek Orthodox (Melkite) communities dwindled dramatically (Mojsov, 2010; Cambridge History of Egypt, 1998). In Libya (Cyrenaica and Tripolitania), early Christian communities—linked to Cyrene and the Pentapolis and featuring bishops such as Synesius—largely disappeared after the seventh-century Arab conquests and later Hilalian migrations. Churches were abandoned or converted, and by the medieval period organized Christianity had effectively vanished from the indigenous population (Oden, 2011; Frend, 1979).

In Nubia (present-day northern Sudan), Christianity endured for nearly a millennium after its sixth-century establishment in the kingdoms of Nobatia, Makuria, and Alwa. Despite successful resistance to early Arab incursions and the Baqt treaty of 652, the kingdoms gradually weakened under Mamluk pressure from the thirteenth century onward. Royal conversion, intermarriage, loss of clerical supply from Alexandria, and social disintegration led to the extinction of organized Nubian Christianity by the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century (Adams, 1977; Jenkins, 2017; Shinnie, 1978). Churches fell into disuse rather than wholesale destruction, illustrating a process of internal demoralization and failure to transmit covenantal memory across generations.

These collapses raise a theological question: to what extent did the Church's demise stem from negligence of the creational mandate in Genesis 2:15? Yahweh Elohim placed the human in the garden “to work it and keep it” (לְעֹבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ). As established in the preceding exegetical analysis, *ʾāḇad* (*avad*) encompasses productive cultivation, service, and worship, while *šāmar* (*shamar*) denotes vigilant guarding, boundary maintenance, and protective custody so that nothing harmful befalls the entrusted object (Beale, 2004; Wenham, 1987; Davidson, 2015). When paired, the verbs describe priestly ministry in sacred space (Numbers 3:7–8; 8:25–26; 18:5–7). G. K. Beale (2004, 2018) and Gordon Wenham (1987) demonstrate that Eden functions as a proto-temple and Adam as the first priest-king charged with expanding and protecting sacred order. Walter Brueggemann (2002) further frames land as gift rather than absolute possession: it is held conditionally under covenant, requiring justice, gratitude, and vigilant stewardship. Failure to treat land and people as divine trust—reducing them to mere secular concern or spiritualizing them into otherworldly irrelevance—invites dispossession.

The historical pattern suggests that where the Church treated territorial integrity, cultural transmission, and institutional guardianship as secondary to purely spiritual or individual concerns, the structural architecture of *shamar* atrophied. Without deliberate cultivation (*avad*) of covenantal

memory, education, and economic resilience, and without the hedging vigilance of *shamar* against external encroachment and internal decay, sacred spaces and peoples became vulnerable. Brueggemann's dialectic of landlessness and landedness warns that periods of apparent security can mask the conditions for exile when covenant fidelity is neglected (Brueggemann, 2002).

Pilgrim Spirituality versus Covenantal Occupation: Revelation 21:1–4 and Luke 19:13

A significant contributing factor to this vulnerability has been a one-sided “pilgrim” or sojourner theology that interprets Christian existence primarily as temporary passage through an alien world whose ultimate home is heaven alone. While Scripture affirms that believers are “strangers and exiles” whose citizenship is in heaven (Hebrews 11:13–16; Philippians 3:20; 1 Peter 2:11), this motif is frequently absolutized to the exclusion of creational and eschatological responsibility for the earth. The result is a quietism that surrenders the public square, land, and institutions as “not our home,” thereby abdicating the dual mandate of *avad* and *shamar*.

Revelation 21:1–4 presents a decisive counter-vision. John sees “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. The holy city, new Jerusalem, comes down out of heaven from God. The dwelling of God is with humanity; He will wipe away every tear, and death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more. The eschatological hope is not escape from the created order but its radical renewal and the permanent dwelling of God with His people on a transformed earth. This vision fulfills the trajectory begun in Eden: the garden-temple expands until the whole earth becomes the sanctuary of God's presence (Beale, 2004). The meek inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5); the creation itself will be set free from bondage (Romans 8:19–21).

Luke 19:13 reinforces present responsibility. In the parable of the minas, the nobleman instructs his servants, “Occupy till I come” (KJV; Greek *pragmateusasthe*, engage in business, trade, or management). The servants are held accountable for productive stewardship of what has been entrusted during the master's absence. Combined with Genesis 2:15, the text frames the Church's interim existence as active cultivation and vigilant guarding of the spheres—territorial, cultural, institutional, and missional—committed to its care. Stewardship is not optional; it is the condition of accountability at the master's return. A theology that reduces the Christian vocation to passive waiting undermines both the creational commission and the eschatological promise of renewed creation.

Avad and Shamar as Containment and Reawakening against Expansionist Displacement

The Hebraic pair supplies both diagnostic and constructive resources for the contemporary Church and indigenous communities facing patterns of displacement, land dispossession, and demographic pressure associated with certain forms of Islamic expansionism. *Avad* calls for generative cultivation: the deliberate building of educational institutions that transmit covenantal memory, economic enterprises that root communities in productive labor, liturgical and formational practices that orient identity toward service of God and neighbor, and political engagement that elects leaders “from among the brethren” who share the community's land ethic (Deuteronomy 17:14–15; Brueggemann, 2002). *Shamar* supplies the protective architecture: legal vigilance over land titles and inheritance, boundary maintenance in education and culture, institutional integrity against corruption, and strategic awareness of geo-political and demographic realities so that “nothing wrong or evil happens” to the entrusted inheritance.

Together the verbs reject both naive universalism that dissolves particular covenantal responsibilities and grasping nationalism that severs land from justice. They reawaken the Church to treat land not as disposable commodity or merely temporary sojourn, but as divine gift held in trust. In contexts of expansionist pressure that prioritizes demographic replacement and territorial control, *shamar* becomes the theological warrant for vigilant preservation of indigenous Christian and ethnic spaces, while *avad* ensures that preservation is life-giving rather than merely defensive.

Survivalist Strategies for the Organic Church and Indigenous Peoples

The organic Churchⁱ—understood as the living, local, covenantal community rather than merely institutional structures—must recover the dual mandate as divine obligation for which it will give account. Survival is not secured by withdrawal or by uncritical assimilation, but by faithful *avad* and *shamar*. The Church learns to live under this obligation by embedding the Genesis 2:15 commission in catechesis, leadership formation, and communal decision-making; by treating land, culture, and political voice as trusts rather than secular irrelevancies; and by remembering that accountability at the fullness of time includes the condition of the inheritance left for succeeding generations (Luke 19:13–27).

Three Biblically Based Strategies for Daily Life

First, recover covenantal education and memory transmission as primary *avad*. Deuteronomy repeatedly commands the people to teach the words diligently to their children, to talk of them when sitting in the house and walking by the way (Deuteronomy 6:6–9). In practice this requires families, churches, and indigenous communities to prioritize intergenerational instruction in biblical land theology, historical memory of prior dispossessions, and practical skills of economic and legal stewardship. Curriculum must integrate Brueggemann’s gift-versus-possession framework and Beale’s priestly reading of Eden so that the next generation understands land as sacred trust rather than negotiable asset. Daily family worship, communal storytelling of regional Christian history (Alexandria, Nubia, Anatolia), and formal educational institutions oriented toward covenantal values constitute concrete *avad*. Without this cultivation, memory atrophies and *shamar* becomes impossible.

Second, practice vigilant boundary maintenance and institutional guardianship as *shamar*. Numbers 3 and 18 describe the Levites’ duty to guard the sanctuary against unauthorized approach. Analogously, communities must exercise legal, cultural, and demographic vigilance: secure land titles and inheritance patterns under indigenous customary and statutory law; resist educational curricula that erase Christian or ethnic memory; monitor and contest demographic policies or migration patterns that systematically displace indigenous populations; and maintain the integrity of church and community institutions against corruption or external capture. This is not xenophobia but the attentive care that refuses to allow “nothing wrong or evil” to befall the entrusted garden. Practical expressions include community land trusts, legal defense funds, and political advocacy for leaders who share the community’s covenantal land ethic (Deuteronomy 17:15).

Third, integrate productive labor and worship as unified *avodah*. Colossians 3:23–24 instructs believers to work heartily as for the Lord. Agriculture, entrepreneurship, professional excellence, and liturgical service are all forms of *avad*. In contexts of economic marginalization that facilitate land loss, communities must deliberately cultivate self-sustaining economic bases—cooperative farming, skills training, micro-enterprise—that root people in place and generate resources for defense of inheritance. Simultaneously, gathered worship must explicitly include intercession for land, justice, and faithful stewardship, refusing the divorce between altar and field that turns *avad* into either pure activism or pure pietism. When work is offered as worship and worship fuels vigilant service, the dual mandate is held together. These strategies, practiced daily, reorient the Church from passive sojourning to active occupation until the Master returns. However, the Church should not limit itself to these three strategies drawn from the biblical *shamar* doctrinal concept of land. It must also deepen its understanding of land by incorporating John Sailhamer’s interpretation from a creation perspective, in which land is primarily tied to blessing and obedience. What follows is an overview of how Sailhamer illustrates how the concept of land has been structured and understood across three distinct stages in biblical history, while remaining a natural habitat for moral human beings:

Old Testament Foundation: Promised Land as a central, unifying motif

In *Genesis Unbound* and related works, Sailhamer argues for “historical creationism.” Genesis 1:1 records God’s creation of the entire universe (“heavens and earth”) over an indeterminate period. From Genesis 1:2 onward, *’eret* is best understood as “land” (the specific territory later identified with Eden and Canaan), not the planet as a whole. The six days describe God preparing this already-created land—making it ordered, fruitful, and habitable—for humanity. The boundaries and features of Eden align with those of the land promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:18). Thus creation itself anticipates the covenant gift of land.

This land theme structures the Pentateuch and the rest of the Old Testament. God gives the land as a place of blessing, rest, and divine presence under the Sinai covenant, conditioned on faithfulness. Israel’s story (patriarchs, exodus, conquest, monarchy, exile, and hoped-for return) repeatedly echoes the Eden pattern: gift, disobedience, expulsion “eastward,” and the prospect of restoration. Prophetic texts reinforce the same land as the arena of God’s future work with his people. The land is never an end in itself; it is a type and shadow pointing beyond temporary possession to a greater reality secured by divine faithfulness.

New Testament Continuity and Fulfillment

In the New Testament the land promise is not discarded but transformed and expanded in Christ. The patriarchs themselves looked beyond the earthly Canaan to “a better country—a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11). Jesus and the apostles reframe territorial expectations around the Messiah, the true temple, and the people of God drawn from every nation. The inheritance broadens (Abraham as “heir of the world,” Romans 4:13), yet the underlying theme of a prepared place where God dwells with his people remains intact.

Eschatological Climax in Revelation 21:1–4

Sailhamer’s framework finds its natural telos in the new heaven and new earth of Revelation 21. Secondary applications of his work (and explicit links drawn in reviews of *Genesis Unbound*) note that the New Jerusalem descends to the very sphere God first prepared—the same land/Eden/Promised Land trajectory. Revelation 21:1–4 depicts the first heaven and earth passing away and a new creation appearing in which “the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more...” This is the consummation of the land theme: the place God prepared from the beginning, lost through sin, promised and partially realized under the old covenant, and now fully realized as the renewed creation where God’s presence is permanent and unrestricted.

Revelation 21:1-4 brings the theme to its climax. The new heaven and new earth, with the New Jerusalem coming down and God dwelling fully with his people (“he will dwell with them... and wipe away every tear”), restore and surpass the original Edenic ideal. The land prepared from the beginning reaches its consummation not as a return to a limited Canaan under the old covenant, but as the renewed creation in which God’s presence is unrestricted. The original preparation of the land for humanity finds its ultimate realization in the eschatological dwelling of God with redeemed humanity. Sailhamer’s framework thus sees continuity from the land of Genesis 1–2 through Israel’s history into this final new creation.

This reading fits the larger theology of the Pentateuch. Enjoyment of God’s good land is repeatedly contingent on “keeping” (*shamar*) his commandments (e.g., Deuteronomy 30:16). The same verbal pair (*’avad* and *shamar*) elsewhere describes priestly service at the tabernacle or covenant loyalty. In Sailhamer’s view, the original human vocation in the prepared land is therefore priestly and covenantal rather than primarily ecological or agricultural. Stewardship of the land is real, but it is exercised through worship and obedience: remaining in right relationship with the God who prepared

and owns the land. Disobedience leads to expulsion (as with Adam and later Israel); faithful worship and obedience secure rest and blessing in the land.

Thus, Sailhamer reorients the *avad/shamar* mandate away from a standalone environmental or agrarian ethic and toward the central biblical concern of the Pentateuch—living before God in the land he has given, under the terms of his covenant. The traditional “work and keep” language is not denied outright but is subordinated to, and interpreted through, the priestly and covenantal framework that runs from Eden through Israel’s history to the final dwelling of God with his people in the new creation of Revelation 21.

Four Obvious Consequences of Neglecting the Genesis 2:15 Mandate

Failure to cultivate and guard the entrusted inheritance produces predictable outcomes attested both in Scripture and in the historical cases already examined. **First**, territorial and demographic dispossession follows. When Israel treated land as absolute possession rather than a conditional gift, exile resulted (Brueggemann, 2002; 2 Kings 17; 25). The conversion of Hagia Sophia, the abandonment of Nubian churches, and the near-extinction of indigenous Christianity in North Africa illustrate the same pattern: neglected *shamar* allows external powers to redefine sacred space and replace populations. **Second**, loss of covenantal memory and identity ensues. Without *avad* that transmits the story, subsequent generations no longer know the meaning of the land or the terms of the trust; they become rootless and easily absorbed (Judges 2:10). **Third**, institutional collapse and moral corruption accelerate. The Levites’ failure to guard the sanctuary invited judgment (Ezekiel 44); similarly, churches that neglect boundary maintenance invite internal decay and external capture. **Fourth**, eschatological accountability intensifies. The unfaithful servant who buried the mina rather than occupying it faced severe rebuke (Luke 19:20–26). The Church that treats the creational commission as optional will answer for the condition of the inheritance at the Master’s return. These consequences are not speculative; they are the historical record of regions where the dual mandate was set aside.

Four Generationally Driven Recommendations for Land Protection

First, institutionalize intergenerational land theology education as non-negotiable. Every Christian educational institution, from Sunday school to seminary, must include systematic instruction in Genesis 2:15, Brueggemann’s land theology, and the priestly reading of Eden (Beale, 2004; Wenham, 1987). Curriculum should pair biblical exposition with regional historical case studies of Christian land loss so that memory is concrete. Families must practice daily and weekly transmission of this framework. Without generational embedding, any short-term strategy dissipates.

Second, establish enduring legal and economic structures for land security. Communities should create perpetual land trusts, cooperative ownership models, and legal defense mechanisms that bind successive generations to the protection of ancestral and church lands. Customary law, where still operative, must be strengthened and aligned with biblical stewardship principles. Economic development initiatives should prioritize rooting populations in productive relationship to place rather than facilitating out-migration. These structures embody *shamar* across time.

Third, form leadership pipelines that prioritize covenantal land ethics. Deuteronomy 17:15’s requirement of “one from among your brothers” must shape electoral, ecclesiastical, and community leadership selection. Training programs for Christian politicians, traditional rulers, and church leaders should include explicit formation in *avad–shamar* theology and the dangers illustrated by Jezebel and Doeg. Successive generations of leaders must be raised who view land as a gift to be enhanced rather than a commodity to be exploited.

Fourth, cultivate a sustained missional and intercessory posture that refuses resignation. Luke 19:13 and Revelation 21 together call the Church to occupy until the new creation arrives. Generational

commitment requires ongoing prayer, strategic vigilance, and prophetic witness against policies or ideologies that systematically displace indigenous Christian and ethnic communities. This includes public advocacy, scholarly documentation of historical patterns, and practical solidarity across regions. The mandate is not for one generation alone; it is the ongoing vocation of the people of God until the dwelling of God is fully with humanity on the renewed earth.

In recovering Genesis 2:15 as living doctrine, the Church and indigenous peoples reclaim the priestly vocation given in Eden and sustained through Israel's history. Land governance must again become an essential item in theological education and missional practice. Only then can the organic Church fulfill its calling to work and keep the inheritance entrusted to it until the King returns.

Findings

The research demonstrates that "one from among the brethren" denotes a leader nurtured within the community's shared memories, covenantal responsibilities, and values—someone who views land as a divine gift to be enhanced rather than a possession to be coerced (Brueggemann, 2002; Wright, 1996). In contrast, leaders lacking these shared covenantal understandings (historically illustrated by figures like Jezebel and Doeg the Edomite) frequently exploit land and people (Brueggemann, 2002). Applying this to the contemporary Nigerian state, the study argues that the Christian electorate's failure to apply these biblical benchmarks in the 2015 and 2023 general elections resulted in severe political marginalization and widespread territorial insecurity (Kukah, 1993; Suberu, 2001). Historical precedents such as Jezebel and Doeg the Edomite illustrate the dangers of foreign influence on land ethics (Brueggemann, 2002). The persistent loss of land and political autonomy among indigenous communities and Christian populations often stems from a deficient theological understanding of land stewardship (Habel, 1995; Turaki, 1999). The paper critiques the Nigerian Church's historical missteps, particularly in the 2015 and 2023 elections, where support for non-indigenous leadership contributed to the erosion of Christian voice, indigenous land rights, and security, turning farmlands into sites of violence. Looking at the contemporary Nigerian state, the study argues that the Christian electorate's failure to apply these biblical benchmarks in the 2015 and 2023 general elections resulted in severe political marginalization and widespread territorial insecurity. Brueggemann's (2002) framework is prophetic, which serves as a warning against both naive universalism (ignoring particularity) and grasping nationalism (ignoring conditionality and justice). It calls for a peculiar people whose relationship to place reflects God's own character.

Position

The study concludes that land governance must be reinstated as an essential doctrinal item in twenty-first-century theological and missional programs (Katongole, 2011; Wright, 2006). To prevent further disenfranchisement, the Church and indigenous communities must actively educate the electorate and Christian politicians on biblical paradigms of leadership selection, ensuring chosen leaders are committed to preserving the community's territorial and covenantal heritage. The paper, in referencing Walter Brueggemann (2002), would help to encourage Nigerian Christians and indigenous people that Nigerian future elections must view land as a divine gift to be nurtured through covenant memory and stewardship by electing their own who understands land covenant relationship. The study urges Nigerian Christians and indigenous communities to urgently recover these biblical mandates in their political theology and electoral decisions (Ojo, 2006; Turaki, 1997). By embracing Genesis 2:15 and Deuteronomy 17:14–15 as guiding principles for leadership selection, the Church can fulfill its missional calling to occupy and steward the land faithfully until Christ's return (Luke 19:13), ensuring governance that honors God's design for His people and their inheritance. This biblical approach offers a prophetic alternative to prevailing political patterns and calls for renewed theological education among Christian politicians and voters. The study concludes that land governance must be reinstated as an essential doctrinal item in twenty-first-century theological and missional programs. To prevent further disenfranchisement, the Church and indigenous communities must actively educate the electorate and Christian politicians on biblical paradigms of leadership

selection, ensuring chosen leaders are committed to preserving the community's territorial and covenantal heritage. The Church, as an extension of biblical Israel, bears a theological responsibility to steward the land and influence governance in alignment with God's covenantal principles rather than secular or pragmatic considerations. Historically rooted in Judaism, the Christian Church possesses a foundational mandate—expressed through the Hebraic concept of *shamar* (Genesis 2:15)—to actively manage, guard, and govern territorial spaces rather than treating land as a merely secular concern (Beale, 2004; Wenham, 1987). Looking at the contemporary Nigerian state, the study argues that the Christian electorate's failure to apply these biblical benchmarks in the 2015 and 2023 general elections resulted in severe political marginalization and widespread territorial insecurity.

The significance of this paper covers a wide spectrum of human society by spanning through the umbrella of scholarship, the Christendom and the global indigenous people. Its utmost aim is to reawaken the peoples' consciousness to land and its stewardship by drawing the attention of the aforementioned groups of peoples that the concept of land governance must be reinstated as an essential doctrinal item in twenty-first-century theological and missional programmes. To prevent further disenfranchisement, the Church and indigenous communities must educate the electorate and Christian politicians on biblical paradigms of leadership selection and stewardship. Brueggemann's framework serves as a prophetic warning against both naïve universalism (ignoring particularity) and grasping nationalism (ignoring conditionality and justice). It calls for a peculiar people whose relationship to place reflects God's own character.

Conclusion

Genesis 2:15 is not a peripheral horticultural instruction but the foundational charter of humanity's priestly vocation: to *avad* (work, cultivate, serve, and worship) and *shamar* (guard, keep, protect, and exercise vigilant care) over the land and inheritance entrusted by God. This dual mandate, later institutionalized in Israel's sanctuary service and clarified by Brueggemann's distinction between land as divine gift and land as coercive possession, establishes that territorial integrity, institutional continuity, and cultural memory are covenantal trusts, not secular afterthoughts or temporary sojourns.

The historical record of Christian disappearance from once-dominant heartlands—North Africa, Alexandria, Nubia, and Anatolia—reveals the concrete cost of neglecting this mandate. Military conquest, *dhimmi* subordination, demographic attrition, conversion of sacred space (most emblematically Hagia Sophia), and internal theological amnesia combined to overrun the garden wherever the Church treated land as disposable, reduced stewardship to quietist pilgrim spirituality, or failed to elect leaders formed in shared covenantal memory. Scripture itself supplies the diagnostic parallel: when leadership lacks the ethic of "one from among your brothers" (Deuteronomy 17:14–15) and when the people cease to view territory as a conditional gift rather than absolute possession, exile and dispossession follow.

The same pattern reappears in contemporary Nigeria. The Christian electorate's failure to apply these biblical benchmarks in the 2015 and 2023 elections contributed to political marginalization, the erosion of indigenous voice, and the transformation of farmlands into zones of violence. A deficient theology of land stewardship—treating territory as a negotiable commodity or merely a temporary passage—has left communities vulnerable to systematic dispossession. Brueggemann's framework remains prophetic: it warns against both naïve universalism that dissolves particular responsibility and grasping nationalism that severs land from justice. It calls for a peculiar people whose relationship to place reflects God's own character.

Recovery therefore requires more than lament. Land governance must be reinstated as an essential doctrinal and missional priority in theological education. The Church and indigenous communities must deliberately form and elect leaders who share the community's covenantal memories and who understand land as *fideicommissum*—a trust held for successive generations rather than a possession

to be coerced. Only by recovering *avad* and *shamar* as living categories of daily vocation, electoral discernment, legal vigilance, intergenerational education, and productive labour can Nigerian Christians and indigenous peoples fulfill the Master's charge to "occupy until I come" (Luke 19:13) and prepare for the eschatological dwelling of God with humanity on a renewed earth (Revelation 21:1–4).

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