

# The Concept of Cult Centralization in Deuteronomy and its Possible Implications for Today

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## Abstract

The concept of cult centralization in the book of Deuteronomy is viewed as one of Deuteronomy's constructs for an inclusive society where everyone is important, including the most vulnerable. Some scholars like Bennett and Tigay disagree with this opinion. They argue that the cult centralization, which made the capital the sole center of worship and pilgrimage, was a product of indoctrination and oppression that benefited only the king. This paper contributes to the conversation on cult centralization, especially for an inclusive society where principles of equity and efficient allocation of resources are fulfilled in the context of federated units. It adopts a tradition historical method in its exegesis in examining the earlier function of cult centralization, its context in Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch, and the use or interpretation of it by other biblical traditions, thereby

drawing possible implications for today. In an era when most African countries are grappling with problems of fiscal federalism and resource control due to a central government system, is it possible to find a credible solution to the attendant problems associated with running a centralized government? The paper concludes that a good understanding of Deuteronomy's social vision for community living as evidenced in the cult centralization would possibly leverage an improved social cohesion and integration in society today.

**Keywords:** centralized cult, Deuteronomy, sacred law, federalism, resource control

## 1. Introduction

Endless debates and controversies have competed to provide possible solutions to the conflicting roles

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of ethnicity, politics, and derivation formula in most Africa countries—especially as they grapple with the problems of fiscal federalism and resource control because they run a central government. For example, in Nigeria, the issue of resource control has become a national burden for Nigeria's federation. Some sections of the country have, on occasion, agitated for resource control for a number of reasons. The agitations aim at redressing perceived injustices and inequalities in fiscal relations among ethnic nationalities, regions, and political units within Nigeria's federation. According to Dickson and Asua (2016), this agitation is perceived as a necessary fall-out of the degradation of their environment and the neglect of their conditions by the central government, which is seen as advancing the interests of the ethnic majorities to the detriment of the minorities. Adeyeri (2010) pointed out that Nigeria's federal system has been fluctuating between the excessive regionalism that marked the First Republic (1960–1966) and the excessive centralization of the military and, relatively, the post-military era. Consequently, the inconsistencies in fiscal policies that extend through the colonial era, military rule, structural imbalance, over-centralization of power in the central government, among other factors, have over time perpetuated various thorny issues and challenges within Nigeria's federation (Dickson and Asua 2016). Over the years, the federal government has adopted several approaches in tackling the various issues through different administrative agencies. However, the failure to find a political solution became an excuse for more agitations from different quarters. Factions within these quarters were motivated by various sentiments, which included resource control, restructuring of the nation, and self-determination within the federation (Ikelegbe 2001).

The book of Deuteronomy anticipates a society where everyone is important, including the most vulnerable. Most scholars point to Deuteronomy 12:15–19, as the basis for a sacred law demanding a centralized

cult in the nation's capital. Others draw attention to Deuteronomy 16:18–18:22 as being pivotal in radically shaping and advancing the law. The religious, political, and economic interests of the central sanctuary were advanced by making the capital the sole center of worship and pilgrimage. Robust humanitarian considerations were made for worshippers, including the care for the less privileged. As plausible as this sacred law appears, scholars like Bennett (2003, 7–13) and Tigay (1996, xxii) disagree. They argue that the sacred law was a product of indoctrination, victimization, and oppression, which benefited the king. In order to unravel the purpose of this sacred law, this study adopts a tradition historical method in its exegesis in examining its earlier function, its context in Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch, and the use or interpretation by other biblical traditions, thereby drawing possible implications for today. Mainly, it reviews the five views of scholars on cult centralization, as presented and analyzed by Peter Vogt (2003).

## **2. The Concept and Context of Cult Centralization**

The belief that God has chosen a specific location for worship and valid sacrifices is paramount to the Deuteronomistic theology. This became a sacred law transmitted to the people by Moses. The book of Deuteronomy presented the sacred law in a peculiar way, especially in regulating that sacrificial worship be held only at a specified, centralized sanctuary. This law conferred on the central sanctuary virtually all the important activities that were previously held at local sanctuaries (e.g., judicial activities, rites of purification, festivals, and sacrifices). The book of Deuteronomy is silent about absolute closure of regional sanctuaries in favor of the central sanctuary. However, on several occasions, it is stipulated that the Israelite and the members of his household must sacrifice, partake of the sacrificial meal, and eat tithed food only at the central sanctuary (Deut 12:11, 12, 17,

18), a requirement which entailed the need to desacralize the butchering of animals at the regional level (Blenkinsopp 2004). The synopsis of the sacred law for cult centralization in the book of Deuteronomy is listed as follows:

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Masoretic Text (Hebrew)</b>	<b>English Version (ESV)</b>
Deut 12:5	כִּי אָמַן־אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִכָּל־שָׁבְטֵיכֶם לְשָׁם אֲתִשְׁמוּ שָׁם לְשִׁבְנוּ תַּדְרֹשׁוּ וּבָאתְ שָׁמָה:	But you shall seek <u>the place that the LORD your God will choose</u> out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go.
Deut 12:11	וְהִי־ּה הַמֳּקָם אֲשֶׁר־יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בֹּא לְשִׁבְנוּ שָׁמוּ שָׁם שָׁמָה תָּבִיאוּ אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מִצְוָה אֲתֶכְם עוֹלָתֵיכֶם וּזְבַחַתֵּיכֶם מֻעָשָׂרָתֵיכֶם וֶתְרָמָת יְדֵיכֶם וּכְלֵיכֶם מִבְּחָר נְדִירֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר תַּדְרֹשׁ לְיְהוָה	then to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, and all your finest vow offerings that you vow to the LORD.
Deut 12:14	כִּי אָמַן־בַּמֳּקָם אֲשֶׁר־יִבְחַר יְהוָה בַּאֲחָد שְׁבָطֵיךְ שָׁם תַּעֲלֵה עַלְתִּיךְ וְשָׁם תַּעֲשֵׂה בְּלֵא אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מִצְוָה:	but <u>at the place that the LORD will choose</u> in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you.

Deut 12:18	כִּי אִם־לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תִּאכְלֶנּוּ בַּמֳּקָם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בֹּא אַתָּה וּבָנְךָ וּבָתְךָ וּעֲבָדָךָ וְאִמְתָּךָ וְהַלְוִי אֲשֶׁר בְּשֻׁעָרֵיךְ וְשִׁמְחָתָ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךְ בְּכָל מַשְׁלָח יְדָךְ:	but you shall eat them before the LORD your God <u>in the place that the LORD your God will choose</u> , you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, and the Levite who is within your towns. And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God in all that you undertake.
Deut 12:21	יִרְחַק מִמֶּנּוּ הַמֳּקָם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לְשָׁוֹם שָׁמוּ וַיַּבְחַתָּ מִבְּקָרֶךָ וּמִצְאָנָךָ אֲשֶׁר נִתְןָ יְהוָה לְךָ כִּאֲשֶׁר צוִיתָךְ וְאִכְלָתָךְ בְּשֻׁעָרֵיךְ בְּכָל אֹתוֹ נְפָשָׁתֶךָ:	If <u>the place that the LORD your God will choose</u> to put his name there is too far from you, then you may kill any of your herd or your flock, which the LORD has given you, as I have commanded you, and you may eat within your towns whenever you desire.
Deut 12:26	רַק קָדְשֵׁיךְ אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה לְךָ וּנְדָרֶיךְ תִּשְׁאַו וּבָאתְ אֶל־הַמֳּקָם אֲשֶׁר־ יִבְחַר יְהוָה:	But the holy things that are due from you, and your vow offerings, you shall take, and you shall go to the place that <u>the LORD will choose</u> .

<sup>2</sup> Ellinger, Karl, and Willhelm Rudolph, eds. 2006. The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) Standard Edition. German Bible Society.

Deut 14:23	וְאֶבֶלֶתْ לִפְנֵי   יְהוָה אֱלֹהִיךְ בַּמֶּקוּם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר לְשִׁבּוֹ שְׁמוֹ שֶׁמֶן מַעַשֵּׂר דָּגְנָךְ תִּרְשַׁךְ וַיְצַהַּרְךְ וּבְכָלָת בְּקָרָךְ וְצָאןָךְ לְמַעַן תַּלְמַד לִירָאָה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהִיךְ כֹּל הַיּוֹם:	And before the LORD your God, <u>in the place that he will choose</u> , to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always.	Deut 31:11	בְּבוֹזָא כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל לְרֹאֹות אֶת-פָּנָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהִיךְ בַּמֶּקוּם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר תִּקְרַא אֶת-הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת נֶגֶד כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַזְנֵיכֶם:	When all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God <u>at the place that he will choose</u> , you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing.
Deut 16:11	וְשִׁמְחַתْ לִפְנֵי   יְהוָה אֱלֹהִיךְ אֶתְתָּה וּבָנֶךָ וּבְתָךְ וַיַּעֲבֹדָךְ וְאִמְתַּחְךְ וְהַלְוֵי אֲשֶׁר בְּשֻׁעְרֵיךְ וְהַגָּר וְהַיּוֹתָם וְהַאֲלָמָנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּקָרְבָּךְ בַּמֶּקוּם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִיךְ לְשִׁבּוֹ שְׁמוֹ שָׁם:	And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you, at the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there.			
Deut 16:15	שְׁבֻעַת יָמִים תָּחַג לְיְהוָה אֱלֹהִיךְ בַּמֶּקוּם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר יְהוָה כִּי יִבְרַכְךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִיךְ בְּכָל-תְּבוֹאָתֶךָ וּבְכָל-מִعְשָׂה יָדֶיךְ וְהִיא אֵיךְ שְׁמָחָה:	For seven days you shall keep the feast to the LORD your God <u>at the place that the LORD will choose</u> , because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful.			

Table I: Synopsis of Cult Centralization in Deuteronomy

From the synopsis above, the repetition of the formulaic phrase, “the place that the Lord your God will choose,” is apparent. This was to emphasize the importance of the sacred law that forbade Israel from worshipping in any other location, except the one approved by “the Lord your God.” That particular place chosen by God himself was to serve as the meeting place for all the tribes of Israel during their periodic national festivals or solemn rites. This rule transferred virtually all important activities that were previously performed at local sanctuaries (e.g., sacrifice, festivals, rites of purification, and certain judicial activities) to the central sanctuary. In connection with the annual festivals, the deuteronomistic regulations were related to the three major annual festivals of Israel, namely: Unleavened Bread, Weeks, and Tabernacles. These were celebrated as pilgrimages to local or tribal sanctuaries (Exod 23:17). Attention shifted to the central sanctuary from different localities whose festivals were abrogated. In all the references made to it by Moses, the name of the place was never mentioned, probably to safeguard it from the external aggression of the Canaanites within whose territories it was situated.

Peter Vogt (2003, 34) draws attention to Deuteronomy 16:18–18:22 as pivotal in shaping and advancing the radical program of centralization, secularization, and demythologization of the book of Deuteronomy. The offices of judge, king, priest, and prophet are carefully highlighted in this text, hence a major essence in deuteronomic theology. Vogt presented

and analyzed five views of scholars on centralization on the basis of laws regarding these offices, concluding with an alternative understanding of the views expressed. The major proponents of the views were S.R. Driver, G. von Rad, Moshe Weinfeld, N. Lohfink, and Bernard Levinson.

i. Driver sees 16:18–18:22 as a discrete unit which he titles, “The Office Bearers of the Theocracy.” In Driver’s view, centralized worship at the Temple in Jerusalem was a necessary corollary to the near monotheism taught in Deuteronomy. This was due to the “conditions of the time,” in which worship in many different places would lead to syncretism. The centralization programme envisioned by Deuteronomy is in response to the excesses and abuses of the reign of Manasseh. Deuteronomy represents an attempt to actualize the ideals advocated by the eighth-century prophets, and Deuteronomy’s law of centralization is the logical extension of the prophetic criticism of the *bamot*. The book itself is a “prophet’s reformulation of the ‘law of Moses,’” adapted to the requirements of that later time (Vogt 2003, 34–36).

In Driver’s view, Deuteronomy is “a great manifesto against the dominant tendencies of the time.” It was an attempt to reaffirm in a new context the values and ideals on which the nation was founded, and a call to repudiate practices which were inconsistent with the unconditional loyalty to Yahweh called for by Moses. Given the new context and changed circumstances, however, the older laws of the Book of the Covenant were “adjusted” in order to meet the needs of the time. Driver argues that in some respects Deuteronomy’s programme had unintended consequences. He argues that the goal of Deuteronomy was to spiritualize religious life in Israel, but that the necessity of centralization (to prevent idolatrous worship at the *bamot*—*bamot*) led to formalization of worship and resulted in a loss of spontaneity (Vogt 2003, 34–36).

ii. Von Rad, utilizing the method of form criticism, sought to identify the *Sitz im Leben* of Deuteronomy. More specifically, von Rad argues, the authors of Deuteronomy were “country Levites,” who sought, with the support of the *עַמּוֹת הָאָרֶץ* (people of the land), to revive the “old patriarchal traditions” of Yahwism which date back to the amphictyonic period. He bases this argument on the relative insignificance of the king in Deuteronomy and the absence of any apparent reference to the Davidic covenant and the Messianic implications thereof. On the other hand, von Rad cautions against seeing centralization as a theological center of the book. He argues that Deuteronomy’s demand for centralization represents a relatively late period in the development of the book and is “comparatively easy to remove as a late and final adaptation of many layers of material.” According to von Rad, centralization is a key aspect of the deuteronomic program. Nevertheless, it is important to note his caution in seeing it as the key theology of the book. The book seeks to revive ancient traditions and ideals of the amphictyonic period. It is, therefore, utopian in its view of an earlier period and its desire (which is recognized and promulgated by the authors in the laws as an unrealistic desire) to re-institute the practices of the earlier period. It is realistic, however, not in its political aspirations but in its call for complete loyalty to Yahweh (Vogt 2003, 36–42).

iii. In Moshe Weinfeld’s view, centralization was part of an attempt to reform religious life in Israel that sought to repudiate older traditions and concepts that did not comport with the more sophisticated theological understanding of the authors of Deuteronomy. It presented Deuteronomy as having a distinctly secular foundation. Institutions and practices which were originally sacral in character are recast in secularized forms. In short, the effects of centralization were so far-reaching that they had a dramatic impact on nearly every facet of life.

Deuteronomy's program is, in Weinfeld's understanding, eminently realistic and practical. This program as understood by Weinfeld is one marked by "demythologization and secularization" (Vogt 2003, 42–47).

iv. Lohfink sees Deuteronomy as representing in part a redefinition of power relationships in Israel, such that power is distributed among the offices of judge—the ultimate authority in Israel. However, it is not the offices or officeholders, but rather Torah that constitutes the redefinition of power. This program was a utopian ideal, since the office of the king was never re-established after the exile. Lohfink sees external political reasons underlying the deuteronomistic program, based on the experience of Assyrian domination and Babylonian exile. Lohfink notes that Deuteronomy pointedly seeks to integrate those who, for whatever reason, cannot support themselves on their own property (Vogt 2003, 47–51).

v. Levinson associates Deuteronomy (that is, a form of the book that included a law of centralization) with the reforms of Josiah, on the basis of the close association between the requirements of the legal corpus of Deuteronomy and the reform measures actually carried out by Josiah. While transforming local judicial procedure, Deuteronomy transfers authority for adjudicating ambiguous cases to the central tribunal. For Levinson, the program of centralization of justice envisioned by Deuteronomy is both realistic and utopian. It is utopian in its subjugation of all offices to the Torah. On the other hand, he sees it as realistic in its systematic and deliberate reinterpretation of the Covenant Code and the judicial system and procedures described there. He sees in Deuteronomy both a "draft constitution" as well as a description of the office bearers of theocracy (Vogt 2003, 51–58).

In evaluating the highlighted five views of centralization, Vogt demonstrated that, while there may be consensus that centralization is at the core of the deuteronomistic program, it has not led to consensus on other key aspects of the book. Areas of divergence include the key areas of interpretation of the book, namely: setting, audience, and the nature of the program—whether utopian or realistic (Vogt 2003, 67–69). On *setting*, von Rad contends that the book is the product of northern country Levites, hence a priestly/cultic setting, while Weinfeld and Levinson see the setting of the book as the Judean court. On one hand, Driver (Vogt 2003, 34–36) proposes a prophetic setting for the book, while Lohfink (Vogt 2003, 47–51), on the other hand, sees a post-exilic setting for the book. For *audience*, Weinfeld sees Deuteronomy as a manual for the king and the people. Similarly, von Rad sees the book as preaching, and consequently as being addressed to an audience consisting of the people. Driver sees the book as continuing in the prophetic tradition of the eighth-century prophets and therefore has the people in view. Likewise, Lohfink (Vogt 2003, 47–51) sees a popular audience, on the basis that the text was "to be read before large assemblies of Israel." On the *nature* of the programme, for Lohfink, the judicial reform of Deuteronomy 16:18–18:22 represents a utopian ideal because the institution of the monarchy had ceased to exist at the time this was accepted as law. Levinson (Vogt 2003, 51–58) sees the reform as an active engagement with an existing political system that was realistic in intention. Clearly, the nature of the program affects how the book is best interpreted.

So, Vogt proposed an alternative view. According to him, the nature of centralization and its relationship to the vision espoused by Deuteronomy is an important issue, for the understanding of the nature of the program necessarily has an impact on the interpretation of the book. Vogt argued that centralization in Deuteronomy is best conceived of as centralization of sacrifice, while the expansion of holiness represented in the book suggests

that all of life is lived before Yahweh and is, therefore, religiously significant. Thus, while sacrifice is centralized, worship is not. Deuteronomy is radical in its rejection of Ancient Near East conceptions of administration, which have at their center an all-powerful king. Instead, Deuteronomy presents a vision of a community in which the people in assembly are given tremendous responsibility. In Vogt's view, some elements in the deuteronomistic vision appear utopian, while most provisions are realistic—a departure from Lohfink's view of strict utopia. This study anchors with Vogt's (2003, 238) conclusion that the centralization formula in Deuteronomy provides a realistic program for the administration of the nation.

### 3. The Purpose of Cult Centralization

For centuries, scholars have debated the reason behind the regulation for the cult centralization in Deuteronomy. Apparently, Deuteronomy perceived worship at multiple sites as inherently pagan, hence the admonition, "You shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place that he shall choose to make his name dwell..." (Deut 14:23). Curiously, one is constrained to know the purpose for the centralization of the cult at the place chosen by the LORD, or why there were restrictions on the regional sanctuaries, and who were the authors and beneficiaries of the cult centralization.

Bakon (1998, 30) opines that the major reason for the abrogation of the בָמֹת (*bamot*—high places), was to forestall the influence of Canaan idolatrous practices from being introduced into the worship of God; it was a reintroduction of pure monotheism, and the purification of Judean life from heathenism. Weinfeld foresaw a political dimension in the cult centralization. According to him, "centralization of the cult in the Jerusalem Temple itself was a sweeping innovation of revolutionary proportions" (Weinfeld 1996, 38; cf. 1972, 190; 1964, 202–212). He refuted the opinion that the centralization was intended to prevent religious syncretism from

taking root at the high places, since the temple of Jerusalem was also not immune to syncretism. Finally, he submitted that the abolition of high places and the provincial sanctuaries under Hezekiah and Josiah was an attempt to increase the dependence of the provincial population upon the central sanctuary in Jerusalem, thereby preventing both their political and religious surrender to Assyria (Weinfeld 1964, 205–206; cf. Nicholson 1963, 380–385).

It is plausible that the motivation of the cult centralization in Deuteronomy could be explained in both political and religious terms. It would be added that economic consideration was one of the motivations, because tithes and offerings were demanded at the central sanctuary (Deut 12:15–19; 14:22–29). According to Levinson (1997, 20):

The authors of Deuteronomy sought to implement a comprehensive programme of religious, social and political transformation that left no area of life untouched. Their new vision of the Judean polity included matters of cultus, justice, political administration, family life, sexuality, warfare, social and economic justice and theology.

Steinberg (1991, 162) demonstrated that, from a cross-cultural perspective, these legal provisions can be interpreted as part of the politics of state centralization. State centralization altered judicial authority as exemplified in the Book of the Covenant, which is generally regarded as an earlier legal tradition. Using the perspectives of comparative legal studies, he demonstrated that the change in ancient Israel's judicial administration was aimed at weakening local political boundaries in order to strengthen the authority of the central government under the united monarchy. According to Steinberg (1991, 169), in the tenth century, Deuteronomy 19–25 would have provided an important means for centralizing the political authority of the king by weakening local political boundaries and strengthening the nuclear family unit.

In summary, the motivation for the cult centralization was religious, political and economic. Religiously, it was intended to prevent syncretism from taking root at the high places, even though it did not guarantee that. Politically, it increased the dependence of the provincial population upon the central sanctuary, thereby preventing their political and religious surrender to the adversary nation. Economically, all the major offerings, sacrifices, and tithes were directed to the center for the upkeep of the sanctuary and its personnel, the support of the three major annual pilgrimage festivals, and the promotion of the humanitarian services of the state. The economic sustenance of the cult centralization depended much on the tithe system; elaborate stipulations were made for it in Chapters 12:1–28, 14:22–29, and 26:12–15.

## **4. Authorship and Beneficiaries of Cult Centralization**

On the authorship and the beneficiaries of the cult centralization, opinions are varied. The apparent generalization of the functions of the priests and Levites in Deuteronomy has caused some to suggest that it was authored by the Levites (cf. Wright 1996, 325–330; cf. Weinfeld 1972, 54). Hjelm (1999, 298–309; cf. Halpern 1981, 20–38) sees the cult centralization as a device of cult control, which served the king's interest; so the origin must be connected to the palace. However, Crusemann and others believed that a social sub-group in the biblical communities prior to the appearance of the monarchy was responsible for the reformulated laws in Deuteronomy (Crusemann 1996, 215–234; cf. Bennett 2003, 7–13). Yet another view believes that the resident priests in the central sanctuary at Jerusalem were responsible for Deuteronomy as a means of garnering support for themselves.

The views expressed above have been refuted by some scholars. It is inconceivable that the Levites—who were deprived of their office through the centralization of the cult and were therefore rated with foreigners, orphans, and widows—could be identified with the circle which authored Deuteronomy (Weinfeld 1972, 55). Furthermore, Tigay (1996, xxii) argues that the innovations of Deuteronomy were costly to the priests because tithes and firstlings were no longer given to them exclusively. The deuteronomic law required the Jerusalem priests to share their duties and income with any provincial Levites who came to Jerusalem (cf. 18:1–6). Weinfeld believes that it was written by the scribes in the service of Hezekiah, and perhaps, their disciples under Josiah (a century later), who made it a major criterion for evaluating the history of the Israelite monarchy (Weinfeld 1972, 158–178; 1964, 210; cf. Prov 25:1).

I agree with Tigay (1996, xxii) that it is difficult to determine precisely who was responsible for the authorship of the innovations in Deuteronomy. But suffice to say that, whoever was responsible must have been dissatisfied with the earlier traditional attachment to provincial cults; this apparently did not create enough social and humanitarian orientations. Deuteronomy looks like a composite work, but the cult centralization definitely is tilted towards the cultic and political reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. It is possible that the scribes in the service of Hezekiah, or their disciples who served under Josiah, were responsible for the cult centralization as a way of legitimizing the unified monarchy.

Subsequently, Niehaus (1997, 540) suggested that the sentence, “You are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put God's name there for God's dwelling” (Deut 12:5), was understood to be a veiled reference to the Jerusalem temple. It was part of the deuteronomic agenda of reform to centralize worship in Jerusalem, thus confirming the control of the Jerusalem priesthood and enhancing

the battle against idolatry. This interpretation has become standard among many scholars, although it runs counter to the long-understood meaning of this passage, namely, that “the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put the LORD’s name there for the LORD’s dwelling,” simply means, “wherever the LORD will have placed the tabernacle”—be it at Shiloh (Jer 7:12) or, later, Jerusalem. The identification of “the place” (**מִקְרָה**) of Deuteronomy with Jerusalem depends on the existence of parallel phrasing in the books of Kings (e.g., 2 Kgs 21:7). But it is now clear that stock phrasing was applied in the ancient world to different locations as circumstances changed, so that “the place” in Deuteronomy 14:23 may also refer simply to any place that the LORD might choose to place the LORD’s name (cf. Niehaus 1997, 541).

To be precise, who were the beneficiaries of the cult centralization? Deuteronomy gives the impression that no one was excluded. From the worshipper and the presenter of offerings, down to the foreigners, orphans, and widows; all benefited from the proceeds of the cult centralization. However, it should be stressed that the cult centralization was a form of garnering support for the state and the central sanctuary.

## 5. Earlier Function of Cult Centralization

Levinson (1997, 23) opines that some scholars have maintained that centralization of cult in Deuteronomy originally functioned not exclusively but rather distributively, and thus applied to a succession of earlier sanctuaries, such as at Shechem and Shiloh. This view was tied to the claim that the origins of Deuteronomy were to be found in the northern kingdom of Israel and that the formula was only secondarily specified to apply to Jerusalem (cf. Geoghegan 2003, 227). The argument that the deuteronomistic centralization formula (as in Deut 12:14) has a distributive meaning was an attempt to make the origins of Deuteronomy ancient.

The attempt to assign a distributive meaning to the centralization formula cannot be defended philologically. Indeed, there is compelling evidence that the election formula was, from its inception, centered on Jerusalem. When the formulas that include the key term **הַמֶּקֶם** (the chosen place) are examined, they always refer to Zion/Jerusalem or to the election of the Davidic dynasty resident there.

Gamberoni (1997, 532–544) submitted that the term **מִקְדָּשׁ** (place) can refer without theological overtones to the land of one’s birth (Ezek 21:30) or of certain peoples (Exod 3:8, 17). In Genesis 13:14–17 the **מִקְדָּשׁ** is not just an arbitrary location, but rather the Promised Land itself. A particular **מִקְדָּשׁ** may be of interest to tradition because a certain encounter with God occurred there (theophany). The etiological names given to the sites of theophanies or other significant events in the form of fixed formulas, regardless of whether such sites were already cultic sites according to previous traditions, infuse Israel’s identity and tradition, as it were, into the land and Israel thereby appropriates the land both in an actual and in a theological sense.

According to Gamberoni, the chosen place (**מִקְדָּשׁ**) in Deuteronomy announces God’s future act and does not constitute a prescription, not even with its amplifications (Deut 12:5; 14:23, 26; 15:20; 16:15, 16; 17:10; etc.). The chosen place (**מִקְדָּשׁ**) is the sanctioned and obligatory site for sacrifices, offerings, and joyful repast (ch. 12), for the fulfilment of vows (12:26), the delivery or eating of tithes of produce and of firstlings (14:22–23; 15:19–20), for the administration of the portions of the priests and Levites (18:6–8), for the main festivals (16:1–17), for judgement in difficult legal cases (17:8, 10), and finally, for the regular reading of “this Torah” (31:11). Only sections generally judged to be written later speak about movement from different places and pilgrimages (12:5; cf. 12:26; 14:25). The inner logic of certain new regulations presupposes that the chosen **מִקְדָּשׁ** is not (or

no longer) situated at one's own dwelling place; such indications include the permission for sacrificial slaughter at one's own home (12:15–16, 21; 15:22), financial provisions for certain cases (14:24–26), and concern for Levites from other places (18:6–8). Such measures are justified by the fact that the chosen place is “too far” (14:24)—a situation itself arising from the fact that following God’s promise, God “enlarged” the land through God’s blessing (12:20; 19:8).

According to McConville (1984, 33), “The recurring collocation of **ה** and **מִקְדָּשׁ** suggests a pattern in the way in which **הַמִּקְדָּשׁ** is used. And, indeed, the force of phraseology that is produced is to stress the agency of the LORD in Israel’s coming in to the land.” The singularity of one cultic site for all Israel (i.e., the strict demand for cultic centralization) was not inherent from the very beginning of this formula, but rather was imbued into it as a result of circumstances. Ultimately, the unexplained fact that the **מִקְדָּשׁ** in Deuteronomy was never given a name may be a result of the fundamental nature of the incomplete formula itself, among other things. Here, the LORD’s selection is the primary issue. According to one series of admonitions, the pagan cultic sites are to be avoided (12:8, 13, 30, 31; 2 Kgs 17:33), yet another calls for their demolition. First Kings 8:27 literally calls into question the older unaffected notion that the LORD dwells in the temple and “on the earth” (1 Kgs 8:12, 13). According to Deuteronomy God chooses the place to “make God’s name dwell there” (12:11), whereby it remains unresolved, whether one may refer here to an actual deuteronomistic “name theology” or not. In other contexts, **מִקְדָּשׁ** sometimes hovers between the meanings, “temple” and “land” (2 Sam 7:10, 1 Chron 17:9; Exod 23:20). Despite the close connection between temple, dynasty, and residence, the term **מִקְדָּשׁ** is never used to refer to the residence, even though virtually everything constituting the external, public prestige of that center uses the word for the sake of localization—either because of its dramatic effect, or as

a syntactical device serving the simultaneous celebration of the greatness of the temple and of the near God (Gamberoni 1997, 543).

So, the collection and the eating of the tithe at the chosen place (**הַמִּקְדָּשׁ**) in Deuteronomy 14:23, 26 was a special deuteronomistic provision, arising out of centralization of worship. It was impractical for all Levites to serve at the central sanctuary; therefore, special consideration was to be given to the town Levites (14:27–29; cf. 18:1; 26:12–15). This law modifies the previous provision that an annual tithe be brought to the sanctuary for the support of the Levites (Num 18:21–32). Tigay (1996, xxii) reports that the centralization of the cult reflected the views and interests of various groups in ancient Israelite society, but that it is difficult to identify any single one of them as the authors. He suggests that the Jerusalem priesthood and the royal court were involved in the discovery and promulgation of the book (cf. 2 Kgs 22–23). Certainly, their political and economic interests would be advanced by making the capital the sole center of worship and pilgrimage, but unfortunately for them, other details of Deuteronomy prejudiced their interests (e.g., the law of the king in Deut 17:13–20). Deuteronomistic stipulations became costly to the priests because tithes and firstlings were no longer donated to them as such, but for the support of the annual pilgrimage feasts. It also required the Jerusalem priests to share their duties and income with any provincial Levites who came to the central sanctuary—a requirement they apparently resisted when Josiah’s reform was carried out. From the same point of view, Bennett (2003, 7–18) argued that the cult centralization, especially the tithe regulation in Deuteronomy 14:22–29 and 26:12–15, relegated the Levites, the foreigners, the orphans, and the widows to a position of vulnerability and socio-economic inferiority.

The deuteronomistic centralization of the cult may have posed more problems to the people than it sought to solve. But I disagree with Bennett

and Tigay that the cult centralization relegated the Levitical priests and the less privileged to the state of socio-economic inferiority and vulnerability. Credit instead should be given to the book for its humanitarian orientation, which is hardly seen in other Pentateuchal codes. Apart from the provision of tithe in support of the cult workers and the less privileged, the book of Deuteronomy elaborated various other material supports for the people.

## **6. Possible Implications for Today**

From the foregoing, it is plausible to draw on deuteronomistic cult centralization perspectives to leverage an improved understanding that serves social cohesion and national integration for African countries—especially as they grapple with problems of fiscal federalism and resource control. Here are outlines of some of the possible implications for today in the context of cult centralization under the following headings: derivation principle, appropriation principle, integration principle, devolution of powers, and national security.

### *6.1 Derivation Principle in Cult Centralization*

According to Adebayo (2012), “The principle of derivation is a component of fiscal federalism and ensures that a region or state retains a certain percentage from oil tax revenues derived from the exploitation and extraction of natural resources (like oil and gas) in its territory.” The cult centralization in Deuteronomy was a form of garnering support for the state and the central sanctuary, whose main resource was the tithing system. The deuteronomic tithe was related to three major functions: (a) to support the sanctuary feast—14:22–26, (b) to support the Levites—14:27, and (c) to support the less privileged in the society, which included the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow—14:28, 29 (Weinfeld 1996, 38). The tithing system was a form of contribution where every Israelite was expected to contribute

ten percent of their earnings to the center. Brown (2002, 157) suggested that in order to avoid endless debates about how much might be considered worthy as a gift to the LORD, the LORD gave them a basic principle for the allocation of their resources: giving one-tenth as a general guide. It also implied that an individual would be left with a sufficient percentage of his income to care for his private needs, although it was assumed that some fractions of the individual’s portion could still be used in other forms of offering. African nations could ensure that each region in a federated unit retains a substantial percentage of the revenues derived from their territories. This would go a long way in defusing latent tensions within the polity.

### *6.2 Appropriation Principle in Cult Centralization*

Appropriation is defined as the act of setting aside money for a specific purpose. A company or a government appropriates funds in order to delegate cash for the necessities of its business operations. For example, a company might appropriate money for short-term or long-term needs that include employee salaries, research and development, and dividends. In the cult centralization, tithes were appropriated as priestly emoluments and wages for the Levites for their services in the sanctuary and regional courts or cities of refuge (Deut 14, 19). As long as this provision was in place, the cult personnel were devoted to their duties and the nation prospered. The chronicler, in a later dispensation, recorded how King Hezekiah’s reforms restored both the titling principle and the welfare of the nation (2 Chron 31:1–12). It is not out of place for the federal governments in Nigeria to rely on the resources from their confederated units to perform their civil obligations, namely: defense, education, roads, electricity, health, foreign policy, power, and steel production among others (Kehinde et al. 2013). In as much as federal government agencies require adequate appropriation from

the center, this procedure should be pursued in a spirit of transparency, equity, and accountability. Raji was right when he argued that the failing promises of Nigeria's federal government to appropriate the revenue accrued from the region toward a sustainable development, explain the basis for persistent demands and endless crises in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria (Raji et al. 2013).

### *6.3 Integration principle in cult centralization*

Credit should be given to the cult centralization for its humanitarian orientation. Apart from the provision of tithes in support of the cult workers and the less privileged, the book of Deuteronomy elaborated various other material supports for the people. The cult centralization anticipated a social system where no one is economically disadvantaged. According to Tigay (1996, xviii), "Humanitarian rules of this sort are found in all of the Pentateuchal laws, but they are most extensive in Deuteronomy." Deuteronomic laws protected and provided for the poor and disadvantaged, which included debtors, indentured servants, escaped slaves, foreigners, orphans, widows, and Levites, as well as animals and even convicted criminals (10:8–10; 16:11–14; 24:19–21; 27:19). In a federated system, one of the greatest challenges is that of a sharing formula as regards to the fiscal resources generated and jointly owned by the federated units. Nkwede et al. (2011) corroborate the fact that principles of horizontal equity and efficient allocation of resources should be achieved in the context of fiscal federalism.

### *6.4 Devolution of powers in cult centralization*

One of the dark sides of the cult centralization was the usurpation of the functions of the Levites by the Priests. Bennett argues that the cult

centralization relegated the Levites to the state of socio-economic inferiority and vulnerability in the post-exilic era when the numbers of the Levites dwindled. Furthermore, the cult centralization was also seen as a way of confirming the control or superiority of the Jerusalem priesthood over the priests in other locations (cf. Niehaus 1997, 540). This created tension. According to Dickson (2016), "True federalism is a situation whereby the centre and the sub units are economically autonomous and administratively responsible for most of their activities, i.e. a situation whereby there is devolution of constitutional responsibilities of power between the centre and regions/sub units." In other words, the state, regions, and the center share sovereignty in various aspects.

### *6.5 National Security in Cult Centralization*

The cult centralization system engendered national security in ancient Israel. It increased the dependence of the provincial population upon the central sanctuary, thereby preventing their religious, political, and economic surrender to adversary nations. But, when there was a rebellion to withdraw from the center through the infamous quote: "To your tents, O Israel!" (1 Kgs 12:16), the national security of ancient Israel was never the same again. Federal governments in Nigeria could ensure regular conversations and negotiations with their federal units in the spirit of tolerance, equity, inclusion, and national cohesion, to forestall incidences that engender violent agitations and calls for self-determination.

## **7. Conclusion**

The controversies and politics surrounding resource control among African nations may still linger as long as regions within confederated units are still playing discordant tunes. However, this study has shown that the book

of Deuteronomy anticipated a society where everyone was important, including the most vulnerable. The introduction of the cult centralization was the bedrock of deuteronomistic theology where the religious, political, and economic interests of the central sanctuary were advanced by making the capital the sole center of worship and pilgrimage, and which became a rallying point for the nationhood of ancient Israel. While the outcome of the sacred law varies, the paper recommends that integrating deuteronomistic social vision for a healthy society should leverage an improved understanding for social cohesion and national integration among African nations. Federalism should not be seen as a curse but a blessing.

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