Published by

British Journal of Contemporary Research

BEXFORD PUBLISHING

Lex Talionis and the Ethics of Reciprocal Justice: An Exegetical Study of Exodus 21:23-25 in Dialogue with *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè*

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 6 | 2026 | Article Number: 074

Accepted: 03 November 2026 | Published: 10 November 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)

Crossref : **https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-S5SALW9B**

Babatope David Oni[1], Oluwaseyi Nathaniel Shogunle[1], Olufadekemi Adagbada[2]

[1]Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria,

[2]Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, Faculty of Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria

Correspondence: Babatope David Oni, onibabatope81@gmail.com

Abstract

Interpreting *lex talionis* in Exodus 21:23-25 opens up a fascinating discussion about retribution, proportionality, and regulation of responses to wrongdoing. While the phrase "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" is often seen as a principle of retaliation, it is essential to investigate its legal role and ethical implications within its literary and historical contexts. This study therefore reexamined *lex talionis* in a dialogue with *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè* to explore the concept of reciprocal justice. Adopting historico-grammatical exegesis, the study analysed the biblical text alongside contextual interpretations of the *ẹsẹ Ifá (Ifa* verse). This dialogue highlights both the similarities and differences between the two traditions without assuming them to be identical. The analysis focused on the connection between injury and consequence, the boundaries of retaliation, moral accountability, and the maintenance of social order. The paper then argued that the *talionic* formula forms part of a legal framework that should not be seen as a license for personal revenge. Similarly, the *Ifá* narrative features themes of reciprocal recompense, but it ultimately leads to the tragic death of *Ogbè's* daughter and ends with a clear warning to uphold good behaviour. Thus, its ethical message is both complex and cautionary: retaliatory equivalence can perpetuate harm rather than restore justice. This study contributed to biblical hermeneutics by demonstrating how a critically controlled dialogue with an indigenous religious narrative can demystify the ethical pitfalls of vengeance while respecting the historical and conceptual uniqueness of both traditions.

Keywords: *Lex Talionis*, Exodus 21:23-25, *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè*, Reciprocal Justice, Proportionality, African Biblical Hermeneutics

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

1. Introduction

Justice hinges on the ability to differentiate between an appropriate response to wrongdoing and mere retaliation that might intensify the original harm. Legal systems attempt to make this distinction through rules on liability, evidence, proportionality, and how cases are judged. One of the most well-known expressions of this relationship between injury and consequence is the biblical principle known as *lex talionis* and expressed as "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth." When this principle is taken out of its legal context, it can easily be misinterpreted as a justification for personal retaliation. To fully understand Exodus 21:23-25, there is a need to consider the meaning of the formula within the Covenant Code, the types of harm it addresses, and how its language relates to legal authority and accountability. This pericope is particularly important because it includes this familiar formula in the context of legislation about a situation where a pregnant woman is injured (Exod. 21:22-25). It further clarifies the distinction between cases where no serious harm occurs and where harm does happen, laying out a sequence of corresponding consequences. The exact meaning of the Hebrew word אָסוֹן (harm, disaster, or possibly fatal injury) and the outcome described in verse 22 are still subjects of debate. These discussions influence how we understand the shift from a monetary penalty to the *talionic* principle (Jackson, 2006; Wright, 2009). It is important to interpret these verses without treating "eye for eye" as a self-contained maxim.

This paper engaged Exodus 21:23-25 in dialogue with *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè*. In the narrative of *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè, Ọ̀wọ́nrín* and *Ogbè* enter a cycle of reciprocal claims. A borrowed pot comes back in the wrong form, a fruit-bearing tree is cut down, and a bead later becomes the instrument through which an old grievance is avenged, and the revenge ends with the beheading of *Ogbè*'s daughter. The narrative is full of formulaic sayings about retaliation. It also warns that retaliation breeds regret, and it closes with an appeal for good conduct. That tension makes the narrative an ideal partner for investigating the difference between correspondence and justice. The paper does not intend to neither merge biblical law and *Ifá* into a single moral system nor make claim that one tradition explains the other. It rather sets the texts in a controlled hermeneutical dialogue. The central argument runs is that Exodus 21:23-25 establishes a principle of correspondence within a legal context while *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè* narrative likewise dramatises what happens when a retaliatory interpretation of correspondence is pursued without restraint, as grievance feeds on itself and turns destructive. The paper hence raises questions of proportionality, of responsibility, and of the difference between repairing harm and prolonging it.

The paper addressed the popular interpretation of *lex talionis* as a direct command for victims to inflict identical injuries. Such readings ignore the legal context, the neighbouring laws, and the disputed meaning of the harm described in Exodus 21:22-23. It also describes *talion* purely as a humane brake onretaliation, and that description can conceal debates about literal enforcement and compensation. The *Ifá* narrative resists easy summary in the same way, since its reciprocal sayings sit beside a tragic ending and an explicit call to good conduct, which rules out reading it as a simple endorsement of payback. This paper therefore investigated how each text relates injury to consequence, and when the pursuit of recompense further becomes injustice. It also reinterpreted Exodus 21:23-25 through critical dialogue with the *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè* narrative, with particular attention to proportionality, responsibility, reciprocal consequence and the regulation of retaliation.

2. Review of Related Literature

Lex Talionis in Biblical Legal Scholarship

The *talionic* principle appears three times in the Pentateuch: Exodus 21:23-25, Leviticus 24:19-20 and Deuteronomy 19:21. Each occurrence links injury to consequence and must therefore be read in its literary setting. Exodus situated the principle in the Covenant Code's laws on social relations, bodily injury,

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

property and liability. Childs (1974) places these laws within the literary and theological movement of the book. Sarna (1991) comments closely on their Hebrew wording and legal context while Jackson (2006) warns against assuming that every provision in the Covenant Code operated only as a rule enforced by a formal court; some laws may also have taught, and some may have helped communities avoid disputes in the first place. Wright (2009) examines the compositional links that bind together the laws on homicide, assault, injury to a pregnant woman, *talion*, and injury to enslaved persons.

Jackson (2006) questions how biblical law functioned in the resolution of disputes while Wright (2009) asks how the text was shaped in relation to its neighbouring laws and to ancient Near Eastern legal traditions. These questions complement each other, and the present study draws on both. It declines to reduce *talion* to a purely symbolic rule, and it declines equally to reduce it to an automatic command for bodily retaliation. The text decides. Its context decides with it.

Injury, Compensation, and the Ancient Near Eastern Context

Exodus 21:22-25 is debated since it describes a fight that injures a pregnant woman, the emergence of her children, the presence or absence of אָסוֹן (harm), and finally a *talionic* list. Scholars remain divided on whether the verses originally preserve separate legal materials or they fold the formula into a single case. Wright (2009) compares the Covenant Code with the Laws of Hammurabi and argues that biblical law reworks older legal materials, including their treatment of liability and vicarious punishment. Ancient Near Eastern parallels matter but similar formulae can serve different functions.

The *talionic* list appears among provisions on assault, bodily injury and slaves. Exodus 21:26-27 make a provision for release of a slave whose master destroys his eye or knocks out his tooth. This neighbouring law unsettles any mechanical reading of "eye for eye" and raises questions about social status and about the remedies available to people of different standing (Jackson, 2006; Wright, 2009). Verse 22 brings its difficulties. Some interpreters read the phrase וְיָצְאוּ יְלָדֶיהָ (her children come out) as premature delivery, and others read it as miscarriage. The phrase וְלֹא יִהְיֶה אָסוֹן (and no harm/disaster occurs) is equally disputed. Jackson (2006) surveys the competing interpretations and shows how hard it is to pin down the exact referent of אָסוֹן (harm).

***Ifá* as Literary and Ethical Tradition**

Ifá is a divinatory corpus that includes narratives, poetic formulae, prescriptions, prohibitions, and accounts that interpret human conduct in relation to destiny, social obligation and consequence. Abimbola (1976) posit that *Ifá is* a structured literary corpus in which poetic language and narrative work relate. Bascom (1969) idenntifies the role of the verses in divination and in cultural transmission. Both studies support that a verse should be read whole, with close attention to its formulae, its plot and its concluding instruction. African biblical hermeneutics makes a parallel demand: interpretation must take African contexts seriously and must never assume that cultural categories are uniform or self-explanatory (Adamo, 2015; West, 2004).

Recent scholarship keeps pressing on the linguistic and literary texture of *ẹsẹ̀ Ifá*. Olateju (2025) analyses its specialised language and its sociolinguistic and stylistic features, and the analysis reinforces a basic need that shape genre and performance instead of treating verse as a transparent statement of doctrine. *Yorùbá* proverbs also carry jurisprudential reflection, and Arowosegbe (2017) shows how they inform indigenous reasoning about justice. Following these leads, the paper separates the proverbial language of the narrative from the moral judgement that its plot and closing exhortation suggest.

3. Methodology and Hermeneutical Framework

The paper adopted a qualitative textual approach as historico-grammatical exegesis attended to Hebrew

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

vocabulary, syntax, literary context and the legal setting of the Covenant Code. It also engaged critical scholarship on how the *talionic* formula relates to the neighbouring laws. English translation was not allowed to settle the meaning of the pericope. Where the Hebrew is disputed, the analysis lays out the interpretive options and explains why they matter.

Likewise, the contextual analysis of the *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè* narrative followed the narrative sequence, the recurring sayings, the actions of the principal characters, the consequences of their decisions, and the explicit moral that closes the narrative. It is therefore cited as a supplied narrative, and no published edition is claimed for it. This gap should be closed before journal submission. If the text was collected from Chief Ifáyẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, Àràbà Awo of Oṣogbo. The dialogue between the traditions is comparative in the analytical sense. Equivalence is never assumed. Four criteria guide the comparison: (a) how each text relates wrongdoing to consequence; (b) whether the response is proportionate to the original injury; (c) how responsibility is assigned; and (d) whether the outcome repairs social harm or compounds it. These criteria make comparison possible and still respect the distinct genres and historical settings of biblical law and *Ifá* narrative**.**

4. Exegetical Analysis of Exodus 21:23-25

Literary and Legal Context

Exodus 21:23-25 belongs to the Covenant Code (Exod. 20:22-23:33),, which follows provisions on homicide, assault and bodily injury (Exod. 21:12-21). The immediate scene is a fight between men in which a pregnant woman is struck (21:22). The text then distinguishes two outcomes. If no אָסוֹן (harm) occurs, the responsible party owes a compensation set through the woman's husband and the adjudicative process. If harm does occur, the text introduces the formula "life for life" and a list of bodily injuries. The legal structure thus ties the consequence to the degree or kind of harm. How the childbirth outcome should be understood is still contested (Jackson, 2006; Sarna, 1991; Wright, 2009). The woman is a vulnerable third party, and she is not one of the men fighting. Her injury interrupts their quarrel and demands a defined response. The husband helps determine the payment, and his role is qualified by a reference to adjudication, so the amount never appears as an unchecked private demand. The precise meaning of בִּפְלִלִים (judgment) in verse 22 is debated. Most interpreters associate it with determination by judges or arbitrators.

Hebrew Text and Translation

The relevant Hebrew text of Exodus 21:23-25 reads:

וְאִם־אָסוֹן יִהְיֶה וְנָתַתָּה נֶפֶשׁ תַּחַת נָפֶשׁ׃

If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life,

עַיִן תַּחַת עַיִן שֵׁן תַּחַת שֵׁן יָד תַּחַת יָד רֶגֶל תַּחַת רָגֶל׃

eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

כְּוִיָּה תַּחַת כְּוִיָּה פֶּצַע תַּחַת פָּצַע חַבּוּרָה תַּחַת חַבּוּרָה׃

burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

A close working translation reads: "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life,eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe The phrase "serious harm" is an interpretive rendering of אָסוֹן (harm), and it makes no claim that the Hebrew term carries only that meaning. Many English translations simply say 'harm.' Some read the term as death or fatal injury. A close reading should keep that uncertainty in plain view.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

אָסוֹן (ʾĀsôn): 'Harm', 'Disaster,' or 'Fatal Injury'

The conditional clause וְאִם־אָסוֹן יִהְיֶה can be rendered "if harm occurs" or "if there is serious injury." Outside this text it appears in the Joseph narrative, where Jacob fears that harm may befall Benjamin (Gen. 42:4, 38; 44:29). Its semantic range covers disaster and injury, and the precise severity intended in Exodus 21:23 is disputed. Two readings follow. If the word refers specifically to the woman's death, the *talionic* list may specify the consequence for that death and then extend the principle through a conventional catalogue of injuries. If it refers more broadly to serious injury, the formula covers a wider range of outcomes. Jackson (2006) and Wright (2009) show why lexical assertion alone cannot resolve the matter.

The choice has ethical weight. The text clearly separates the consequences in verse 22 from those in verse 23. It says nothing, in modern legal terms, about how each injury must be proven or how each penalty is to be carried out. The shift from an assessed payment in verse 22 to corresponding consequences in verses 23-25 places the gravity and nature of the harm at the centre of the legal response.

תַּחַת (Taḥat): "In Place of" and the Logic of Correspondence

The repeated preposition תַּחַת which means 'under,' "instead of" or "in place of." In נֶפֶשׁ תַּחַת נָפֶשׁ (life for life), it binds the life lost to the life that answers it in the legal response. The same construction returns in עַיִן תַּחַת עַיִן (eye in place of eye) and in every remaining pair. Repetition gives the law its rhetorical power. Each consequence is matched to a named injury. The injured party's anger has no say in setting it, and the offender's social influence has none either.

The expression has limits; it cannot tell whether every case required literal bodily injury, monetary compensation, or some other legally mediated remedy. Scholars disagree about how *talion* operated historically, and the evidence supports no universal consensus. Wright (2009) reads the formula against the Covenant Code's adaptation of ancient Near Eastern law. Jackson (2006) stresses literary form and social function while Sarna (1991) places it within the stream of biblical legal tradition. The safest conclusion is modes; the formula expresses correspondence. Its enforcement in particular cases needs further evidence.

The *Talionic* Catalogue: Life, Eye, Tooth, Hand, Foot, Burn, Wound, Bruise

The list descends from life to organs and limbs, then to burns, wounds and bruises. Its repeated pattern of noun plus תַּחַת matches each stated consequence to a specified injury. Tension remains as the wording can sound like an instruction to reproduce bodily harm, and claiming that it could never have carried a literal meaning would be dishonest. The ethical argument must separate the principle of correspondence from its possible modes of implementation. At minimum, the formula rejects unlimited response. One injury cannot justify any degree of counter-injury. Read this way, the principle works as a constraint on retaliation, and the debate over literal implementation and compensation can continue alongside it.

The Wider Context: Injury to Enslaved Persons

Exodus 21:26-27 follows the formula with a striking provision. A master who destroys the eye or knocks out the tooth of a male or female slave must release that person. Here the law applies a consequence to injury inside a relationship of deep inequality. Status grants no exemption. The loss of bodily integrity becomes legally consequential, and the Covenant Code shows that it could articulate remedies that do something other than replicate the injury. Its legal imagination is wide. A single mechanical reading of "eye for eye" cannot contain it.

Caution is still needed, since one adjacent law cannot prove that *talion* was always symbolic or that every injury was settled with money. Its evidence is narrower and firmer. Bodily injury could trigger a legally specified remedy other than identical injury. That finding supports reading *lex talionis* within a broader

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

framework of liability and proportionate consequence, and it leaves blanket authorisation for private vengeance with no footing in the text (Jackson, 2006; Wright, 2009).

Exegetical Synthesis

Exodus 21:23-25 presents a principle of correspondence within a legal collection concerned with violence, bodily harm and liability. Its Hebrew wording binds injury to consequence. The surrounding case makes the seriousness of the harm decisive. The passage has real ambiguities, chief among them the meaning of אָסוֹן and the practical operation of *talion*, and they should stay visible. None of them justifies reading the passage as permission for unregulated revenge. The legal context places every response to harm inside a normative framework that relates consequence to injury. That conclusion lays the ground for the dialogue with *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè*.

5. Synopsis and Ethical Interpretation of *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè*

The Narrative and Its Structure

Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè opens with a divinatory admonition; sacrifice should be made, and people should avoid harmful conduct, because retaliatory behaviour is not good. A practical principle of replacement follows: when a borrowed item cannot be returned in its original form, the lender should accept a substitute and let retaliation go. The narrative then introduces two proverbs. The vessel of injury does not easily break. The measure used to borrow grain should be the measure used to repay it. Together these sayings frame the story as a meditation on reciprocity, repayment and the danger of retaliatory insistence.

The plot unfolds in two episodes. In the first, *Ọ̀wọ́nrín* uses a pot borrowed from *Ogbè* to protect a young tree. When *Ogbè* later demands the pot, he refuses any substitute, and the tree is hew down. In the second, *Ogbè* borrows a bead for his daughter ahead of her marriage. *Ọ̀wọ́nrín* refuses to release it. He invokes his earlier loss and demands that the daughter be beheaded so the bead can be recovered. The demand is carried out. *Ogbè* laments that the first injury was nothing beside the last. The narrative closes with an exhortation to good conduct.

The Ethics of Substitution and Repair

The narrative proposes that when the exact item cannot be returned, an acceptable replacement should be received. This is practical repair. The duty to repay stays serious, and repayment is freed from the impossible demand to recover the original object. Refusing a substitute turns a manageable material dispute into a destructive conflict. The pot and the tree are unequal. A pot is an object, and objects can be recovered. A tree holds time, labour, growth and future fruit. *Ogbè*'s insistence on the original pot cost the tree to be hewed. *Ọ̀wọ́nrín* later insistent on the bead costs a human life. The narrative traces a widening gap between the object at stake and the harm imposed to recover it. Repayment curdles; once the remedy destroys more than the grievance ever did, the logic of repayment has become morally distorted.

Key *Yorùbá* Sayings: Reciprocity, Retaliation and Good Conduct

Several *Yorùbá* sayings drive the narrative's argument, and the plot puts each one to the test. "*Ó ṣe mí, mo gbẹ̀san*" (You wronged me, so I took revenge) gives retaliation the shape of a personal justification. Injury alone becomes sufficient reason to strike back. Nobody asks whether the response is proportionate. Nobody asks whether it lands on the person responsible. "*Adìyẹ dà mí lóògùn nù, mo fọ́ ọ lẹ́yin*" (The fowl spilled my medicine, so I broke its eggs) turns a loss into an attack on something associated with the alleged offender. The fowl may well have caused the loss. Breaking its eggs repairs nothing but simply adds a second loss to the first. The proverb "*Adìyẹ dà mí lóògùn nù, mo fọ́ ọ lẹ́yin*" (The fowl spilled my medicine, so I broke its eggs), is especially harsh, since the response to spilled medicine falls on the fowl's

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

eggs, its reproductive future. The image expresses a corresponding injury. It also forces a hard question about how responsibility relates to punishment. In the narrative, this language foreshadows a moment when making the other party suffer matters more than repairing the first harm.

Two further expressions give this logic in the appearance of measured reciprocity. "*Igbá oró kì í fọ́, òsùnwọ̀n oró kì í ya bọ̀rọ̀bọ̀rọ̀* rendered, "the calabash of injury does not break easily; the measure of injury does not tear readily." The image suggests that injury and its consequences endure, and it may also imply that a claim for redress cannot be brushed aside. *Igbá tá a bá fi wín ọkà, làá fi í san án padà* means "The measure used to borrow corn is the measure used to repay it." Equivalence takes centre stage. The story shows that equal measure falls short of justice and that severity counts. Consequences count as the characters reach for these sayings to justify what they do, and the losses that follow expose the limits of treating a proverb as an automatic rule for punishment.

The opening and closing statements of the narrative complicate any simple endorsement of retaliation. "*Ifá pé ká rúbọ; ká má hùwà oró, ìwà oró ò dáa*" means "*Ifá* says sacrifice should be offered; one should not act cruelly or vengefully, because harmful conduct is not good." At the end comes *Ẹ jọ̀ọ́, ìwà rere ni ẹ jẹ́ ká máa hù* (Please, let us practise good conduct). These admonitions bracket the retaliatory proverbs on both sides. Between them stands *Ogbè*'s lament, *Àṣé oró àkọ́dá kò dàbí oró àdágbèyìn* (The first hurt is not as painful as the last). The final consequence has outstripped the earlier injury in human cost. the sayings generate real ethical tension. The language of repayment insists on accountability. The ending warns that vengeance can spiral into a worse injustice.

The Daughter as the Victim of Escalating Retaliation

The most disturbing feature of the narrative is simple to state. *Ogbè*'s daughter pays the final price for a dispute between two men. She did not cut down *Ọ̀wọ́nrín*'s tree. Nothing in the narrative makes her responsible for the earlier quarrel over the pot. Her body still becomes the means by which *Ọ̀wọ́nrín* seeks repayment. Here the narrative exposes a profound moral failure, because retaliation strikes a person who never committed the original wrong. She changes everything; once her death is in view, no responsible reading can treat the story as a straightforward endorsement of reciprocal punishment. The narrative presents that death as the fruit of *Ọ̀wọ́nrín*'s insistence, and *Ogbè*'s lament recognises the unbearable weight of the outcome. The closing appeal to good behaviour reads naturally as a warning against the very conduct the plot has just enacted. Some ambiguity lingers, because the text itself uses the formulae of vengeance. It holds the language of repayment and the tragic exposure of its consequences in deliberate tension.

The Narrative's Ethical Ambivalence

At least three voices speak in the supplied account. The opening injunction condemns harmful conduct and vengeance. The characters insist, again and again, that injury must be repaid. The closing admonition calls for good behaviour. Flattening these voices into one proposition would distort the text. The plot lends narrative force to the retaliatory sayings, and the outcome reveals what happens when they are applied without restraint. The story works best as a cautionary tale about the instability of vengeance. An injury may generate a legitimate claim for redress. Chasing equivalent suffering can produce a greater wrong.

This reading leaves the narrative's severe and potentially troubling moral world intact. It recognises that a literary text can dramatise a principle without endorsing every act performed in its name. Abimbola (1976) and Bascom (1969) show the importance of reading *Ifá* verses as literary performances in which formulae, narrative and interpretation work together. The narrative examined here deserves the same treatment. Read it whole. Document its source and performance context wherever possible.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

6. A Critical Dialogue between *Lex Talionis* and *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè*

Correspondence between Wrongdoing and Consequence

Exodus 21:23-25 and *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè* make a relationship between action and consequence at the centre of their reasoning, legal in one case and moral in the other. In Exodus 21:23-25, the repeated תַּחַת (*taḥat)* formula ties specified injury to specified consequence. In *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè*, the sayings about repayment and the grain measure assert that conduct creates obligations nobody may simply ignore. In both traditions, Injury matters and loss calls for a responds.

The difference is obvious in the way correspondence is framed. Exodus sets the *talionic* formula inside a legal unit and attaches it to a case that distinguishes between outcomes. The *Ifá* narrative delivers reciprocity through a plot of interpersonal claims, refusal and revenge. No clearly articulated adjudicative process governs its consequences. The parties themselves demand repayment, and their choices push the harm higher with every step. This point is decisive. Rhetorical correspondence between a consequence and an earlier act offers no guarantee that the consequence is just.

Proportionality and the Limits of Retaliation

Proportionality offers a fruitful point of dialogue, provided that it is not an assumption that the two traditions define it identically. In Exodus, the repeated pairs (life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth) set a limit on how injury relates to consequence. Historical implementation remains debated. The wording itself resists the idea that a lesser injury permits an unlimited response, and the legal form can therefore act as a brake on escalation.

Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè tells a darker story. Its language of measured repayment is steadily overwhelmed by disproportionate consequences. Felling a mature fruit-bearing tree is an excessive answer to a quarrel over a pot. Beheading a daughter over the loss of a tree is catastrophic. Step by step, the sequence shows how a claim to equivalent repayment hardens into a rationale for escalating violence. The story's ethical force comes from exposing a cycle that can never restore what has been lost.

Accountability, Agency, and the Identity of the Victim

Another difference concerns of the two traditions is who bears the consequence?The biblical formula is stated in general terms within a legal context concerned with bodily injury. The surrounding legislation suggests that liability attaches to an injury and that the consequence should bear a legal relation to it. These verses offer no complete procedural code. Their setting still stands at some distance from the unchecked personal insistence portrayed in the *Ifá* narrative.

The killing of *Ogbè*'s daughter shows the danger of cutting punishment loose from the agency of the original wrongdoer. She becomes a substitute victim in a conflict between men. Proportion is only part of the problem. The deeper question is whether the person harmed bears any responsibility for the act being avenged. The narrative throws a principle of accountability into sharp relief: a demand for redress turns unjust the moment it shifts the burden of a grievance onto someone uninvolved.

Repair, Compensation, and the Possibility of Restraint

The opening instruction of the *Ifá* narrative points away from retaliation but accept the replacement. When the original item cannot be returned, a substitute will do, and the advice reflects a restorative concern with settling disputes without chasing an impossible recovery. *Ogbè* refuses an alternative, and the tree is destroyed. *Ọ̀wọ́nrín* later refuses to release the bead and demands a life. Insistence on exact recovery, the narrative shows, can wreck the very social relations that make borrowing, lending and mutual help possible.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

While Exodus 21:22-25 also sets harm and payment side by side, and the payment of verse 22 differs in kind from the *talionic* consequence of the verses that follow. The husband's demand in verse 22 is subject to a determination associated with adjudication. Verses 23-25 spell out corresponding consequences. Scholars debate how these provisions relate. The passage shows at least this much: biblical law answers injury through specified responses and keeps the consequences out of the sole discretion of the injured party (Jackson, 2006; Wright, 2009).

Convergences and Divergences

Both texts treat wrongdoing as consequential but their genres and settings diverge sharply. Exodus offers a legal provision within the Covenant Code and *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè* is a divinatory narrative built from proverbs, reversal and tragedy. Exodus formulates correspondence. The *Ifá* narrative dramatises how retaliatory insistence turns destructive. The narrative offers no simple confirmation of *lex talionis*, and Exodus holds no ready solution to the *Ifá* narrative. Criticism gives the dialogue its value. Exodus raises questions about legal correspondence, and the narrative exposes the danger of pursuing repayment as personal vengeance.

7. Discussion: Reconstructing the Ethics of Reciprocal Justice

Beyond Private Vengeance

Reciprocal justice and vengeance are different things, and the combined reading insists on keeping them apart. A just response must address the original wrong. It must also weigh the relationship between that wrong, the responsible agent, the proposed consequence, and the chance of preventing further harm. Exodus frames correspondence within a legal context. The *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè* narrative shows how personal enforcement can turn a claim for repayment into a fresh injustice. The lesson is plain. Wrongdoing deserves an answer, and the answer must also face judgement.

This interpretation steers clear of two extremes. One treats *lex talionis* as unlimited permission to injure an offender. The other dismisses the formula as ethically empty because its language is violent. The reading offered here recognises that a legal principle of correspondence can curb excess and still leave open questions about implementation. The *Ifá* narrative supplies a test drawn from story. When the pursuit of equivalence destroys a tree and then a human life, the so-called remedy has become a source of further wrongdoing.

The Need for Responsible Accountability

Accountability asks for more than a declaration that a wrong has occurred. It demands attention to evidence, to responsibility, to the nature of the injury, and to the likely effects of the response under consideration. The legal setting of the biblical passage, together with the reference to adjudication in verse 22, makes legal determination central to the treatment of harm. The *Ifá* narrative traces the fallout of decisions made through personal grievance. Its plot suggests that a dispute grows unmanageable once each party treats retaliation as a duty beyond reconsideration.

The death of *Ọ̀wọ́nrín*'s daughter is especially significant for this discussion. A system of accountability that punishes someone merely for being connected to the original adversary cannot be defended. The tragic resolution sharpens the difference between holding a responsible person to account and shifting punishment onto a vulnerable third party. That difference speaks to contemporary reflection on justice. Any modern application must be argued with care, and neither ancient text should be presented as making it directly.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

Repair and the Preservation of Social Relations

The advice to accept a substitute item is practical wisdom. It recognises that repayment can be achieved without recovering the exact object that was lent. Later events in the story reveal the cost of rejecting that flexibility. Limits apply; some losses cannot be settled by substitution, and no victim should be forced to accept inadequate compensation. The narrative's real question is sharper. Does the demand for exact repayment serve justice when the remedy causes greater harm?

A restorative approach to reciprocal justice would separate the recognition of wrongdoing from the desire to make another person suffer. It would seek a response that recognises loss, assigns responsibility and prevents recurrence, and it would do so without creating a new victim. This implication grows out of the dialogue itself. Neither Exodus nor the *Ifá* narrative contains a modern restorative-justice initiative. The value of the implication lies in clarifying the question both texts set before their readers. What kind of response to wrongdoing can preserve justice and halt the reproduction of injury?

Contribution to Biblical and Indigenous Religious Hermeneutics

Cross-traditional interpretation works when rooted in close reading. The Hebrew terms of Exodus keep their meaning and are never replaced by *Yorùbá* categories. The *Ifá* narrative, likewise, is never reduced to a cultural illustration whose meaning biblical law has already fixed. Each source is analysed in its own genre and context before the dialogue begins. That procedure lets convergence emerge and keeps difference intact.

The principal contribution of this paper is a distinction between the correspondence of consequence and the ethics of retaliation. Exodus 21:23-25 provides a legal formula whose function must be understood in relation to injury and liability. *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè* presents a narrative in which reciprocal claims become destructive when enforced without restraint and without regard for the person who finally suffers. Their dialogue supports a nuanced account of justice, one that requires proportionate response, clear responsibility and firm limits on vengeance.

8. Conclusion

The paper has reinterpreted *lex talionis* in Exodus 21:23-25 through dialogue with the *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè* narrative. The repeated Hebrew term תַּחַת (*taḥat)* (in place of) expresses correspondence between injury and consequence. The immediate context concerns a fight that injures a pregnant woman. Interpretation remains shaped by the disputed meaning of אָסוֹן *(āsôn)* and by ongoing debate over how *talion* operated in history. The neighbouring laws on assault and on injury to enslaved persons confirm that the formula belongs within the wider legal collection. It licenses no private vengeance.

The *Ifá* narrative also links action to consequence. Its plot lays bare the danger of retaliatory logic. *Ogbè*'s refusal to accept a substitute leads to the destruction of *Ọ̀wọ́nrín*'s tree. *Ọ̀wọ́nrín*'s later insistence on recovering the bead leads to the killing of *Ogbè*'s daughter. The closing appeal to good conduct complicates any reading of the revenge sayings as a plain endorsement of retaliation. Repayment becomes unjust under three conditions: when it is disproportionate, when it targets an uninvolved person, and when it cannot restore what was lost.

The dialogue establishes no equivalence between biblical law and *Ifá*. Exodus foregrounds correspondence within a legal setting. *Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè* dramatises vengeance pursued without restraint. They suggest that justice must take wrongdoing seriously and must also keep accountability distinct from retaliatory escalation.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

References

Abimbola, W. (1976). *Ifá: An exposition of Ifá literary corpus*. Oxford University Press Nigeria.

Adamo, D. T. (2015). What is African biblical hermeneutics? *Black Theology, 13*(1), 59-72. https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000047. Accessed September 24, 2026

Arowosegbe, J. O. (2017). Indigenous African jurisprudential thoughts on the concept of justice: A reconstruction through Yoruba proverbs. *Journal of African Law, 61*(2), 155-170. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021855317000183. Accessed September 24, 2026

Bascom, W. R. (1969). *Ifa divination: Communication between gods and men in West Africa*. Indiana University Press.

Childs, B. S. (1974). *The book of Exodus: A critical, theological commentary*. Westminster Press.

Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, Y. (2015). *Recitation of Odù Ọ̀wọ́rínṣogbè.*

Jackson, B. S. (2006). *Wisdom-laws: A study of the Mishpatim of Exodus 21:1-22:16*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198269311.001.0001. Accessed September 24, 2026

Olateju, A. (2025). Speaking in tongues: A sociolinguistic-stylistic explication of the language style of Ẹsẹ̀-Ifá: The Yorùbá Ifá literary corpus. *Emmanuel Alayande University of Education Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 1*(1), 111-128. https://doi.org/10.60787/eaued-jms.vol1no1.9 Accessed September 24, 2026

Sarna, N. M. (1991). *Exodus: The traditional Hebrew text with the new JPS translation*. Jewish Publication Society.

West, G. O. (2004). Locating "contextual Bible study" within biblical liberation hermeneutics and intercultural biblical hermeneutics. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 60*(1-2), 147-168. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v60i1/2.519.Accessed September 26, 2026

Wright, D. P. (2009). *Inventing God's law: How the Covenant Code of the Bible used and revised the laws of Hammurabi*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195304756.001.0001 Accessed September 26, 2026

© 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the **Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence** (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)