



Vol. 6 (Jan.-June 2024) NO. 2
ISSN: 2636 - 6622

BENIN **Journal** *of* **Religions** *and* **Society**

A Publication of The Department of Religions,
Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City,
Edo State, Nigeria.

CONTENTS

CONJUGAL MORALITY IN EPHESIANS 5:21-33: IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIAN FAMILIES Rev. Fr. Onyegasi Anthony Uchechukwuka	1-14
NIGERIAN YOUTHS AND MORAL DISRUPTION IN A CHANGING WORLD Bosede Gladys OGEDEGBE and Solomon Ijewemen Ikhidero	15-28
AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF AMOS 5:23-24 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL- ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INJUSTICE IN NIGERIA Komolafe Hezekiah Deji	29-40
THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND YORUBA ONTOLOGY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS Ajayi S. Abayomi	41-50
“WE WRESTLE NOT AGAINST FLESH AND BLOOD”: A CASE FOR WARFARE PRAYERS IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL COSMOLOGY Omomia O. Austin	51-64
A REFLECTION ON THE STUDY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION THROUGH THE LENS OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES Ikhidero Solomon Ijewemen and Alli Peter Oluwafemi	65-79
THE REVELATION OF GOD IN THE BIBLE AND IN AFRICAN RELIGIOUS TRADITION Ajayi S. Abayomi	80-92
EFFECT OF PASTORAL CHURCH MINISTRY ON FAMILY STABILITY IN SOME SELECTED CHURCHES IN AJEROMI IFELODUN LCDA, LASOS STATE. Olaitan Oyedele Olaoba and Festus Sunday Obebe.....	93 -107

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF AMOS 5:23-24 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL- ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INJUSTICE IN NIGERIA

KOMOLAFE, Hezekiah Deji

Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Ilorin

hezkomolafe@gmail.com

GSM No: 07067976315

Abstract

The study investigates the prevalence of social injustice in Nigeria in the light of prophet Amos, an eight century social crusader in Israel. The study adopts historical and exegetical methods to achieve its aim. It is discovered from Amos 5:23-24 that religious activities without justice are abominable and unacceptable to God. Similarly, the study exposes the antithesis of increase in social injustice in the midst of the people widely believed to be very religious. The paper recommends among others that Nigeria must be restructured in such a manner that it ensures equal distribution of resources. In conclusion, there is a need for both the political and judicial functionaries to have a change of heart and discharge their duties of defending the vulnerable in the society.

Keywords: Prophecy, Ancient Israel, Nigeria, Injustice and Religious Leaders

INTRODUCTION

The questions that form the main concern of this paper are: Why are most Nigerians wallowing in abject poverty despite all the material endowments in the country? Who will be held responsible for the act of injustices in Nigeria and what steps can be taken to minimize, if not eradicate the menace of injustice in the country? The aim of this paper therefore, is to carry out an exegetical study of Amos in Amos 5: 23-24 in the context of Nigerian society. The paper has four major sections, namely: an overview of Amos' life and ministry; an exegesis of Amos 5:23 - 24; social injustice in Nigerian context; and Amos message as panacea for social injustice in Nigeria.

The Reality of Social Injustice in Nigeria

An Overview of Amos' Call and Messages

Amos was one of the twelve Minor Prophets, a prophet of eighth century BC. He was a native of Tekoa, a town which is about twelve miles south of Jerusalem.⁵ He was neither a prophet nor a son of a prophet, but a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees before he was called to prophetic ministry (Amos 7:14). He prophesied in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah and Jeroboam the son of Joash, the king of Israel two years before the earthquake (Amos 1:1). The name Amos means "to carry load or a burden".⁶ This probably points to the fact that the Prophet felt burdened by the combination of Israel moral and social sins. Amos was undoubtedly an eloquent preacher whose message could not be ignored by his hearers.⁷ This is virtually true of this highly revered Prophet because his prophetic ministry to Israel in the eighth century BC provided a powerful prophetic witness for all ages.

His Ministry

Amos was the first of the earliest prophets whose words of prophecy are preserved in the form of a book. He has always been admired for the purity of his language, his beauty of diction, and his poetic art. In all these respects, he was Isaiah's progenitor.⁸ He prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel somewhere between 760-750 B.C in the midst of eighth century, a few years before prophet Hosea began his prophetic ministry. During the long reign of king Jeroboam II, the Northern kingdom of Israel enjoyed one of its most happy and prosperous periods. Together with the good political situation came economic prosperity which made many people in the Northern kingdom very wealthy, and began to lead a luxurious life.⁹ It is unfortunate, the unusual prosperity brought a collapse of moral standards in the nation. They ignored the great ideals and commandments of the Torah to help the poor and to practice justice and loving kindness. The rich were oppressing the poor; might was right and it was an age of corruption.

Although Amos lived in Tekoa, a small village bordering the wilderness of Judah, his preaching to Israel provided a powerful prophetic witness for all ages because of his condemnation of the spiritual blindness of the Judean upper class and their unjust exploitation of the poor. The ministry of Amos forged an explicit and unbreakable link between justice towards neighbor and righteousness before God. His ministry provides an eternal witness of God's opposition to economic, political and social injustice.¹⁰

Furthermore, during Amos' ministry, religion was gradually losing its hold; luxury and drunkenness were on the increase. Wealth was accumulating in fewer hands by open injustice. People became prodigal in their spending and therefore covetous. The small land owners were dispossessed by their rich neighbors and could not secure justice from courts presided over by corrupt judges. The picture of the national life was luxury for the privileged few and poverty for the masses.¹¹

Although, Amos predicted a terrible day of judgment, his anxiety was not shared by the governing classes, instead they maintained that no evil could come to them because they were God's chosen people and therefore secured no matter what they did. The time Amos ministered was a crucial time, and it was an age that needed a reformer and statesman. Amos fearlessly attacked these evils and warned the people of the inevitable collapse which would follow corruption. Amos message to an oppressed society and his concern for the poor and the oppressed made him a Prophet for all times

The main teachings of prophet Amos in his ministry include:

1. Prayers and sacrifices do not make up for bad deeds. Practice of religious acts is no insurance against the judgment of God;
2. Behaving justly is much more important than ritual (Amos 5: 23-24). Ceremonial worship has no intrinsic value. The only genuine service of God consists in justice and righteousness (5:24);
3. Economic justice was necessary to preserve the nation; and
4. The relationship between the people of Israel is articulated to be a moral contract. If the people of Israel fall below the moral requirements of God, then their relationship will certainly be dissolved.¹²

The biblical evidence shows that the ministry of Prophet Amos spanned through the reigns of Uzziah, king of Judah (767-740/39 B.C.), and Jeroboam II of Israel (782/81-753 B.C.).¹³ Also, the Apocryphal work, "The Lives of the Prophets" recorded that Amos was killed by the son of Amaziah priest of Bethel. It further states that before he died, Amos made his way back to his homeland and was buried there.¹⁴

Exegesis of Amos 5:23-24 vis-à-vis Social Justice in Israel

24. כד ושלששים, מששט,שצדקה, שנהל איתן 23 כג הסר מעלי, השן שרי ; וזמרת נבלי , א אשמע

English Translation of Amos 5:23-24

23 Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your

harps.

24 But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Lexical Analysis of Amos 5: 23 - 24

This section looks at some important words that will enhance the proper interpretation of the passage. It intends to bring out the meaning of each of the words and how it was used in some specific context. This will ensure capturing the actual meaning of the words and aid the proper interpretation of the passage. Two nouns were considered.

1. **מִשְׁפָּט** (mispat, meaning- justice), this noun indicates a verdict whether favorable or unfavorable. It also connotes right or privilege. The word is a singular masculine noun which indicates a legal decision, a legal case; a claim.¹⁵ The word **מִשְׁפָּט** has a wide range of meaning including judgment. It occurs 425 times in the Hebrew bible.¹⁶ In the Hebrew bible **מִשְׁפָּט** means that which should be or the right thing. Isaiah speaks of the servant of Yahweh: "...he will bring forth justice to the nations...he will faithfully bring forth justice...he will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth..." (Isa. 42:1, 3-4). Prophet Amos admonishes Israel to hate evil, love good and establish justice in the gate (Am.5:15). Here it indicates that there should be a right verdict in their court system. The court should not be on the side of the rich and powerful when they are in the wrong side.

The result of carrying out justice among other things is social justice because in doing the right thing, the interest of the vulnerable in the society could be seen to be upheld. The word **מִשְׁפָּט** sometimes connotes judicial decision. It is used in reference to the process of formal litigation when different parties enter into a law suit for redress.¹⁷ In this sense, this implies that it refers to the pronouncement of judgment or a judicial sentence. The word could also be used in relation to commandment or law: it is mostly translated as ordinance. The word justice in relation to commandment can be used in two dimensions: as commandment of man and as commandment of God. As commandment of man, it includes laws and ordinances that human leaders give to their subjects. Joshua made a covenant with the people of Israel at Shechem where he gave them a statute and ordinance (Josh. 24:24), God told the people of Israel not to walk in the statutes of their fore fathers nor observe their ordinances (Ezek. 20:18-19).

The word **מִשְׁפָּט** is also used to refer to the commandment of God in Lev. 18:4, and it is translated as judgment or ordinance. "You shall observe

my judgments and keep my ordinances, to walk in them: I am the Lord your God." Also, in Deuteronomy chapter 4, the word **מִשְׁפָּט** appears five times in reference to the commandment of God. **מִשְׁפָּט** is primarily an attribute of God, all the true **מִשְׁפָּט** finding its source in God Himself and therefore carrying with it His demands. **מִשְׁפָּט** is rooted in God's character and it ought to be the attribute of man in general and of all judicial process among them. This virtue of justice was the expectation of the Lord from the Israelites so that it will serve as a prerequisite to their acceptable worship.

2. **צִדְקָה** (sedeqah meaning- righteousness), this is a feminine noun which also signifies alms or demonstration of mercy and is generally translated as righteousness. The word righteousness connotes blameless conduct and integrity. It denotes justice, right action and right attitudes.¹⁸ The word is synonymous to truth. In its meaning as righteousness, **צִדְקָה** has an appeal to human relationship and everyday practical actions which result in doing the right thing. For example, when Jacob was negotiating his wages with Laban, he said: "So shall my righteousness answer for me in time to come, when it shall come for my hire before thy face ..." (Gen. 30:33). Jacob was putting forward his honesty and integrity to do the right thing in selecting the part of Laban's flock to be his wages.

The word also describes the practical act of returning the pledge to the poor. In Deut. 24:13, the injunction to restore the pledge of the poor to him at sun set concludes with a reason: ... "that you; neighbor may sleep in his own garment and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before the Lord your God." In some instances, the word **צִדְקָה** means right, due or merit. For example, when Mephibosheth defended himself before David and against Ziba's slander, he said: "For my father's house deserve death at the hand of my lord the king: yet you set your servant among those who ate at your table. Therefore what right have I still to cry out anymore to the king?" (2 Sam. 19:28). Also, Solomon appealed to God during the dedication of the Temple to justify the righteous by giving him according to his righteousness. (1 Kgs. 8:32). Here, the word refers to the right or merit a person has, what is deservedly due to a person. Furthermore, sometimes the context of the word reveals a reference to a quality rather than an action.¹⁹ For example; Abraham belief in God and this gave him the quality of righteousness (Gen. 15: 6). David in 2 Sam. 22:21 stressed the meaning of **צִדְקָה** as an act of piety by saying: "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands." Thus, the word **צִדְקָה** denotes an abstract quality

that describes the nature of a person. It was this virtue of righteousness coupled with justice that the Lord required from the Israelites before their worship can gain acceptance before Him.

Contextual Analysis of Amos 5: 23-24

This section focuses on the discussion on the general and immediate context of Amos 5:23-24. It shall focus on the pre-text and the text itself, Amos 5:23-24. This will aid the proper understanding of the context of the passage.

Amos was quite harsh as he condemns Israel for their many social injustices: trampling on the poor like they were dirt (2:7), exploiting the weak and crushing the needy (4:1), extorting unfair taxes from the poor (5:11), taking bribes and denying justice to the needy (5:12), and stealing from the people in the market place. In the pretext, prophet Amos in 5:16-20 was delivering Yahweh's words of judgment. A very terrible threatening of destruction approaching, since they will not take the right course to obtain the favour of God, God would take an effectual course to make them feel the weight of His displeasure. Threat is introduced with more than ordinary solemnity to strike awe upon them. The land of Israel shall be put in mourning to the extent that all the places shall be filled with lamentation for the calamities coming upon them. The lamentation shall be so great as not to be confined within the bound of decency, but it shall be proclaimed in the streets and highways and shall run wild.

The prophet pronounced woe upon those who desire the coming of the Lord's Day as if it were to be a time that would be desirable, thus, speaks jestingly of the day of the Lord. The prophet shows the folly who impudently wished for God's judgments that it is to be the exact opposite of what they expect it to be i.e. darkness and gloom and defeat.²⁰ It is clear from this passage that there was a popular expectation of a day of Yahweh which was not a creation of the prophet. The prophet declared that the people will find it not a thing to be bantered "The day of the Lord is darkness and not light". When God makes a day dark all the people in the world cannot make it light. In v19 the vivid figures here emphasize both the unexpected nature of the day of Yahweh and the inescapability of his judgment.

Moreover, in the text itself-Amos 5:23-24, God rejected Israel hypocritical services because they continued in their sins. They thought they could bribe God with their offerings and sacrifices. In fact, in verse 23, there was a wealth of religion festivals, sacrifices and music in abundance but with all these services they hoped to obtain leave to go on in sin. It is a picture of

religious activities that is going nowhere. Therefore their religious activities stank as far as God was concerned.²¹ God said He hates and despised all their feast days including all the sacrifices and offerings offered. Nothing is more hateful, more despicable than hypocrisy. God will not smell in their solemn assemblies for there is nothing in them that is grateful to Him, but a great deal that is offensive. The implication of this is that sacrifice itself is of small account with God in comparison with moral duties i.e. to love God and our neighbor is better than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. Also, that sacrifice of the wicked is really an abomination to God (Prov. 18; 8).

However, what God required from them without which no sacrifice would be acceptable is in verse 24 let justice run down as waters among you and righteousness as a mighty stream.²² This means that they should allow a general reformation of manners among them, let justice be duly administered, the current of it should not be stopped by partiality and bribery; let it be pure as running water, not muddled with corruption; let it run like a mighty stream. Justice calls for a response and demands that they should take upon themselves the cause of those who are unable to defend themselves due to their weak and vulnerable status in the society and ensure that they receive what is due to them.

Justice is the fruit of righteousness. Justice is correct moral practice in daily personal and social life while righteousness is the cultivation of correct moral principle (both for self and society) justice is mainly outward, righteousness is inward. Biblically, righteousness always has the connotation of being right with God, what God thinks right and therefore when the Lord desires that the outflow of religion should be justice and righteousness, He is calling for the establishment of principles and practices of daily living which conforms to His word and law.²³

Amos messages as panacea for social injustice in Nigeria

The Nigerian nation has been plagued with socio- economic oppression; culminating in economic disparity between the rich and the poor masses leading to discontentment and destitution.²⁴ Nigeria, like ancient Israel is rich in terms of natural resources sufficient to make the society conveniently comfortable, but the reverse is the case. Nigeria was economically regarded to be a promising nation in Africa being the largest producer of oil. Nigeria has the potential to be an economic giant, but becomes a dwarf economically because much of her wealth has been hijacked by few individuals without regarding the poor masses. Olanisebe posits that:

The economic recession, as a matter of necessity, has bred poverty into the country. The social stratification into the upper, middle, and lower classes became pronounced. Like the northern kingdom of Israel, the rich were getting richer while the poor were getting poorer.²⁵

This is compounded with incessant increment in pump price without corresponding improvement in people's living condition. Nigerian government declared subsidy removal on 29th May, 2023 with promises that the removal will be of great benefit to its citizens, but the situation of the citizenry became worsened day after day. The masses are managing to afford the price of Premium Motor Spirit called (petrol) kerosene, and diesel before the subsidy was removed, and after the removal, the situation becomes worse. Although, palliative for citizens was announced by the federal government, the money realized from subsidy removal has not been accounted for nor geared towards making life better for the citizens.²⁶

The Nigerian legal system is also similar to that of ancient Israel during prophet Amos. Israel's legal system was good with fantastic courts chaired by professional jurists, yet the just are not justified; rather the wicked are vindicated. The Nigerian situation is not only like that of the ancient Israel, but also worse. The wheel of justice in Nigeria grinds ever slowly, justice has become a casualty: the little thief is jailed, while the big thief moves around being celebrated. For example, the poor man that steals yam goes to jail because he is poor having no money to bribe himself out, while a rich man that embezzles billions of naira from government treasury moves around vindicated because he has money to bribe himself out.²⁷ Our nation has been bedeviled by Attorney - Generals who have protected criminals rather than prosecute them due to god - fathers that are sponsoring the criminals. For example, according to Sahara TV report of 13th December, 2022, preliminary investigation by the DSS revealed various acts of terrorism, financing fraudulent activities perpetrated by Emefiele and his involvement in economic crimes of national security dimension in year 2022. A federal High Court in Abuja however, declined an application by the secret police to arrest the apex bank governor.²⁸ President Tinubu in a statement in Paris, said "the suspended Governor of the Central Bank, Godwin Emefiele, made a few connected people wealthy while Nigerians became poorer"²⁹ Although, Emefiele has since been suspended, arrested and detained since June, 2023, Nigerians are still awaiting the judgment of the Court till today.

Also, the Nigerian judiciary has allowed prejudices, sentiments, and biases in thier judgments. Perversion of justice in favor of the wealthy and to the detriment of the less privileged is prevalent in Nigeria. The constitutional

right of the poor has been abused. The provision for fundamental human right is regarded as hypocritical statement. A good example is the case of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government of Nigeria. The union went on eight and half months strike (14 February to 14 October, 2022) over federal government's non-adherence and implementation of the 2009 agreement. Consequently, the government took the case to industrial court from where the union was ordered to suspend the strike and will not be paid salaries for the period of the strike. The National Industrial Court actually dismisses the case filled by ASUU against the Minister of Labour on payment of their salaries for the period they were on strike and describing it as abuse of court process, frivolous and vexations.³⁰ The poor do not enjoy fair hearing as a fundamental right and could not find redress in the law court. The Nigerian situation has become "whom you know" and god - fatherism. The popular slogan in Nigeria is that: "the rich are always right." The rule of law is no longer given precedence in Nigeria. Nigeria is known for the act of impunity.

Again, the political success in ancient Israel during the time of Amos brought a stark contrast between the luxury of the well - to - do and the misery of the poor. Ditto is the experience of Nigeria as a country today. According to Obiotika, no matter the system of governance, politicking, the country is hijacked, overtaken by rogues and criminals. A bag of rice that was #18,000 before APC took over in 2015 is now sold above #50,000.³¹ The economic success, national affiliation, and connection with foreign countries seem to deceive the leadership of Nigeria into believing that all is well. The poor are forced to hardship socially, economically, and politically.

Furthermore, rich people in the church and mosques are treated preferentially; while the commoners are neglected. For example, the early church was united and had everything in common, they were sharing together material things; no discrimination among them (Acts 2:41-47). But the contemporary church's case is very far from it. There is ethnicity, discrimination in form of denominationalism and favoritism. The rich people in Church will be given special consideration; they will be given special seats, and ordained as patrons and matrons in the church, even when the source of their wealth is questionable. The pastor gives special attention to the rich that give him fat envelopes. James 2:5-6 admonishes Christians not to discriminate between the rich and the poor when they come to the gathering because God has created them both.

Conclusion

This paper finds similarities in the social situation in the time of Amos and to the prevailing situation in Nigeria.

An Exegesis of the passage-Amos 5:23-24 was done in order to further enhance the understanding of the message and the requirements of God from the Israelites which is also relevant to the Nigerian society. During the ministry of Amos in the eighth century BC, there was economic prosperity and this created a wide gap between the rich and the poor. People were either very rich or very poor. Sadly, some of the wealth of the rich were amassed through the exploitation of the poor. The judiciary was not left out as judges receive bribe to pervert justice. Religious activities were observed without moral standard.

It is obvious in this paper that: the experiences of the time of Amos and that of contemporary Nigerian society are similar. Exploitation of the poor and the rejection of divine messages, pretentious religiosity, and corruption, mark the two situations. Injustice in the country stems from bad leadership and the selfishness of some Nigerians. To prevent or eradicate socio-economic and political injustice in Nigeria, not only should religious leaders speak out like Amos, the citizenry must insist on building a country that works for all until and unless this is done, the country sits on a keg of gun powder.

References

- Rick R. Marrs, "The World of the Eighth Century Prophets" *Leaven* Vol. 11:2 (2003): 5
- P.A Oguntoye "Amos and Miscarriage of Justice in Israel in the Context of Nigeria socio-political order in *Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa*, VI (2022): 70.
- Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Section 34 (1) on www.nigerian-constitution.com accessed on 23/10/2023
- P.M Lere, "Prophet Amos and the Unjust Society of Israel" in *Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa*, VI (2022), 135.
- Takunbo Adeyemo et.al (eds), "Amos" in *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi Kenya: Zondervan Publishers, 2006, 1059.
- E. Itapson and G.E Janvier, *A Study of the Major and Minor Prophets of the Old Testament* (Kaduna: Prudent Universal Press, 2010, 95.
- 'E. Itapson and G.E Janvier, 95.
- Prophet "Amos" www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles1423-amos