

THE SOCIAL NATURE OF THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY OF AMOS AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR NIGERIAN PASTORS

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ABSTRACT

The nation Israel occupies a great place in salvation-history having to do with Yahweh's interest in making them an example for other nations; a chosen people at that. Israel in her walk with Yahweh through several ages promoted a lot of fleshly interplays which brings about Yahweh's fatherly concern and reaction. The prophetic ministry is one of the mediums through which Yahweh communicates His mind to the people. Amos' prophetic ministry falls in this periscope. The actions and deeds of the Israelites succinctly call for the message. Although Israel (who were the original recipients of Amos' message) and Nigerian Christians (especially the pastorate) are two different contexts; yet, the study observes a nexus, resulting into a reflective applicability of the social-nature of Amos' ministry.

Keywords: Amos, Message, Nigeria, Prophet,

Introduction

Amos is a shepherd and a fruit picker from the Judean village of Tekoa when God called him, even though he lacks an education or a priestly background. Amos' mission and messages of impending doom and captivity is directed to Israel because of her sins are largely unpopular and unheeded. Amos' ministry takes place while Jeroboam II reigns over Israel, and Uzziah reigns over Judah.¹ Amos attacks two major areas of sin commonly indicted by the prophets: idolatry and social injustice. Israel's root problem was its false religion - having a form of godliness but denying its power.

Although Israel maintained the ritual formalities of the law, and even exceeded them (Amos 4:4-5), idolatry was commonplace (2 Kgs 17:9-17; Amos 5:26).² Yahweh sent warnings to Israel in

¹James. Annie, *The Book of Amos and its Message* (Nashville: H and R Publishing Company, 2000), 34.

²Annie, 35.

form of hunger, thirst, blight, locusts, plagues, and military defeat, but the people had refused to see his hand in these (Amos 4:6-11). Judgment must follow (Amos 4:12-5:20), and this punishment is portrayed in a series of verbal and visionary prophecies predicting wholesale destruction and exile.

The nexus between the recipients of Amos' message (Israel) and Nigeria can be seen in the light of Nihilola's observation; "modern Nigeria is a corrupt society."³ Although this assertion seems devastatingly outrageous, the reality and actuality of this observation forms the framework of this research.

Prophetic Ministry: A Brief Overview

The Old Testament Prophet are cardinal to the history and religion of Israel. Griffin affirmed that the Prophets are sets of people who are not taken for granted.⁴ This is because they were relevant and integral to the political, and religious life of the nation Israel. The will of God as it concerns business, politics and interpersonal relationship is adequately communicated through the prophets. Coupled with these significant duties and responsibilities, the prophets have a place in the council of Yahweh,⁵ standing in the gap between God and the nation Israel. The prophet functions as religious thinkers,⁶ social activities,⁷ social reformers⁸ and military strategists.⁹

³Nihilola E. *Theology under the Mango Tree: A Handbook of Christian Theology*. (Alausa, Ikeja: Fine Print and Manufacturing Limited, 2013), 43.

⁴Griffin, N.P. *The God's of the Prophets: An Analysis of Divine Action* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997), 34.

⁵D.A. Akao, *Old Testament Theology*. (Ibadan: Centre for External Studies, 1992), 39.

⁶G.O. Akintola, *Prophecy and Social Change in the Old Testament* (Ilorin: Amazing Grace PrintMedia, 2008), 110. A.O. Dada, *The Prophets* (Nigeria, Abuja: National Open University, 2009), 27. J.O. Alao, "The Implication of Amos' Prophecies for Social, Moral and Religious Injustice in Nigeria", John W.C. (Ed.) *Light in a Once-Dark World: Contemporary Issues in Nigerian Christianity* (Hayesville: The American Journal of Biblical Theology, 2019).

⁷B.D. Baba, *A Biblical Guide in the Study of the Minor Prophets*. (Niger: Pyla-Mak Services Publications, 2008).

⁸S.O. Abogunrin, *African Journal of Biblical Studies*. (Ibadan: Department of Religious Studies, 2010).

⁹S.W. Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Kenya: Word Alive Publication, 2012), 147. Akintola, *Prophecy and Social Change in the Old Testament*, 110.

Therefore, the study posits that the significance and efficacy of Prophetic ministry cannot be denied or discarded; then, if otherwise, doom is on the way.

Amos and His Message

Amos native of Tekoa in Judah, about six miles south of Bethlehem, originally a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees, who was called by God s Spirit to be a prophet, although not trained in any of the regular prophetic schools. (Amos 1:1 ; Amos 7:14Amos 7:15) He travelled from Judah into the northern kingdom of Israel or Ephraim, and there exercised his ministry, apparently not for any long time. However, nothing is known of the time or manner of his death.

Amos was the only prophet to give his occupation before declaring his divine commission (1:1). Amos' names provides a key to the leading message of the book. Amos name which means 'burden' or 'burden-bearer' is not be confused with Amoz (Stout, Strong), the father of Isaiah (Isa 1:1).¹⁰The prophecy of Amos is characterized by great boldness coupled with great tact.¹¹ The prophet gains the attention of his audience by pronouncing judgment on Israel's enemies before delivering the main burden of judgment against Israel herself. In the delivery of his prophecy he is very courageous while being unusually stern and severe.¹²

Amos provides the historical key for his ministry: the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake" (1:1). Uzziah's independent reign took place in 767-740 B.C., and the sole reign of Jeroboam II in about 782-753 B.C. Amos was a contemporary of Hosea, Isaiah, and Jonah. Amos and Hosea were co-workers and may even have gone on preaching tours through the land together, although Hosea continued his work after Amos passed from the scene. Isaiah and Micah followed Amos's ministry and may have heard him preach when they were lads.

¹⁰William J. Doorly, *Prophet of Justice: Understanding the Book of Amos* (New York: Paulist Press 1989), 23.

¹¹C. Richard, *A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (USA: Wock Publishers, 1987), 54.

¹²Richard, 24.

Amos shows himself to be an oratorical giant, in spite of the fact that he had no formal training. Amos's prophecy was issued primarily at Bethel, the seat of idolatry in the northern kingdom. He attacks Satan's stronghold, Bethel, and when he is opposed by the idolatrous priest, Amaziah, he becomes even bolder in his preaching. Throughout, the prophecy is filled with references to rural life, indicating Amos's background as a shepherd. The prophet never put on pretenses. He was what he was, God's messenger for this hour to call the nation Israel to awaken to her responsibility and accountability for the national sins she had committed against God.¹³

Social Nature of Prophet Amos' Ministry

For Amos, most foundationally, justice links inextricably with life. Do justice and live, Amos asserts; do injustice and die. Amos does not see justice as an abstract principle but rather as a life force.¹⁴ An unjust society will die; it cannot help but collapse of its own weight. Genuine justice cultivates life. More particularly, justice seeks life for *everyone* in the community. Because life is for everyone, justice pays particular attention to the people denied life. Justice provides for access by all to the communal "good life." None can justly prosper at the expense of others, or even in the light of the poverty and need of others.¹⁵

Amos sees justice as part of the created order. Injustice defies nature, like a crooked wall or an ox plowing the sea. To be unjust is thus inherently self-destructive. Injustice poisons its practitioners. The first and second chapters show that Amos saw God's justice as intended for everyone, including the pagan nations. The covenant people have a special responsibility due to their special awareness of God's justice.¹⁶

Amos sees justice as something to be done: relationships established, needs met, wrongs corrected. Justice, in Amos, has nothing to do with a meaningless cult. Justice links with

¹³Boer. Harry, *The Minor Prophets* (USA: Day Star Publishers, 1991), 32.

¹⁴Dada, *The Prophets*, 27.

¹⁵Griffin, N.P. *The God's of the Prophets: An Analysis of Divine Action*

¹⁶Kolawole, O.P. "A Critical Evaluation of the Message of Amos and Its Relevance to the Socio Political Situation of Nigeria." *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance*, 2019a.

specific acts and people. God does not inspire Amos's threats and warnings for the sake of repaying rebellious Israel an eye for an eye.¹⁷ Amos voices them in order to inspire transformation recognizing that should Israel not respond the death of her nation-state will come. Amos sees justice as the solution; it is what the community should (must) seek. "Let justice roll down like waters, like an ever-flowing stream that brings life."¹⁸ Judgment is not "justice"; instead, it is what happens when there is no justice. Justice is about healing; and transformation, not punishment.

Amos has much to say about oppression and the plight of the poor in Israel, so it is only natural that his book has become a focal point for discussions about social justice. The social nature of Amos' ministry is in three folds; the nature of God, the role of the individual, and the role of the social system. For Amos, justice among people must begin with the Lord himself. The Lord expects justice first of all because he has created mankind on the earth. He can expect certain standards of conduct to be upheld by all nations (Amos 1:3-2:5) because of his sovereign power. He has appointed each nation to its own sphere (9:7), though he has reserved a place of special honor for his people Israel (3:2). Having formed the nations of the earth, he also has the absolute right to judge them.¹⁹

Amos was particular because he could see the social system set up by Yahweh disintegrating. "Joseph" was in ruins, having been thoroughly ransacked (6:6).²⁰ In stark contrast were individuals of wealth and privileged position who were securing greater riches and power by taking advantage of the poor class. Therefore, when the Israelites defraud the poor, they just as surely defraud the Lord himself.²¹ Life is not divided into secular and sacred for Amos: all things stem from the sovereign Lord. The way people behave in the marketplace or how they judge in the gate directly relates to their religious practices.

¹⁷Dada, *The Prophets*, 55.

¹⁸Jack. Parnell, *The Prophets and their Messages* (NY: H and R Publishing Company, 1991), 34.

¹⁹Parnell, *The Prophets and their Messages*, 35.

²⁰S. Henze, *The Messages of the Prophets in the Old Testament* (Rapids: Queen Publishers, 1987), 12.

²¹Henze, 13.

Elements of social justice found in Amos can also be viewed from a universal perspective.²²The social nature of Amos' ministry reveals that God expects a system that makes it possible for people to thrive in a system free of corruption that would deprive them of what they need to survive and flourish. It should be a system where merchants are honest and judges are incorruptible.²³

The Relevance of Amos' Ministry for Nigerian Pastors

The prophets were men raised by God, to call the people back to God and his ways. This function sets the Amos' ministry and Nigerian pastors in an analogous manner setting a clear template for the relevance. Although the unbeliever's sins often appear worse to us, in God's eyes, those of the Christian are worse because Christians should know better (Amos 1-2). Just like the Israelites looked down on her neighbor's for the atrocities they committed, pastors in Nigeria down on those that commit gross sins and think that we are better than they, not realizing that God hates sins of hypocrisy and idolatry more.²⁴

The gap between the 'haves' and have-not' has widened significantly. People are either very rich or very poor. Sadly, some of that wealth are results of the poor being deprived of basic amenities; roads, water, drugs in the hospital, even hospital as a whole among others. This results in majority of the Nigerian populace living in abject poverty.²⁵

On this note, it is not illogical to say that the rich have enslaved the poor; this is visible to the blind and audible to the deaf. Leadership should bring to implementation policies and projects that are people centered. The concern of leadership should not be how to store up wealth but how to better the lots of followers. The society at large must be ever conscious of the fact that there

²² David and Alexander Path, *The Lions Handbook of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1989).

²³ Willy Schottroff, *Amos: Prophetic Poetics in Latin American Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1984), 27.

²⁴ Schottroff, 130.

²⁵ O.P. Kolawole, "John the Baptist: A Model for Christian Leadership for Effecting Change in Nigeria". *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 36-41. www.apjmr.com, November, (2019b), 3.

can be no human solidarity in a situation where human right are trampled on, and where human dignity is treated as natural privilege for a few citizen.²⁶

Unfortunately, the Nigerian Church (the pastorate in particular) has not helped the situation of things by coming on the side of the poor. The prophecy of Amos carries an urgent memorandum for the Nigerian church in the twenty-first century. Where God has brought material blessing to his people through honest hard work and diligence. Yet in light of massive worldwide needs such as poverty, and inadequate medical care; material blessing granted to some believers must go out to those parts of the world where help is needed. To do anything less is to tragically imitate the people in Amos's day who neglected the poor among them.

In time past, the court of law due to human abuse has been seen as a place which is full of manipulations. But in this contemporary time, the Nigeria church seems to portray more injustice in its system. In the contemporary Nigerian church, there is shift of focus, in that everyone craves leadership position and this gives room for some who are in position and minded to misuse the power. This corruption is further encouraged by the recognition accrued to people whose source of wealth are questionable. Pastors spend more of their visitation times in the homes of few rich members; neglecting the poor. In fact, the rich are given 'high table' in fund-raising programs and other events of the Church.²⁷

The study posits that wealth is not wrong in itself; but when acquired at the expense of the poor, or when it is used as a tool for oppressing the poor, then the wealthy place themselves in God's judgment path; so do religious leaders who neglect the poor for their stomach (personal gains). There is need for proper justice in the word of God. Thus, the ministry of Amos reveals the need for Nigerian pastorate to hear and follow the mind of God by reinstating and re-establishing the purpose of the church.

²⁶J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Bail Blackwell, 1962), 65.

²⁷ Kolawole, "John the Baptist: A Model for Christian Leadership for Effecting Change in Nigeria", 4.

Consequently, leadership must rise up to these challenges ensuring equality and equity at all levels. In Nigeria, leadership must ensure equal distribution of the so called national cake. Just as Amos was a social crusader in a society, replete with corruption and exploitation so our society is called upon to denounce every form of injustice and defend the rights of citizens.²⁸ Those, at the helm of affairs, should create job opportunity for the teeming crowd of the unemployed men and women in the nation today.²⁹

God's impartial justice is one of the major themes in Amos' ministry. The Lord does not overlook injustice on the part of his own people simply because they are his. Indeed, God's covenant relationship makes justice and righteousness in the lives of his people all the more crucial, for they are representing the Lord to the nations (Rom. 2:17–24). Thus when his people “trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end” (Amos 8:4), God will certainly not exempt the judgment that such selfishness deserves.

The church must never presume upon God's favor. His justice is universal. He will deal in perfect justice with those who claim his love and compassion but fail to extend that love and compassion in concrete ways to others. “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,” say the Lord (Amos 6). “Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches . . . who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils” (6:1, 4, 6). Not only are God's people living in luxurious ease, however, but in their self-satisfied greed they are also trampling on the needs of the poor, dealing deceitfully in business transactions, and profaning the Sabbath to make more money (8:4–6).

Furthermore, such is the tendency of the human heart when prosperity comes. While material prosperity is a blessing from the Lord (Prov. 10:22) and is appropriately earned by those who work diligently and wisely (Prov. 21:5), the accumulation of wealth tends to lead to a variety of temptations and sins (1 Tim. 6:9–10). Many Nigerian pastors are guilty of this; causing great

²⁸Lindblom, 66.

²⁹W.K Simpson, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Publishing Company, 1965), 121.

deal of harm to the mission of God in using people for his work. Of a truth, many ministers in the church today now see wealth as a sign of success in the ministry. It is thus explicit through Amos' ministry that the impending wrath of God is coming upon the refusal of such people to repentance.

More so, some of them see the number of cars, houses, degrees and a sign of making it in the ministry; meanwhile leaving faithfulness and commitment to the work of the master. It is important to note that in Nigeria today, the mission work has turned to something else; in the sense that everyone one is scrambling to make it at the cause of competing with one another; however, the justice of God is ahead.

Conclusion

The prophetic ministry of Amos is concerning the national sin of God's chosen people, as well as the judgment that must fall unless they repent. No better testimony could be given concerning Amos that his own Amos can see that beneath Israel's external prosperity and power, internally the nation is corrupt to the core. The sins for which Amos chastens the people are extensive: neglect of God's Word, idolatry, pagan worship, greed, corrupted leadership and oppression of the poor. Amos begins by pronouncing a judgment upon all the surrounding nations, then upon his own nation of Judah, and finally the harshest judgment is given to Israel. Amos' visions from God reveal the same emphatic message of the nearness of the judgment. The book ends with God's promise to Amos of future restoration of the remnant. Of a truth, there is a great hope for the church in Nigeria; if pastors in Nigeria today will mirror the current state of the Church through the ministry of Amos tracing and re-entrenching itself through the warning, message and teachings of Amos.

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