

**An Ethical Appraisal of Social Justice in the Book of Amos and
Its Implications for Socio-Religious Integrity
in Contemporary Nigerian Society**

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Abstract

Social justice is a situation or social condition predicated on human rights and equality which social injustice does not guarantee. This paper examines the concept of social justice in the book of Amos and presents its ethical implications for the contemporary Nigerian society. The aim of this paper is not to do an exegesis of the book of Amos, but to consider the moral messages of prophecy of Amos as it affects the socio-religious integrity in contemporary Nigerian society. The work uses the tripartite historical, sociological and expository approaches in analysing data which is mainly obtained from secondary sources. The findings in this paper revealed that Nigeria accommodates certain social conditions that are similar to those in Israel at the time of Amos; the wealth of the nation is concentrated in the hands of the few privileged and mostly corrupt Nigerians. The poor masses are suffering in the midst of multi-millionaires who corruptly enriched themselves at the expense of the poor masses who are divided along tribal and religious lines without the unity needed to challenge their corrupt leaders. This paper therefore recommends the application of, Amos' teaching on social justice by Christians in Nigeria to remedy the situation of gross injustice and

economic inequality in the contemporary Nigerian society that is obviously lacking in religious and moral integrity

Key Words: Justice, Book of Amos, Ethical, Integrity corruption, Contemporary Nigeria

Introduction

Justice is the dominant theme of prophet Amos' message. In a passage which by now should have entered deep into the consciousness of many believers, God says through Amos, 'Let justice flow like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream (5:24). In other words, when justice is perverted in the law courts, it is an abomination to the Lord, an act wholly incompatible with the nature of God. Kelley explained that Israel had grown "prosperous, corrupt and pitiless"¹ Thus, God demands integrity in religious activities of which Israel was very much aware but rebelled against their God. Consequently, Amos was incensed when he saw the miscarriage of justice. His people "sell the righteous for money and the needy for a pair of sandals" (2:6; 8:6). To Amos, this was gross injustice to the poor and a sin against the moral law. All men or women are equal before God and should be related as persons not things.

Amos was so concerned with social injustice which manifested in dishonesty in the courts and in the market places, oppression of widows and orphans, and the immorality and lack of integrity in the organised religion. Thus emphasis on social justice was imperative in the time of Amos as well as in the present Nigerian society. Our spirituality cannot divorce us from such temporal matters like politics, economics and other social concerns/problems of the Nigerian society. Like the Israelites, Nigerians have no moral right of freedom to do as they please in social, economic, and political matters. According to Alexzander, "Amos coordinated sin against people with sin against God"² Thus Christians ought to oppose injustice in Nigeria because God calls us to a model of treating people as people, not as things. We must get involved in social issues because God expects us to do so as models of His divine love, kindness and mercy. This is the only way Christians can maintain their personal and religious integrity in Nigeria.

This paper is only an attempt to buttress Amos' concept of social justice as expressed in the book of Amos and its importance to our contemporary Nigerian society. To achieve this, the paper is divided into four sections. The first part is the introductory section which tried to link Israel at the time of Amos with the contemporary Nigerian society and set the structure/direction of the study. The second section is an exposition of Amos concept of social Justice in relation to Israel and Nigeria. The third section underscores the relevance of Amos' Justices to the contemporary Nigerian society; while the last section is a concluding remark and recommendations.

An exposition of Amos Concept of Justice

Justice is a virtue that has been defined as rights and duties of people to each other. Hornby³ and Adrian Vallance *et al*⁴ define justice as fairness in the way people are treated. According to Iwe, "justice as an ethical concept with immense social significance implies the notion of fairness, fair deal, moral integrity and righteousness in the dealings of men with one another and in the affairs and transaction of social life"⁵. Injustice, which is opposite of justice refers to man's inhumanity to man, unfair distribution of natural resources and infringement of fundamental human rights. Social injustice on the other hand is the opposite of social justice. Social justice is primarily concerned with how society is organised, how health, power, privileges, rights and responsibilities are distributed to each strata of the society. Obiajulu defines social justice as "a more equitable distribution of the social resources and more equitable access to the various social institutions by all members of the society"⁶. Social justice has its direct object as the common good of the members of the society. Social justice recognises and assumes the fact that we are all members of the same human family.

On the basis of the above definitions, social justice demands that each member and each sector of the society should contribute its own quota for the attainment of the common good of the whole. Social justice in this context is based on human rights and equality which social injustice does not guarantee. Amos' concept of Justice is clearly stated in Amos 5:24, which calls for social justice as an imperative of true religion or religious integrity. Amos understanding of justice is comprehended in the fact that when justice is spoken of in his prophecy,

over and over again, the targeted beneficiaries are widows, orphans, aliens, and other vulnerable groups. Justice is thus intimately connected with the fate of these groups. To become just, a society must bring into community all its weak and defenseless ones, its marginal ones, giving them voice and a fair share in the goods of the community. Sider stresses that “God cares so much about the poor that He works to destroy social systems that tolerate and foster injustice.”⁷ God dealt with Israel and Judah because they forsook their God and involved in social injustice.

Social Injustice in Amos’ Time and Contemporary Nigerian Society

Looking at Nigeria and Israel in the time of Amos, one would observe that Nigeria has become a place where the land, money and wealth are shared among the elites at the detriment of the poor majority. Since Nigeria gained independence in 1960, tribalism, nepotism, corruption, discrimination, rigging of elections and gross injustice have dominated the economic, political, judicial, cultural, religious and social lives of Nigerians. This is evident in the following discussions.

Socio-Judicial Injustice in Nigeria

As justice was denied at the time of Amos, so it is also being denied in the contemporary Nigerian society. According to Oputa, “It is a common knowledge that the courts are infested by the virus of bribery and corruption”.⁸ This has made justice in our courts a purchasable commodity with the hammer falling for the highest bidder. Ugwueye, observed:

Venal judges and all other people that settle disputes at all levels of the society deny poor people justice, because of bribe from the rich. The rich are constantly claiming poor people’s acres of land, yet the court always rules in favour of the rich, because of bribery.⁹

This is the same social condition in respect to justice that was prevalent in Israel at the time of Amos which the prophet preached against in very strong terms. The situation in Nigeria may even be worse as Ugwueye further lamented that;

It is very unfortunate that Nigerian courts have turned into war zones by greed, avarice, selfishness, and various unspeakable deeds of judges who prepare two

contradictory verdicts (judgements), one for the plaintiff and the other for defendant; these judges wait anxiously to sell the verdict to the highest bidder.¹⁰

In the light of the above observations by Ugwueye, what happens in judicial sector in Nigeria is same as in Israel at the time of Amos. This is to say that in Nigeria, judiciary as an organ of government is no longer the hope of the common man. The equality before the law seems to be a statement in mass deceit.

Socio-Economic life in Nigeria

The socio-economic situation of Amos' time in Israel is very much like that of Nigeria today. Nigeria is naturally blessed with a lot of mineral resources. The economic prosperity could be seen in the extravagant way some Nigerians eat and dress, just like in Amos time. Amos called only the women of Samaria cows of Bashan (Amos 3:4) because of their extra size, gained through excessive eating and drinking, but here in Nigeria both men and women have this extra size, gained through greed/corruption or ill-gotten wealth. In spite of the prosperity or wealth of the Nigerian nation, which is confined in the hands of few people, majority experience all kinds of economic hardship, social disintegration¹¹. At Amos time, the businessmen of his time get impatient for the termination of the holy and work free periods of new moon and Sabbath so that they can engage in their corrupt business practices. The same situation is applicable to Nigeria. According to Ugwueye:

Nigerians who are engaged in what may be called the real business of buying, selling and supplying of goods and services for money are the real deceits. They, of course, make the shekel and the ephaph small as Amos said. The cups, tins and bags used in measuring grains are below their sizes and still the grains measured with them are sold at the same price as the ones measured with full sized measures.¹²

The above situations show that traders in Nigeria like the Israelites do not have the interest of the buyers at heart and therefore, they

cheat the buyers in order to enrich their own purse without any concern for integrity.

Socio-Political Injustice

As was the situation in Amos' time, the prosperity or wealth of the Nigerian nation, which is confined to some few groups of people, has brought with it all kinds of political decay in Nigeria. The quickest way of amassing wealth in Nigeria today is to occupy a political office or position. Unemployed youths are paid and used as thugs to manipulate elections. Human life is valued less than political goals just as the poor were equated with a pair of shoes in Amos time.

Embezzlement of public funds by those in authority has been given the appearance of legality in Nigeria. Schools, roads, hospitals and other social facilities are poorly maintained. The poor masses bear the direct brunt since they are the only ones that go to public hospitals where there are no adequate and effective drugs. The children of the poor are also the ones that attend the public schools where the teachers are not devoted to their work because of lack of financial motivation. The wealthy ones can afford to pay for the bills in private hospitals and schools. Most times their children attend schools in overseas countries. The poor parents who spend their fortunes to train their children in school cannot reap the benefit of their effort because government cannot provide jobs. Nigeria as a nation is rich but those in authority embezzle and mismanage the wealth to the detriment of the poor masses as it was the case in Israel at the time of Amos. This is the reason why Achebe said: The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to challenge personal example which are the hall marks of true leadership.¹³

Socio-Religious Injustice

In spite of all the corruption and immorality in the 8th century Israel, Amos made us know that the people zealously observed their religious activities. The same is true of Nigerians. Despite all the corruption and immorality in Nigerian society, people are pretending to be religious; observing their religious duties as if is a matter of life and death. Obiora rightly observes that religion in Nigeria today is being used for selfish ends. He sees religion as a fast business that people are embarking on. Looking at Christianity in Nigeria, the numerous churches in Nigeria today are not born out of pure motive of serving God but for self-aggrandizement.¹⁴

There was constant performance of rituals at the sanctuaries during Amos time. Nigerians as well show diligence to these external forms of religion without any moral/ spiritual commitment. Religious feasts, which are very many in Christianity, are observed meticulously by Nigerian Christians. Offerings, especially thanksgiving offerings, by those who succeed in their improper business are regularly given in the churches. Both the offering and the music are all religious formalism and external rites unrelated to religious/ moral integrity that is more acceptable to God as well as the society.

The Relevance of Amos Concept of Social Justice to the Contemporary Society

The prophecy of Amos is still relevant to contemporary societies like Nigeria. The God of justice, whom Amos represented, is the same God of Nigerians. He does not change, and His characteristic nature remains the same. Thus, the relevance of Amos concept of social justice will be discussed under four points.

i. God's Attitude towards the Oppressors and the Oppressed has not Changed

God is the God of justice, and desires justice in every nation and community, especially among His children as evident from the book of Amos. "Justice is a communicable attribute of God, manifesting His holiness".¹⁵ The prophecy of Amos has made this clear to us (2 and 3). God hates injustice and oppression everywhere but He loves and promotes justice everywhere. God is concerned with the poor and the oppressed. He defends and takes vengeance for those who are oppressed

unjustly. The prophecy of Amos is very relevant to our nation especially to the Christian communities who are participating in evil social systems and societal structures that unfairly benefit few and harm the majority. Many charismatic and Pentecostal preachers emphasize prosperity without preaching about the injustice in politics and business. Conservative pastors speak out on personal evil but fail to preach about the sins of institutionalised tribalism, nepotism and unjust economic and political structures that destroy many citizens.

We are however expected to be “inevitably committed to work for God’s justice in the face of oppression, for God’s truth in the face of lies and deceptions; for service in the face of the abuse of power; for love in the face of selfishness and hatred; for co-operation and peaceful coexistence in the face of destructive antagonism and wars; and for reconciliation in the face of division and hostility”¹⁶ It is thus very clear that God loves justice and He has a very soft spot in His heart for the poor and the oppressed. “He who oppresses a poor man insults his maker” (Prov. 14:31). There is therefore every need for all Nigerian to truly amend our ways and truly execute justice while dealing with one another.

ii. Religious Activities of the Oppressors cannot be Substituted for Justice

One of the most disturbing things in Nigeria today is the practice of religion without morality or integrity. Nigerian Christians and Muslims can quote their scriptures, understand theology, and explain doctrines, many more are faithful attendants at worship centers, give their tithes and offerings, and many other religious activities. However, all these involvements are not more than “forms and ideas” or mere head knowledge. Their hearts are far away from Biblical truth and the applications of its principles.

As Christians particularly, we seem to believe what we preach and teach well enough. Yet, we do not live our lives according to what we believe and teach. Christianity is however, more than believing the right things and preaching same but practical application of what we believe and preach. The people of Israel in Amos’ days had the same problem—a heartless knowledge. They knew and practised the proper ways of worship. They knew what their scripture said, and yet, Amos said God had rejected them and would judge them. According to Barker, Israel

loves the forms and rituals of religion but did not love what God loves—goodness, mercy, kindness, justice¹⁷. Thus, true religion requires justice and righteousness. God will not be pleased with our worship or religiosity when we are not having right relationship with people. It is an insult to God. He charges Israel with unfaithfulness and rejects their practice of religion (5:21-24).

It is unfortunate that Christianity in Nigeria is now measured by fine churches and cathedrals, large congregation and religious gatherings, manifestation of spiritual gifts, in the midst of moral and social injustice in the society and even in the church. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are now made to overshadow the fruit of the spirit. However, anointing without character is false religiosity; it is an oppression of the poor in the Spirit. Amos' message call on all Nigerians especially Christians to pursue justice and righteousness hence it is more acceptable to God than our solemn assemblies.

iii. Amos Message Calls for Transformation of Socio-ethical and Economic Relationship among Nigerians

Amos' prophetic ministry regarding social justice is still very relevant to the socio-economic situation of our country today. Amos believed that it is the right of every human being to enjoy the dignity, equality and responsibility of being created in God's image in order to have a cordial relationship to God, to our fellow human beings and to the material world. To Amos, any person or institution that would deny mankind of these divine privileges is an oppressor. Israel was found guilty of such oppression (see Amos 5:10-12; 8:4-6). It is easier to condemn Israel than to realize that we have committed the same offenses in Nigeria. We have been involved consciously or unconsciously in one form of social and economic oppression or the other. Most wealthy Nigerians have failed to seek God's perspective on the plight of the poor, the needy and the oppressed. Even those with deep religious beliefs are no more concerned about assistance and development of the poor. The prophecy of Amos referred to physical oppression and poverty, and called for repentance and freedom. This means we cannot claim to be truly religious people if we neglect the wellbeing of the poor and vulnerable members of our communities.

Amos condemned the gross inequalities between the rich and the poor. Amos saw in Israel, what is now the situation in Nigeria; a structure where the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. Israel loves money more than her fellow man or woman (Amos 8:4-6). The rich people were and are accumulating their riches unjustly by fraud. The materialism of the day was and is accompanied by all manner of evils. The ruling class acquired large estates, taking possession of the land until there is no room for the poor (cf. Isaiah 5:8).

Thus, God's warning to the Israelites is also a warning to Nigerians as well. God's demand for justice is against any form of illegal acquisition of wealth. In the Nigerian situation today, the person who rightly should be called thief does not hesitate to put a stamp of approval of an expense account, or robs his employer of a quarter hour's pay. Some take the advantage of other people's ignorance to rob them of their deals in business. Some other even rob their families by squandering the family income. Thus, the Nigerian society, like that of Israel, is dangerously divided between the rich and the poor. In fact, what Amos saw in his days was little, compared to the social inequality and injustice in Nigeria.

Social justice is essential to any system of government, thus making Amos' ethic of social justice very relevant and essential to Nigeria's political life as a nation. Omoregbe opines that, "Any group of people who come together to form a government without justice is a gang of criminals on a large scale"¹⁸. The Nigerian political atmosphere is engulfed with political instabilities, characterized by corruption, election rigging and industrial actions by all sectors of the society. The situation cannot change for the better unless the governance of the country has regard and fear of God and thus embrace Amos' message of social justice as a fundamental factor for national development. Sadly, politics is no longer service oriented but an avenue for treasury looting and embezzlement. Omoregbe captured the situation in the following words; "Our governments have been made up of national treasury looters men (and women) who came to politics primarily, or even solely, to enrich themselves by looting the national treasury without qualm of conscience. We have gangs of thieves in government, each with the key to the national treasury."¹⁹ Thus, all along, Nigerian politicians have been oppressing the poor masses and denying them of good governance in a

nation richly endowed by God with both natural and human resources, yet, only few individuals grab the national wealth and leave millions of other Nigerians in abject poverty and penury.

This situation clearly shows that God's demand for justice is not only for Israel. Amos depicts God's relationship to all nations (1:3-2:5). Therefore, God is concerned with the whole sociopolitical activities in Nigeria. The sins which the ancient nations committed and were condemned by God through the prophet, Amos, are still being committed even at present in Nigeria. Christians are therefore enjoined to be the voices of conscience to the Nigerian society like Amos was in Israel of his time.

Recommendations

1. For Nigeria to benefit from the message of Amos which demands for a religious-moral integrity, there is need for a general reformation of character among Nigerians especially Christians. Our religious activities must be seen to have corresponding effects on the quality of our interpersonal relationship with others. Nigeria will then be watered with Justice and righteousness, bringing down all vices and immoralities.
2. There is also the need for Nigerian Christianity to produce more Christian thinkers in the affairs of the society, men and women of integrity whose motivation will be to promote love, social justice, compassion, honesty and freedom in society, and a vision of humanity, made in God's image, moral responsibility, and with a conscience to be respected. Amos was filled with a sense of divine call. He single-handedly championed the course of the oppressed. Nigeria is therefore in dire need of people of integrity like Amos who will be filled with zeal to please God and show love for humanity; that will champion the reformation of Nigeria so that justice will flow like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24).

Conclusion

Amos' prophetic message on social justice is an exhortation to repentance and reformation. This calls for repentance starting with an individual, then moving to various communities and religious groups, and finally leading to national repentance and reformation. Christians especially are called to be in the vanguard of God's demand for social justice in the Nigerian society so that justice can flow like a river among the people, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream in line with the demand for religious and moral integrity in Amos' prophetic message.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁶A. O. Obiajulu, *Norms, Values, Moral Obligations and Social Justice in Nigeria: A Sociological Analysis in Contemporary Issues* (Owerri: Ark.1996), 18.
- ⁷Ronald J, Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997), 66.
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- ¹⁶Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 66
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