THE RELEVANCE OF PROPHET AMOS’ MESSAGE IN REVIVING NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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THEME: NIGERIA: THE CHALLENGES OF REVIVING CENTENARIAN IN NEAR COMATOSE
Abstract

Generally, the Old Testament prophets were dynamic figures who still minister to our present generation. In fact, no set of men in all literature have presented a more colourful picture of their time as the prophets. Thus, a diligent study of Old Testament prophets and their messages reveals the political, social and religious conditions of the Old Testament period. Prominent among the prophets used by God for the nation Israel was Amos whose message was found relevant and challenging in reviving Nigerian society most especially as we celebrate the centenarian existence of our great nation, Nigeria. This paper, therefore, attempts to provide a biblical reflection from the perspective of prophet Amos on the Israel’s socio-political, economic and religious situation in the 8th century vis-à-vis Nigeria at the centenarian celebration of existence using historical-critical approach. In doing this, we shall examine noticeable decadence in Israel and Amos’ reaction. The present day Nigeria situation will also be x-rayed making way for the challenges of the prophet to the Nigerian society. It is only when justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a flowing stream that there will be hope for individuals and the society at large.
Introduction

A careful and diligent study of Old Testament prophecies reveals the political, social and religious conditions of the period. These men of God according to Agboluaje (2007) gave us an interpretation of history that we cannot afford to miss and a gradually unfolding insight into the eternal purpose of God for his people. Besides, they throw light upon our own generation and our situation by announcing the eternal principles of divine providence which will always operate whenever similar conditions are present (Ganti, 1984). It is a truism to say that in God’s plan, the same things are true today that were true in the Old Testament age (Yates, 1942). If we are guilty of the same sins, we can be sure of reaping the same punishment.

Prominent among the prophets used by God for the nation Israel and whose message against the corrupt Israelites has direct bearing on the contemporary Nigerian situation was Amos. Like the shepherd David, who was called to public service by God, Jehovah took Amos from following the flock and made him a prophet. From the solitude of the wilderness of the South, Amos was called and sent to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Amos came from Tekoa, a town twelve miles south-east of Bethlehem in Judea. Though a man of austerity and simplicity, God nonetheless called him to a metric ministry that impacted the lives of his hearers (Williams, 1988). The convictions of Amos were as different from those of his contemporaries as the convictions of Luther from those of the monks of his day (Miller, 1986). Thus, this paper examines the relevance of prophet Amos message in reviving Nigerian society.

The World of Prophet Amos

Politically speaking, relief and comfort came the way of the Israelites in the year 805 B.C. This was when the Assyrian monarch, Adadnirari III defeated and politically crippled Syria. Consequently, there was a relief to the Israelites. At the same time, Israel was able to regain her freedom and lost territories during the reigns of king Jehoash and Jeroboam II. The Israelites army, which had been committed to repelling the Syrian attack, was used in other directions. Israel made inroads into territories previously held by the Arameans. This means that by the middle of the 8th century the two nations had,
between them, controlled an area almost as great as that of Solomon’s empire (Agboluaje, 2007).

So, for more than fifty years there was a situation of political stability, expansion and national prosperity. The economic condition of Israel during the time of Amos was also dynamic. Harrison (1979) submits that trade and commerce flourished in Israel at this period. He further argues that a generation from whom the ever-present threat of military attack had been removed began to concentrate upon more material things. Otuibe (2003) puts it thus: “They had military triumphs and were steeped in material abundance.”

The prosperity and economic boom of the nation Israel during the 8th century marked the down of its moral decadence. The Northern kingdom, most especially, was in an advanced state of decay socially, morally and religiously. Urban business men manipulated the small farmers by stock piling grain, buying crops at low prices, and then offering loans at high interest rates to the poor farmers, knowing fully well that they could not repay. Apart from this, poor land-owners were forced off their land, and the merchants then purchased it, grew crops with debtors – slaves, and sold grain at high prices to the landless peasants who had been displaced.

Some peasants stayed on their own land as tenants, paying rent to the new owners as they worked on the land, their families had owned for generations. Often the rent absorbed the major portion of their crops (Gnuse, 1985). In short, there was an apparent marginalization in the land. Small groups of influential land owners and merchants lived lives of luxury and splendour, but the rights and needs of the poor were largely ignored (Evans, 1992). Thus, the concept of brotherhood on which the nation had been founded no longer had any significance.

In the administration of justice, local courts composed of elders and judges were the only institution capable of putting end to various injustices but they received bribes and perverted justice. They condemned the innocent people because of trivial debts and confiscated the land of the poor man like the case of Naboth in I Kings Chapter 21. The poor were pushed off their land by economic and justice manipulation, thus, they lost
their status in the community, for without land, their means of economic livelihood and survival were threatened drastically (Ogedegbe, 2007).

It was also a common sight in Israel to see weeping woman and children who had been forcefully evicted from their homes by greedy money lenders. Where they could not meet up the exorbitant interests charged on loan, their homes were confiscated and sold and there was no one they could appeal to because the judges were corrupt. Besides, the cloaks and blankets which protected the poor from the biting cold of the night were also confiscated. Indeed, corruption and injustices of diverse kinds reigned supreme in the land of Israel. Murphy (1967) summarized the situation in Israel thus:

Social injustice was rife: the poor were oppressed, and those in need, like widows and orphans, were not cared for. Materialism was the attitude of the day; wealth was considered the greatest thing in life, and only people with money were thought to be important. The rights of the poor were not defended in the courts and many judges and officials would take bribes. All this was clearly against the ideals of God’s covenant people (p.65).

In the area of religion, the depravity of worship in the Northern Kingdom had reached its fullest point of development. In actual fact, the religious condition of Amos’ time was affected by its social conditions. It was such that characterized by superstition, hypocrisy, idolatory and degrading immoralities (Calkins, 1974).

Israel’s religious life was only a matter of form and outward observance of religious practice rather than a true spiritual ideal that ought to penetrate every phase of the existing order to seek to shape it according to the principle of righteousness and justice. The people of Israel continued to treat Yahweh as if he were an idol or Baal to be pacified by the right kind of religious ritual. They forgot that He was a righteous and a jealous God who would not tolerate the worship of other gods and who made moral demands on his people. Thus, alongside the worship of Yahweh, idolatry was rampant and the religious ceremonies were superficial, having little or no effect on the people’s behaviour. Oppression, corruption, injustice, dishonesty and immorality characterized both kingdoms.
The Call and Commission of Amos

Amos was born in the Southern Kingdom of Judah in Tekoa. Tekoa was a small village about twelve miles south of Jerusalem bounded by limestone hills and wilderness (Harrison, 1979). The name Amos probably means “burden” or “bearer”. Amos was not a son of a prophet nor a professional prophet. He was rather a herdsman and a cultivator of sycamore trees. The sheep he pastured were probably his own (Winward, 1983). Amos also engaged in menial seasonal work as a nipper of sycamore figs, a variety considered food only for the poor. He was busy with his work when God called him to be a prophet.

Amos began his prophetic career two years before the earthquake that occurred during the reign of Uzziah, King of Judah (Williams, 1988). It was at the same time when Jeroboam II, son of Joash, was king of Israel. This implies that Amos’ prophecy was placed sometime within the twenty-six year period, from 829 to about 804 BC, when the reigns of these two kings of Judah and Israel overlapped. As regards his training, Yates (1942) submits that the wilderness life gave to a strong man like Amos just the training needed to equip him for the most effective ministry. The solitude, the loneliness, the glory of God in nature, the silent communion with God, the mental concentration, the prolonged meditation on great thoughts, the hardship, the contacts with traders and travelers etc, all must have equipped Amos for the work of the ministry (Yates, 1942). In this silent land, Amos felt an inner compulsion to go forth and herald the coming judgment against the social injustice practised among the people and condemned the religious corruption of the period.

Prophet Amos’ Message

More than any other book in the Bible, Amos concentrates on injustice. To Amos, injustice is the misplacement or corruption of justice (Agboluaje, 2007). He articulated a stern message of doom and affirmed that Israelites’ disastrous fall would be occasioned by the heartlessness and dishonesty with which the rich maltreated the poor. He declared:

This is what the Lord says: “The people of Israel have sinned again and again and I will not forget it. I will not let them go unpunished any longer! They have perverted justice by selling honest people for silver and poor people for a pair of sandals.
They trample helpless people in the dust and deny justice to those who are oppressed. Both father and son sleep with the same woman, corrupting my holy name” (Amos 2:6-7).

On the corruption of justice, where the rich manipulated the poor so as to seize their land, the prophet declared that this ill-gotten wealth would soon elude them:

You trample the poor and steal the little they have through taxes and unfair rent, therefore you will never live in the beautiful stone houses you are building, you will never drink wine from the lush vineyards you are planting. For I know the vast number of your sins and rebellions. You oppress good people by taking bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts (Amos 5:11-12).

Amos condemned the avarice of merchants who could hardly wait for religious festivals to end before they start business. His rejection of the cultic life of the people was total, not because of any point of principle, but simply because it was the cult of hypocritical people (Otuibe, 2003). Besides, even in the midst of religious ceremony, they were more preoccupied with planning strategies against the poor than really turning their hearts and minds to God whom they pretended to be worshipping. Amos 8:4-6 puts it this way:

Listen to this, you who rob the poor and trample the needy; saying “when will the new moon be over that we may sell grain? and the Sabbath that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances…?”

The ephah is the measure by which the grain was sold to the poor, and it was made smaller. The shekel was the weight by which merchants bought grains from the poor, and it was made larger. The Chaff or “refuse” of the grain was also sold at full price (Gnuse, 1985).
Amos spoke forcefully and insistently to the people of his generation and told them that God was not cooing at her like an indulgent father, rather He was bellowing at her like a fire-breathing dragon. Amos foresaw that their rude awakening, if there could be such, was at hand in a world-wide judgment, a deadly “day of Yahweh” which would mean the death of the nation at the hands of a God-empowered enemy (Layman, 1972). However, Amos admonished them that if they turn to “seek the Lord”, and if they “let justice roll down like waters”, a “remnant” of the nation might avoid the coming doom and exile to foreign lands (Amos 5:6, 15, 24). Amos affirms that they may be very zealous in keeping feasts and in bringing sacrifices but if these were not accompanied by justice and righteousness in their daily lives, then they were far from pleasing God. Their religious practices were hateful to Him.

What a paradox of overflowing temples brimming with worshippers who had no feeling for the common good of all. The same is true of Nigeria. A blessed country carrying on in a most uncountable, uncaring way with mismanaged resources, corruption and disdain for the needs of those they govern who simply ask for bread to survive.

The Nigerian Situation

In Nigeria, the high place of political affairs is corrupt and their corrupt practices have affected the masses generally. The politicians live in luxuries and ride in latest ‘flashy’ cars. Corruption is the order of the day and the conception of our leaders is that of ‘Chop and Chop’ which has become their way of life (Dzurgba, 2003). Taiwo (2000) also described the high rate of political injustice thus:

The irony of this situation was that while the politicians were frolicking about and junketing from coast to coast in their flamboyant regalians, the masses of the people were on the verge of the extinction by hunger. And while the incumbent office holders were preparing for re-election into the offices for second term, the opposing members were desperate to unseat the incumbent… The security of the innocent people was literally at stake with the perverseness of the army of hooligans run by political parties (p. 269).
Zafar Hilaly (2000) in an interview with the Punch Newspaper said: “Don’t blame democracy for not solving the problem of corruption and maladministration, blame the politicians subverting democracy”. In Nigeria of today, like that of the day of Amos, the law courts have become places where judges accord judgment in favour of the rich and withhold the right of the ordinary citizens. Injustice as matter of fact dominated all aspects of life in Nigeria.

Economically, Nigeria as a nation is blessed with both human and natural resources like crude oil, agricultural products, and others yet the gap between the rich and the poor has widened. The reality on ground is that some Nigerians possess stupendous wealth equal to the world’s richest, and yet 70% of Nigerians live below poverty line and without safety nets (Ogedegbe, 2007). Fraudulent practices and embezzlement of government funds are prevalent in the society. Siphoning of public funds to foreign countries has greatly affected the economy and the social strata of the country. What a paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty!

The social vices in the country are not different from that of 8th century B.C. Israel. Social immorality is very rampant in Nigeria today. Ours is a society where father and son share- the same bed with the same woman. There are so many cases of sexual abuse like rape, homosexuality, lesbianism, fornication and adultery. It is a society where kidnapping, ritual killing, smugglings, armed robbery, nepotism, robbery, violence, corruption, tribalism and gross injustice reign supreme (Oguntoye, 2007).

This is a society where there is no value for human lives as Boko Haram continued to claim many lives on daily basis. Social crises that arose out of religious bigotry or boundary disputes have disrupted social and economic activities in various cities and states in Nigeria and these have left some of the cities/villages virtually deserted, especially, in the Northern part of this country.

The country’s law courts and judges are not free from corrupt practices. Judgments are given to favour the rich and the government in power. It is not uncommon to hear that some judges give oppressive and unfair judgment in favour of those who are willing or able to pay. The social injustices in Nigeria today cut across every strata of social life.
Religious wise, the adherents of two major religions in Nigeria (Islam and Christianity) have not lived up to the tenets of their faith. Their preoccupation is how to make money at all cost and at the expense of the poor masses. As it was in the days of Amos, many Nigerians who claim to be religious gather together every Sunday in different places to worship God. They sing praises to God, pay tithes and offerings and solemnly adore the creator of the heaven and earth for making them prosperous during the past week. They attend Bible studies, prayer meetings and revival services regularly, thinking that their regular attendance of these programmes will atone for their sinful activities. Nigerians who indulge in armed robbery, drug dealings, smuggling and other vices are the same people who contribute their millions for the upkeep of these churches. They oppress and annihilate the poor with impunity. In the quest for personal political gains, individual religious leaders in collaboration with some politicians exploit the less privileged. In essence, the ruling elites use religious sentiment to polarize the people and to create unnecessary and unhealthy tension.

Relevance of Amos’s Message to the Nigerian Society

Relatively to the contemporary Nigerian nation, the historical condition of Amos’ time is typical of our own society. Nigeria is a society with notable feature of affluence, exploitation and profit motive with moral standard sinking into disrepute. Nigeria is a society plagued with social malaise of injustice, economic oppression, culminating in economic disparity between the rich and the poor with discontentment and destitution. Poverty is a major issue in her socio-economy and the nation is characterized by widespread corruption despite the efforts of the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practice Commission (ICPC). Religious syncretism is evident everywhere as it was in Israel at the time of Amos.

Divine justice is Amos’ message to the Nigerian society. In other words, there should be a divine control of the lives and affairs of all Nigerians. This according to Oguntoye, (2007) refers to God’s rectitude, honesty of character, moral corrections and inbuilt sense of morality in human being. Divine justice as classified by Oguntoye (2007) will be discussed briefly, which includes: Divine Social justice, economic justice, political and divine legal justice.
**Divine Social Justice**

For Amos, divine social justice is found in the civic and commercial righteousness and of the duty of man to his brother (Oguntoye, 2007). He laid stress upon this requirement of Yahweh, when he declared: “Seek the Lord and ye shall live … seek good and not evil, that ye may live… Hate the evil, and love the good” (Amos 5; 6, 14, 15). Since it is the right of every human being to enjoy the dignity, equality and responsibility of being created in God’s image, divine laws should guide the relationship between man and God and between man and man. Just as Amos called on Israelites to abolish social discrimination and establish mutual respect and service for one another, the Nigerian society is also called upon to do same. The elites in the society are to see to it that those who are less fortunate in terms of social status are not victims of the social order. They are not to be exploited and used as a means to further enrich those who are already rich. When the fundamental principle of recognition of human values is upheld, then divine social justice is in operation in the Nigeria society.

**Divine Economic Justice**

In Amos 8:4-6, Amos condemned the economic injustice of his day. Quite often an Israelite loved money more than his fellow man or woman as also characterized Nigerian society. The poor were cheated in the market place. The business men of Israel used their economic power to enslave a poor man who owes a pair of sandals. This was a clear violation of the humanitarian law of Deut. 24:12-13 where a poor person’s cloak given in pledge for a debt need not to be kept over night. Thus, Amos called for reforms of economic activities in line with God’s commandment. He called for abolition of selfishness, structural injustice, economic oppression, and commercial dishonesty. The Nigerian government should distribute the country’s wealth equally through infrastructural facilities to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor (Oguntoye, 2007). Education should be given priority in both federal and state budgetary allocations to help elevate educational level of ordinary Nigerians.
Divine Political Justice

Amaziah the priest in the Northern Kingdom of Israel charged Amos with political conspiracy. In Nigeria, political opponents have been accused of conspiracy and even charged of treasonable offence (Oguntoye, 2007). “The winner takes all” syndrome in Nigeria politics has deprived some communities of the dividends of democracy. In order to achieve divine political justice, politics should be seen as service to the nation or to one’s community. Selfless, courageous, and dedicated leaders are needed to carry out the divine mandate of justice in the distribution of social amenities with a view to elevating the economic and social status of the citizenry. Divine justice is essential in any system of government but in the case of Nigeria, Aghawenu (2002) declared thus: “…we have gangs of thieves in government, each with the key to the national treasury”.

Divine Legal Justice

As Amos found injustice in the courts, so does injustice prevail in the law courts in Nigerian society. The judges accept bribes and pronounce guilty those they know to be guiltless (Amos 5:12). Amos lamented: “you hate the one who reproves in court and despise him who tells the truth. You trample on the poor and force him to give you again…You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts”. Prophet Amos then called for divine legal justice in the legal system. He admonished them to “seek good not evil; hate evil, love good, maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph’ (Amos 5:14-15).

Nigeria legal system needs divine justice. Judicial decisions that are made on the basis of bribery, religious or tribal sentiment should be discouraged. Aghawenu (2002) stated how legal system should operate:

“The main function of the law is to safeguard the accepted values of the society and to protect the right of citizens. Laws must also be enforceable which means that they must enjoy public approval. To frame and pass such laws requires political power and in a democracy, majority power in parliament” (p.58).
Those who are in control of government and judicial processes have the responsibility of seeing that justice is administered fairly and impartially.

**Conclusion**

The situations Amos denounced in the 8th century are almost same with our contemporary ones; care should be taken so as to avert the coming judgment on Nigerians. His message of Justice was timely as he saw the truth clearly and proclaimed it courageously and Israel did not remain the same. Amos’ message is relevant and should be seen as addressed to the contemporary society in Nigeria. Justice must be sought at all levels irrespective of the wealth and status of the individuals involved.

It is a fact that irresponsible conduct, whether within or without the religious structures of the day, cannot continue unabated without experiencing inevitable retribution. A call to divine judgment is an exhortation to repentance and reformation/transformation. It is only when justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a flowing stream that there will be hope for individuals and the society at large. Indeed, prophet Amos words strongly challenged our nation, and it is a challenge which the leaders and the citizenry must respond to in order to experience the desired transformation or revival.

**Recommendations**

Based on the conclusion of this paper, the following recommendations are hereby made:

(i) Politics in Nigeria should be seen as service to the nation or to one’s community.

(ii) The Nigerian government should distribute the country’s wealth equally through infrastructural facilities to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.

(iii) Education should be given priority in both federal and state budgetary allocations to help elevate educational level of ordinary Nigerians.

(iv) The Judicial Service Commission set up by the government to oversee judicial processes should be empowered and functional to see that justice is administered fairly and impartially in Nigeria.
(v) The religious leaders as a matter of utmost importance should stand in the same pedestal as prophet Amos, pointing out the ills of our society without fear or favour.

(vi) Religious activities or programmes should go hand in hand with right conduct as religion is no insurance against judgment.

(vii) Code of Conduct Bureau should be more proactive, preventing accumulation of wealth by exploitation and plundering to the utter neglect of the poor and needy.

(viii) Against the social ill of idleness and lazy drone attitude, the government and civil society should engage in mass orientation and enlightenment to sensitize the poor community on how to help themselves acquire new values and norms.

References


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