

An Assessment of the Message of Amos and its Relevance to the Socio-Political Situation of Nigeria

Oladotun Paul Kolawole

Abstract

The Prophet Amos was one of the Prophets raised by Yahweh to confront the issue of national sin and the disruption of social norms that had led to the social inequality that prevailed in Israel in those days, a situation that is capable of hampering any development. This paper is set to examine the background of Amos, his prophetic vocation and the contents of his message. It also looks at the social and religious landscape in present-day Nigeria; presenting the kingdom of Israel in Amos's day comparable to the situation in Nigeria.

Introduction

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 (2 Tim. 3:5). 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). The God encountered in Amos is the same Creator who made man in his image. He is God, and there is no other. He does not tolerate idolatry, which in reality is the worship of demons (Deut. 32:16-17; 1 Cor. 10:20).

The Lord sent warnings to Israel in the 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).¹⁹⁶ Judgment must follow (Amos 4:12 through 5:20), and this punishment is portrayed in a series of verbal and visionary prophecies predicting wholesale destruction and exile.¹⁹⁷ But the Lord chastises those he loves, and his judgment is really a sign of faithfulness to his covenant people. He promises to restore the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down (Amos 9:11). Therefore, this research work focuses on the message of the book of Amos and its relevance to the socio-political situation of Nigeria.

Background to the Book of Amos

No better testimony could be given concerning Amos that his own (7:14-15): “I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet’s son; but I was a herdsman...” From this testimony Amos was not a graduate of the school of the prophets, nor of a formal religious training or academic preparation for the mission to which God called him. Rather, he was a simple shepherd who also gathered sycamore fruit...”¹⁹⁸

Amos came from Tekoa, about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. He was a shepherd and he looked after fig trees. His home was in Judah. But God sent him away to Israel, which was north of Judah. (At that time, Judah was a different country from Israel).¹⁹⁹ Very little is known about the life of Amos. Amos lived when Jeroboam 2nd (782-753 B.C.) was king of Israel and Uzziah (767-740 B.C.) was king of Judah. Perhaps Amos gave most of his messages about 760 B.C., but we cannot be certain about this.²⁰⁰

The author of the prophecy is identified as Amos, a shepherd of Tekoa (1:1), a small village 10 miles south of Jerusalem. The prophecy of Amos is characterized by great boldness coupled with great tact.²⁰¹ The prophet gains

¹⁹⁶ Robert B. Coote, *Amos Among the Prophets: Composition and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 71.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 72.

¹⁹⁸ William Sanford LaSor, et al. *Old Testament Survey: the Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 59.

¹⁹⁹ Donald. Eddie, www.easyenglish.info/bible-commentary/amos-lbw.htm (accessed on 24th Oct, 2016).

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

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.²⁰²

God speaks to Amos, a farmer and herder, and tells him to go to Samaria, the capital of the Northern kingdom. Through Amos, God tells the people that he is going to judge Israel for its sins, and it will be a foreign nation that will enact his judgment. The people understand judgment as the coming of "the Day of the LORD."²⁰³ "The Day of the LORD" was widely celebrated and highly anticipated by the followers of God. However, Amos came to tell the people that "the Day of the LORD" was coming soon and that it meant divine judgment and justice for their own iniquity.²⁰⁴

Message of Amos

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. An unjust society will die; it cannot help but collapse of its own weight. Genuine justice cultivates life. 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. 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.

An element of social justice found in Amos is vehemently emphasized and can also be viewed from a universal perspective. What does God expect of a just society? Based on my understanding of Amos, I would say that he

²⁰¹Cripps, Richard, *A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (USA: Wock Publishers, 1987), 54.

²⁰²Ibid, 24.

²⁰³Paul R. Noble, *The Literary Structure of Amos* (Downer Grove III: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), 59.

²⁰⁴C.F. Keil, et al. *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 54.

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.

The purpose of Amos's prophecy is to awaken Israel and its surrounding nations to the fact that the nation is both responsible and accountable for its sins. His theme then, is national accountability for national sins.²⁰⁵ In summary, Amos addresses Israel's two primary sins; an absence of true worship, and a lack of justice. 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 Relevance of the Message of Amos to the Socio-Political Situation in Nigeria

In this part of the research, the message of prophet Amos is relevantly seen as that which directly applies to the nation Nigeria. The situations of the time of Amos and that of the contemporary Nigerian society are similar; in the sense that the oppression of the poor and the righteous, immorality, rejection of divine messages, pretentious religiosity, corruption in business, and idolatry are the order of the day. The situation where the righteous will be declared wanted and the guilty discharged and acquitted. The poor are becoming poorer and the rich richer, in that the race is not for the swift but for those who know how to pay their way in.²⁰⁶ In view of this, the researcher now sees the nation Nigeria as a direct recipient of the prophets' message.

The message of Amos is quite appropriate to governance in Nigeria. Leadership at all levels must be characterized by integrity and honesty. The voice of Amos should be echoed loud on the leadership quality of Nigeria. The society at large must be ever conscious of the fact that there can be no

²⁰⁵Ibid, 68.

²⁰⁶Timothy. Agboluaje, *The Ministry of Amos in Israel and its Socio- Religious Implication for the Nigerian Nation* (Oshogbo: Deming, 2008), 23.

human solidarity in a situation where human rights are trampled on, and where human dignity is treated as a natural privilege for a few citizens. It is impossible to function and live peacefully in a situation where there is no respect for the rule of law.²⁰⁷

Consequently, leadership must rise up to these challenges ensuring equality and equity at all levels. 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 the ordinary citizens.²⁰⁸ Those, at the helm of affairs, God-fearing wealthy citizens should create job opportunities for the throngs of the unemployed men and women in the nation today.²⁰⁹

Leadership should bring to implementation policies and projects that are people-centred. Majority of the Nigerian populace live in abject poverty. The concern of leadership should not be how to store up wealth but how to better the lots of the people they lead. It is often said that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Nigeria today is a wounded nation and many people are nursing physical and psychological wounds, the scars of war, ethnic and inter-communal clashes and cleansing marginalization, religious clashes, bomb explosions, AIDS pandemic and so on. It is only a good government engendered by quality leadership that can seriously tackle these problems easily noticeable everywhere in the nation.

One of the cardinal targets set by the federal government at several presidents' inception was a fight against corruption. More so, when Nigeria has been regarded as the most corrupt country in the world. In Nigeria and overseas, it is believed that corruption has not only stigmatized Nigeria, but it has made it difficult to achieve economic growth. Corruption has found place in every sphere of government. The revolution by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and independent corrupt practices and other related

²⁰⁷J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 65.

²⁰⁸*Ibid*, 66.

²⁰⁹W.K Simpson, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Publishing Company, 1965), 121.

offense commission ICPC brought out several government officials and religious leaders who have used position to perpetrate crimes.²¹⁰

The recent discovery was that of the former Inspector General of Police, who was about to loot 21.6 million naira from the police account. Violent crime and cultism have perpetrated their way to higher institutions and society. Violent crimes such as arm robbery are so rampant that they no longer make headlines in the nation. No more place is safe, be it at home, office, market and the high way, even in the church there is no place to hide.²¹¹

Amos in his days, witness all kinds of crimes and the corruption committed in the Israelite society of his days. He used all the means within his reach to unsettle the comfort of the perpetrators in the society. He was so quick in tackling this social malaises of his own time. By inference, Amos acted as the conscience of the ruling class and those on whom rest the mantle of power and leadership of the nation Israel. His message is a challenge to the government and the various arms of her security outfit, to move out from the level of the word to that of action. For instance, empowering the police force without adequate planning and funding may eventually be an effort of in futility. Efforts must be put to force corruption out of the society in other for a right order of law and order to be regulated in the system of government.

Amos' call for justice in his book is said to be the main and centre theme of his message, which is so apt and direct. The theme is so central and the people' inequity continue to mount and justic4e and righteousness are perverted (Amos 5:7). The truthful men are despised and scorn but those who are full of lies are praised. Traditionally, the city gate was a seat of justice. It is not only the judicial place for process but was also the economic and legal hall of the society. The poor were exploited by the rich who take away the meager food that they love. This is done in form of task, rents and interests on loans.

²¹⁰Godwin O. Akintola, *Prophecy and Social Change in the Old Testament* (Ilorin: Amazing Grace Prints, 2008), 207.

²¹¹Ibid, 208.

This appears to be the case in the Nigerian experience. Justice appears in most cases to have been perverted. Corruption has stigmatized the national judicial disciplined nine judges for indiscriminate granting of ex-parte motion. This action taken by the national judicial council is sequel to the campaign by the judiciary to sanitize the judicial system which is already bedeviled within all for a sharp practice both at the bench and the bar.²¹²

It is said that the judiciary is the last hope of the common man. Hence, it is expected to dispense justice without fear or favor. Recently the attorney general of the federation and the minister for justice recounted the story of a condemned man who had waited for execution of the judgment so that he could be free from the mental torture of when it would be, which he had experienced a whole decade.

More so, the cry for justice by Amos is most relevant here. Just as he admonished the nation of Israel, such admonition is relevant today, "Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an overflowing stream (5:24). Justice must not only be done, justice must be seen to be done. The Nigerian judicial system must be completely overhauled to give credibility to the decisions and judgments of the judiciary. The government should therefore put into consideration the moral probity of anyone appointed judge, should not hesitated to dismiss any corrupt judge."²¹³

Conclusion

The nation Nigeria today is saddled with many socio-political, economical and religious problems. Social injustice pervades the land and leadership problem is a major one in the state. The fact that the message of Amos is relevant to the socio-political situation in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Poverty and other vices are ravaging the land at a high rate because of inequality in the society. Thus, the message of Amos therefore becomes relevant, fresh and living to appropriately serve as a living conscience that can make Nigeria a better place. Religious leaders like Amos should stand as a bearer of moral and spiritual life of the nation. They should be uncompromising in denouncing the evil done by the so called men of God and political leaders in our society.

²¹²Ibid, 209.

²¹³Ibid, 210.

SOURCES

- Agboluaje, Timothy. *The Ministry of Amos in Israel and its Socio-Religious Implication for the Nigerian Nation*. Oshogbo: Deming, 2008.
- Akintola, Godwin O. *Prophecy and Social Change in the Old Testament*. Ilorin: Amazing Grace Prints, 2008.
- Coote, Robert B. *Amos Among the Prophets: Composition and Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortres Press, 1981.
- Eddie, Donald. www.easyenglish.info/bible-commentary/amos-lbw.htm. Accessed on 24th Oct, 2016.
- Keil, C.F. et al. *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986.
- Lindblom, J. *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*. Oxford: Bail Blackwell, 1962.
- Noble, Paul R. *The Literary Structure of Amos*. Downer Grove III: InterVarsity Press, 1974.
- Richard, Cripps. *A Commentary on the Book of Amos*. USA: Wock Publishers, 1987.
- Sanford LaSor William, et al. *Old Testament Survey: the Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996.
- W.K Simpson, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Westminster Publishing Company, 1965.