



Social Injustice in Amos 5 and its Implications for the Contemporary Society

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.103.2045>

Abstract

Amos, a simple herdsman from Tekoa, asserted that he was not a professional prophet but had rather come to the norther state of Israel at the behest of Yahweh. This article is a biblical response to social injustice in the contemporary society through an exegetical study of Amos 5. The study drew inferences from Amos 5 as panaceas to the problems of injustice and deprivation of the poor. Injustice is one of the major problems that is confronting the society, because injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Amos thus rebuked the many sins of the people and he stated how the LORD would punish them. The aim of this study was to examine the concept of social injustice in Yahweh's response in order to give the biblical understanding of the concept in promoting justice and peace. The approach for this study is exegetical. The findings reveal that any unjust act as well as its perpetrator will not go unpunished. Also, the LORD demanded righteousness, love and justice. This article recommends that nations, the Church and individual Christian should desist from any form of unjust act and live a righteous life.

Keywords: Social Injustice, Yahweh, Amos, Righteousness, judgement.

Introduction

Israel grew in size and enjoyed unprecedented political and economic stability during the time of Amos. However, levels of corruption, avarice, human trafficking, sexual immorality, and injustice existed beneath the so-called prosperity. Hypocritical religion replaced true worship because there were increases in religious activities without any serious regard for the LORD's standard. In keeping to His character, the LORD called Amos to denounce their hypocritical religious activities and announce to the visions of His judgement. The situation in Israel during the time of Amos, though it displeased the LORD, is somewhat better than the current situation of our world today. Therefore, this writer analyzed Amos 5 with the use of historical-grammatical approach of interpretation thus drawing lessons for Christians.

Historical Background of the Book Amos

Jeroboam the son of Jehoash, often referred to as Jeroboam II, embarked on a serious expansion of the boundaries of Israel, more than what his father had done (2 Kings 14:25, 28). This brought about serious political and economic prosperity (Hoerth, 1998:30). This experience of prosperity in the Northern Kingdom can be associated with Jonah's prophecy in 2 Kings 14:25, but what was not part of this earlier prophecy, evidenced at this period was that, it was also a time of moral decline and religious indifference (Hoerth, 1998:30). It was this period that an unusual spokesman for the LORD emerged in person of Amos who did not have any prophetic background like other



prophets of this period and interestingly was from Southern Kingdom Judean town, to address these ungrateful attitude of the people of Israel by informing them of the plan of the LORD to judge their unfaithfulness and rebellion against Him even much more than what the LORD will do and have done to the neighbouring nations (Hoerth, 1998:30). Amos lived with a group of shepherds in a small village called Tekoa and he stressed that he did not come from a family of prophets, neither did he even consider himself to be one. He informs us that he was “a grower of sycamore figs” as well as a shepherd (Amos 7:14–15).

Hiebert asserts that the nation of Israel was in an advanced state of social, moral and spiritual decay (Hierbert, 1996). Although, there was increase in religious activities and outward show of devotion to God; but the heart of the people was far from the LORD, hence this increase in activity was only hypocritical (Smith & Page, 1995:26).

Literary Genre of the Book Amos

There are various views about the genre or kind of literary composition that is employed in the book of Amos. Scholars like Shalom M. Paul and Gary Smith do affirm that the book of Amos employs diverse forms of literary genre (Bramer, n.d.: 156-621). which “includes judgment speeches, dirges, disputation sayings, exhortations, vision reports, narratives and eschatological promises.” (Bramer, n.d.:156-621). Douglas Stuart also agrees with the above scholars about the fact that there are arrays of genres in the book of Amos (Stuart, 1987: 285).

Francis I. Anderson and David Noel Freedman also decline to identify the general genre of the book, rather they suggest that Amos employs the style of a messenger, popular metaphors, series of proverbs and oracles to convey his messages to his audience (Anderson & Freedman, 1989:188). Lieland Ryken also observes that there are varieties of literary devices used by Amos in presenting his message to his audience which include: “metaphors, simile, epithets, proverbs, short narratives, sarcasm, direct vituperation, vision, taint, dialogue, irony, satire, parody.” (Constable, 2017). On the other hand, a school of thought submits the possibility of a general genre in the book of Amos. According to one author, the book of Amos is a covenant text; another has suggested that it is a covenant – lawsuit style (Constable, 2017). However, this writer opines that identifying a general genre in the book of Amos might be very difficult and possibly counterproductive to the book itself. There is no doubt that there are various literary devices in Amos which are used deliberately by the prophet to effectively drive home the LORD’s message to the people.

Structure of the Book of Amos

The book of Amos could be classified into three major parts which include: Prologue (1:1-2); the prophetic messages that Amos delivered (1:3-6:14) and the visions that he saw (7-9) (Constable, 2017). Similarly, it could be structured into Amos’ announcement of God’s judgment on the nations (chapter 1-3); Amos’ announcement of God’s judgment on unfaithful Israel (chapter 4-8); and Amos foretells the restoration of the nation of Israel (chapter 9).

Authorship of the Book of Amos

Amos hails from Tekoa, a Judean town, which is roughly ten miles south of Jerusalem and about six miles southeast of Bethlehem (Savelle, C. n.d). His name which means “burden bearer” is evidenced in his ministry as he declared the word of the LORD with much burden in his heart (Dickson, 2011:1008). He wasn’t a prophet in the same sense as other prophets of his day



because he didn't attend a prophetic school or follow a known prophet of the era as a disciple. In fact, Amos never referred to himself as a prophet but as a shepherd and farmer of Sycamore trees (Constable, 2017: 6)

The authorship of the book has been a subject of debate among scholars. R. E. Clement asserts that Amos, whose name is mentioned in Amos 1:1, is the authentic author of the book, because there are no serious evidences for denying this oracle to Amos, because he announced hope for his people (Clement, 1965: 72). In fact, the declaration of hope or restoration, which has been the subject of argument by some scholars, is a common message in Prophet Amos' time; According to Charles Savelle, the restoration promise is linked to the covenant bond between God and His people (Savelle, n.d). However, scholars like Francis I. Anderson and David N. Freedman disagree with this position on the authorship of the book of Amos. They opine that the book seems to be a collection of various prophetic materials (Anderson F. I. .and Freedman, 1989:188). Particularly, the authorship of chapter 9 had been credited to a later redactor; scholars who agree with this position cite the following reasons: that the message of salvation is not in harmony with the message of judgement; (Page, 1996: 16) there are some historical backgrounds that seem not to support the writing of this book in the days of Amos, for instance, certain verses in chapter nine seem to suggest that Judah has already been taken captive by the Babylonians (Vannoy, 2007). He may have emanated from the southern kingdom of Judah, but Amos directed his vital message towards the inhabitants of northern kingdom of Israel, and moreso the cities of Bethel and Samaria (Dearman, 2006).

However, this writer opines that the book of Amos is consistent with other prophetic writing of his days, which often will not conclude on a note of doom but hope or restoration for those who will repent and return to the LORD. Therefore, there is no serious reason(s) to doubt the authenticity of Amos as the author of the Book of Amos.

The Central Theme of the Book of Amos

Undoubtedly, there are other themes as: the universality of God, election of the people of Israel, the expression of the Grace of God which is evidenced in the message of restoration and even more in the book of Amos (McConville, 2002:172). However, central to the very heart of the book of Amos is the issue of social justice which was expressed more prominently in chapter five of the Book (McConville, 2002:172). Amos spread the word that God is ethical so that he si not affected by ceremonies "For Amos ... religion consists not in ritual but in righteousness. YHWH, God of justice, demands right living not oblations" (Waterman, 1945).

Amos, affirms that social justice cannot be replaced with superficial worship because worship without love between and among the people is exposed as utterly vain and such is definitely not accepted to God. McConville emphasises the connection between justice and God's blessing, which is a representation of the covenant life of God's people. Though there is no mechanical connection between the two, they symbolise the image of God's order that underlies His creation of the world (McConville, 2002:172). According to Amos, relationships amongst the people is a true reflection of their relationship with the LORD (Anderson & McCurley, 2003). Thus, He will not be pleased with so much sacrifices and festivals that do not present Him as a just God. Amos teaches us that both the physical and the spiritual needs of all human beings matter when we consider the LORD's notion of what justice entails. The response of the LORD to the problem of social injustice which is the central issue of the book of Amos will be examined in the next section.



Analysis of Selected Verses with Respect to Social Injustice in Amos 5

Although there are other passages of the book of Amos that address the issue of injustice among the people of Israel, but the message is more developed in chapter five. This section of the paper shall analyse the LORD's response to the problem of social injustice as follows:

A call for repentance (verses 4-6)

Social injustice among the people (verse 12)

Consequences of living an unjust life (verse 11 and verses 16-20)

The benefit of repentance (verse 14)

The LORD's ultimate demand (verses 21-24)

A Call for Repentance (verses 4-6)

"This is what the Lord says to the house of Israel: 'Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba. For Gilgal will surely go into exile, and Bethel will be reduced to nothing.' Seek the Lord and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire; it will devour, and Bethel will have no one to quench it." (Amos 4-6)

It is in accordance with God's character to show His people their mistake before judgment. In the opening verse of chapter five, it is quite clear that the LORD is displeased with the unfaithful attitude of His people, but He is still kind to tell them their fault and He expects them to repent. Verses four to six express a window of opportunity that was given to the people of God to see their mistake and turn from them. For instance, the command "to seek with care" seem not to suggest that the Israelites have not been seeking the LORD before the command was given by the Lord, but that they were not seeking Him correctly, hence there is the need for them to turn and seek the LORD in the right way. Amos is warned by God that the Israelites will encounter divine intervention as tyranny was widespread in Israel. God states that the Israelites are simply being religious as opposed to being truly righteous. Their cruelty and also injustice in oppressing the downtrodden in society made them malevolent in God's eyes thus justice was required as is evident in in Amos' important and prophetic teachings (Escobar, 1995). One needs to be always dependent on God when seeking a full life, thus one should always seek the LORD (Amos 5:4).

Amos' sayings are uttered as often judgment oracles and many such as in Amos 5-6 were most likely original (Hayes, 1995). Amos 5 begins as a dirge which is a song of death, and it mourns an Israel that has "fallen, no more to rise," and he condemns the people (Thomas, 2022), who "turn justice to wormwood" (Amos 5:1-2, Amos 5:7).

He further states "You have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine" (Amos 5:11).

Thomas, (2022) quotes Amos 5:24: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" and says this is a prophetic denunciation of the "sacrifices and meal offerings" of a people who have broken the covenant, which is comprised of justice and fairness.



McConville suggests that Israel can only find the LORD when they seek Him in true worship and true worship can only be pictured in justice and right living (McConville, 2002: 172). Since this has not been the case, there is the need for them to repent from their present superficial way of worshipping the LORD, to worship that will picture the LORD as both the Father of the rich and the poor.

Also, this right attitude towards the LORD in verse four is compared with seeking the LORD in Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba in verse two which the people have mistaken to be the right way of worshipping the LORD, which according to the oracle will not be allowed to continue, because that is not the LORD's desire. Just going to the place that has been assigned for the LORD's worship is actually not the same as the worship of the LORD. This is further emphasized in verse six with the repetition of the phrase "seek the LORD carefully and live."

It is also essential to emphasize the importance of the repetition of the phrase "seek the LORD and live" both in verses four and six of this chapter. In McConville's opinion, the command to seek the LORD and live means that Israel will find her good in the right worship of the LORD. This good may include both deliverance from their enemy and material blessings as they currently enjoy. However, the refusal of the people to turn to the worship of the LORD will cost them their lives in both senses mentioned above.

Social Injustice among the People (verse 12)

"For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts."

After a serious appeal by the LORD to the people to turn from their unfaithfulness, which is evidenced in their wrong attitude towards their brothers and sisters, the next issue, particularly in chapter five, was the call to practice justice and righteousness (McConville, 2002:169). The LORD cannot be deceived with mere sacrifice like the priest, who also have decided to close their eyes to the injustice that is growing at an alarming rate in their society. The phrase in verse 12, "for I know" is a clear demonstration of the omniscient character of the LORD; He is all knowing, therefore He declared, "I know all your many transgressions and your mighty sins," how they have oppressed the poor; deprived justice; hated those who speak the truth; and have burdened the poor with heavy taxes. Nogalski affirms that the LORD accused the wealthy of Israel of selling the poor for money, acting with violence and impunity towards the poor; the LORD also spoke against sexual impropriety among the people generally. The blessings of both political and economic stabilities which were expectedly supposed to bring the people closer to the LORD who had promised and fulfilled His promise of restoration to His people (Hoerth, 1998: 229). have unfortunately succeeded in leading the covenant people of God to self-indulgence (1:6); exploitation of the poor (2:6-7, 5:7, 10-13); sexual immorality (2:7); idolatry (5:18-27) and pride (6:8) (Savelle, n.d). Throughout Amos 5-6, the Amos criticizes all who have become wealthy at the expense of the poor and pretend to be holy. Amos informs the evildoers that God says: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies" (Amos 5:21). Religious devotion is meaningless if it is accompanied by unfair taxes on the poor, backdoor bribes, and working against those in need (Amos 5:11-12).



It is important to say that the knowledge of the oppression of the poor by the LORD is not just that He knows, but that He will do something about the injustice against His people. Therefore, the phrase seems to make it very clear to the people that the LORD will bring justice to those who have being deprived of it and on those who have deprived others their rights (Nogalski, 1985: 357-358; Guzik, 2022). Gohwald, affirms that Amos not only has the first-hand information of the oppression of the poor, not only did he detest it, but he was equally aware that such attitude did not please God. Without minding the consequences of his action, he stood to speak without any apology against such ungodly attitude among the covenant people of God (Gohwald, 1985:357-358).

Consequences of Living an Unjust Life (verse 11 and verses 16-20)

¹¹“You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine.”

¹⁶⁻²⁰“Therefore this is what the Lord, the Lord God Almighty, says: “There will be wailing in all the streets and cries of anguish in every public square. The farmers will be summoned to weep and the mourners to wail. There will be wailing in all the vineyards, for I will pass through your midst,” says the Lord. Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light — pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?”

Amos condemned the false worship and oppression of the poor among the covenant people of Israel and further announces the consequences of their actions, some which are expressed in verse 11: “...you have built houses of stones, but will not live in them, you have planted lush vineyards, but will not drink their wine.” One must note the comparison between the verb “you built” and; “you will not live”, the first is in a perfect case while the second is in an imperfect case, this seems to suggest that the rich among them have succeeded in building big and beautiful mansions for themselves but will not at any point in time enjoy whatever they think they have achieved, it will then make sense to have a rethink of their action and see their riches as a means of responsibility rather than using their wealth as an instrument of oppression (Rosenbaum, 1990; Guzik, 2022). Also verses 16 – 20 present far more serious consequences of social injustice in the land: for instance, in verse 17, the phrase “for I will pass through you”, does not mean that the LORD is just strolling through the land of Israel to observe what was going on, but suggests a visit to alleviate, and condemn or destroy the land and Amos refers to the day the LORD will visit the land with his judgement as “the day of the LORD”, which ironically the people of Israel have thought will be a day of joy (5:18). Amos referred to that day as the day of darkness; wailing and mourning; the day no one will be able to avoid the LORD's anger (5:19). According to McConville, God will act against those who use their opportunity, wealth, position or strength to oppress the weak (McConville, 2002: 173).

The Benefit of Repentance (verse 14)

“Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is.”



Just as justice is rooted in the character of the LORD, so also mercy is an important part of His attribute. When the LORD is displeased with His people, there is always that window open them to turn back to the LORD. The benefit of repentance on the part of the people can only be understood when one comes to understand that the LORD is gracious and merciful. The phrase in verse 14, “seek good carefully and not evil that you may be preserved,” suggests that when the people do the things in the way expected of the LORD, there is a reward and Scripture refer to this reward as “preservation” which could mean preservation from both physical death and power of the enemy.

Also, it is observed that repentance will cause the people to enjoy the presence of the LORD as they have claimed to have been enjoying it. What this means is that the people of Israel, though they were meeting with the LORD at various worship centres Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba, He was not actually there. So, to enjoy the presence of the LORD, the people must turn from their oppressive attitude towards the poor (McConville, 2002:169).

The LORD’s Ultimate Demand (verses 21-24)

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings. I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

Undoubtedly, the LORD ordained the various sacrifices and festivals that are observed by the people of Israel, but these ordinances include a vision of a people in harmony and mutual service. The LORD is angered by the way the people observe these sacrifices and festivals, which no longer focus on love for their neighbours and the longing to be just. “In that case, the worship becomes merely irrelevant, but offensive to God” (McConville, 2002:172) Verse 21 summarises the mind of the LORD about this situation: “I hate, I reject your feast and I refuse to be in your assemblies.” The repetition of these negative expressions is an indication of how much the LORD detested the action of the people of Israel.

What then is the LORD’s ultimate demand? This is clearly expressed in verse 24 “...but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” As far as the LORD is concerned, seeking justice and righteousness has much more value in His presence than multitude of sacrifices and feast. The LORD’s ultimate demand is justice to both the poor and the rich; the weak and strong and not sacrifices and feast.

Inferences from Amos 5 as Implications to Social Injustice in the Contemporary Society

More than any other book of the Old Testament, the book of Amos projects God as a universal God, not necessarily a God of a group, nation or tribe, but the One that has controls over all nations of the world. In what is a clear departure from the prophetic order, Amos saw the LORD as Sovereign over all cities or nations of the world. Therefore, the LORD will be displeased with injustice against the poor or the weak irrespective of where they are located, whether in Africa, Asia, America, or Europe. In the light of this, this writer highlights lessons the contemporary society can learn from the LORD’s response to social injustice in time past particularly to Israel in the book of Amos, as it affects people, group or nations; the Church as well as individuals.



Implications for Nations

There is no much debate about the universality of God in this present world, because much more than the time of Amos; nations have come to accept the reality of God's existence. However, it is surprising to see that the more the nations accept the reality of God's existence, the less these nations demonstrate God's character in their national life. If nationals in the days of Amos are guilty of injustice, oppression, immorality, human trafficking, violation of human rights, and were seriously punished by the LORD for these offences, then the present world must be prepared for much more serious punishment, because they are more guilty of same and even much more.

There is increase in cases of human right abuse, violence against women, children and the poor, the policies of governments of the present world, allow the few rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer, dying in their poverty. More nations of the world are not only encouraging immorality through promotion of negative human rights, but are not sanctioning sexual relationships that have angered God in the past such as homosexuality, lesbianism. Just like Amos announces the day of the Lord's judgment, the present world today, particularly their leaders should be aware that the LORD's standard is still much the same, if God will judge the nations in the days of Amos because of their violent ways of life, then, it will be against His character not to do same to this present world unless there is repentance. Also, the principle that lies behind the standard or measure of judgment against nations in the past is that privilege brings responsibility (Constable, 2017: 7). This writer asserts that the principle has not changed: to whom much is given much is expected. There are certain nations of the world that are greatly privileged. Nations like America, Britain, France, Germany; and in Africa, Nigeria, which is often referred to as the giant of Africa, have been undoubtedly blessed by the LORD, both physical and spiritually, but they often misuse these blessings.

The question is, have these nations responded positively to the use of these great privileges? The answer is certainly "no." Particularly in Nigeria, where the leaders oppress the people without anyone to question them; the government may refuse to pay salaries and wages of their workers but would rather travel abroad to misuse the resources that should have been used for the people. The rate of corruption among the political class in Africa is alarming; one person can store billions of dollars in his house that should have been used for the wellbeing of the people. If the judgment of the LORD fell so much harshly on the nationals in Amos' time, then one should be clear of what to expect in our days except the nations repent.

Implications for Individual Christian

Christians who have been privileged to understand the mind of God thus have greater responsibilities than the unbelievers; the people of Israel were punished more severely than people of other nations because they are expected to know what is acceptable to the LORD. It is clear that judgment will begin from the Church; therefore, there is the need for Christians as individuals to judge themselves even before the severe judgment of God will come upon them. It is true that Amos was a national prophet, his message will mainly apply to national life, but, there are obvious lessons that can be learnt from his message as an individual (Constable, 2017, 7). One major lesson for Christians today is that they should make themselves available as instruments of grace to their generation. When the LORD called Amos, he had the option of refusing to yield to the call, because such will not earn him any form of praise from the people he



will be speaking to; also, the Bible painted a picture of a successful farmer, but he left all to become a channel of revival to his people.

Another lesson for Christians today is that “God blesses people so they can be channels of blessing to others.” (Constable, 2017). However, that is not actually the case with Christians today, everyone is minding their business, looking for how to get richer or bigger without minding what other people around them are going through (Allen, 1969). It is no longer a problem for Christians to own several cars and houses even when their brothers in the church is struggling to have a place to lay his head or take at least a meal in a day. The LORD who acted in the day of Amos is that same God today; He will also be just to speak, defend and judge our selfish attitude today. Christians should definitely make sure they are not part of the problem of injustice where they operate, but a voice against injustice and immorality in the society.

Conclusion

The book of Amos emphasizes so much on social injustice far more than any other Old Testament literature. The book condemns all acts of injustice and affirms that the LORD would punish the oppression of the weak and the poor. Throughout the book, Amos is very clear and blunt about what is the mind of the LORD on the obvious cases of social injustice in his society. Amos communicated to the people God’s contempt for the insincere lives of His people (Amos 5:21–24). Amos’ prophecy concludes with a short hint of restoration with the LORD (9:11–15). Just as in the case of other prophets, his prophecies are explicit and pessimistic and aimed at rebuking people who had become idolatrous and wicked. Yahweh appointed Jeremiah and also Amos to announce the devastation and re-building that would befall a nation that would ultimately lead to His Kingdom. He thus, like Jeremiah, also offers his people hope and his prophetic warnings are also promises that atoning to Yahweh will lead the people to divine blessings and he states that Yahweh will eventually honour his pledge with the Jews (Reddy & Nicolaidis, 2022).

Amos was very annoyed by society and its poor actions towards especially the poor. Amos spread God’s word which was directed against the wealthy and arrogant people of Israel, a people who had no compassion for their neighbour and exploited others for personal gains (Bailey, 1995). Amos holds God’s people accountable for their really poor treatment of others in society. He exposed the many failures of the people and calls on them to totally accept God’s idea of justice. They were selling off poor people for material gain, and taking huge advantage of the needy in society while some men were abusing women as well (see Amos 2:6–8; 3:10; 4:1; 5:11–12; 8:4–6). The people had lost the direction required to be caring human beings. Thus Amos reprimanded since he perceived that their lifestyle showed that Israel had indeed forgotten the LORD.

The contemporary society is equally witnessing same problem and if it will not listen to the word of the LORD and repent, then the LORD’s judgment is just a matter of time. Therefore, nations, the Church and Christians must stand up to their responsibilities to speak and act against the problem of social injustice and oppression that is fast becoming a norm in the world today.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



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