

PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF AMOS AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE AFRICAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Amos's prophetic witness and its relevance for today's church in African countries for promoting social justice. There are three basic concerns that motivate this paper: First, there is growing corruption in African societies; second, there are glaring weaknesses of the church's prophetic witness in African societies today; and third, there is a great need for the church in Africa to speak out against social injustices. Thus, the writer seeks an appropriate biblical response that could serve as a viable response for the church in curtailing social injustices in African society. To achieve this, the writer investigated scholarly opinions on the prophetic roles of the church in promoting social justice while considering the argument for and against. Furthermore, the prophetic witness of Amos was examined and its relevance to the African church. It is therefore recommended based on the prophetic message of Amos, that the church should: (a) support those believers who speak out against the evils in our time: crimes and injustices within the socio-economic and political climate of our time; (b) address issues, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, sexual misconduct and AIDS from a Biblical stance; (c) make people aware of the needs of our time; (d) motivate people to get involved in the sustainable development of their environment, and in addressing issues such as unemployment and poor education; and (e) support those people who are still oppressed, maltreated, abused and belittled.

Keywords: *African Society, Prophetic, Social Justice, Corruption*

I. INTRODUCTION

An examination of the church's prophetic witness in African countries, especially West African countries, is relevant for the reasons listed below. Firstly, there is growing corruption in African

societies. Many African countries have ‘inherited indelible scars of exploitation, injustice and misery from colonial rule’ despite obtaining independence.¹ Since then, the situation has declined, resulting in an ever-growing chasm between a few elites in leadership positions who oppress and a vast majority of followers grounded by oppression.

Secondly, there are glaring weaknesses of the church's prophetic witness in African societies today; ‘hence the need for the development of a “relevant theology” that keeps abreast with African realities. Nyiawung points out the following weaknesses in the prophetic witness of today’s church in African societies:

- i. most African countries have adopted democracy without defining what it means;
- ii. many people have lost confidence in the church in times of misery’;
- iii. churches seem to have established a dichotomy between theology and societal realities’;
- iv. the church has up to now mainly focused most of its efforts on evangelizing the faithful churchgoers and has ignored those on the streets;
- v. armchair sermons’ have created passive citizens rather than challenged them to make every effort to achieve responsible stewardship.²

Thirdly, there is a great need for the church in Africa to speak out against social injustices. Von Broembsen and Davis, in an article titled, *South Africa, Must Address Social Justice* express the following concern: Amongst poor communities, there is a growing disillusionment and frustration at being treated unjustly: crime and a lack of delivery in critical areas such as education, housing and health provision are just some of the factors fueling this discontent.³ Now the new challenge is the achievement of social justice as set out in our constitution.

This question arises: how should Christians react when confronted with corruption? Theron and Lotter claim that instead of withdrawing from the world, Christians should

¹M. D. Nyiawung, The prophetic witness of the church as an appropriate mode of public discourse in African societies. *HTS Teologiese Studies* 66(1): 2010, 791.

² Ibid.

³M. Von Broembsen, and D. Davis, South Africa must address social justice. *The South African Civil Society Information Service*. Online article. Accessed from <http://sacsis.org.za/site/article/186.1>, 14/12/2012

participate in transforming all areas of society. Instead of keeping silent about political, social, and economic evils, they should be willing to meet the challenge of addressing these problems in society ‘by applying biblical, moral and ethical principles’.⁴ Jesus confirmed this view by stating that his followers ought to be like salt and light in the world (Matt 5:13–15). This paper aims to show that Amos's prophetic witness is relevant for today’s church in African countries for promoting social justice.

II. SOCIAL JUSTICE FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE: DEFINING RELEVANT CONCEPTS

Firstly, an examination of the prophetic witness of the church for promoting social justice requires the definition of the relevant concepts. Wiersbe defines justice as ‘the fair treatment of people’.⁵ The Christian understanding of justice is based on divine justice, as depicted in Jeremiah 9:24: ‘I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth’ (Jer 9:24, ESV). Divine justice implies that ‘rather than showing favoritism, God treats all persons fairly and impartially. It also ‘entails compassion, especially for the less fortunate’.⁶

Social justice focuses on ‘the common good of the community’, as manifested in areas such as ‘the fair and equal distribution of goods and benefits’ and ‘respect for the rights of others’.⁷ A democratic society is one of freedom, where people exercise equal rights. It is a society where governance is by consent and in the people's interest. In such societies, government institutions and policies are such that they respond to the needs and priorities of the people.⁸ According to Vorster, corruption is ‘the misuse of a public office or a position of

⁴Theron, M. and Lotter, G. A. Corruption: how should Christians respond? *Acta Theologica* 32(1): 2012, 96–117.

⁵Wiersbe, Warren. *Nelson’s pocket reference Bible commentary: Old Testament*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991.

⁶S. J. Grenz, & J.T. Smith, *Pocket dictionary of ethics*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003, 65.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸G. Hyden, *African politics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 10.

authority for private material or social gain at the expense of other people'.⁹ Thus, a prophetic witness is God authorizing a voice to speak on his behalf.

Churches have a particular function to serve as God's agents in civil society. Their prophetic witness can be a vital source of guidance for public discourse in the social arena since, through knowledge of the scriptures, they know 'the undisputable moral truths on which a society depends, such as the dignity of every human being' and the need for the poor to be protected against social injustices—a moral principle for which the biblical prophets stood.¹⁰

In this article, prophetic witnessing will not be confined to ordained ministers since there is a strong spiritual link between Old Testament prophets and all believers. Therefore, the duty of prophetic witnessing is that of every believer.¹¹ Also, a discussion on the church's prophetic witness requires a description of social justice from a biblical perspective. The question arises: to what extent are the themes of justice, and social justice (as applied to individual believers) raised in the Old Testament continued in the New Testament?

Old Testament prophetic messages were focused on public interest. For example, Amos prophesied against societies that 'trample the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed' (Amos 2:7, NIV). In the New Testament, Jesus used the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to illustrate prophetic witnessing against the exploitation of the poor that was earlier championed by former Old Testament prophets (Luke 16:19–31). Nyiawung elaborates: This parable symbolizes a society imbued with injustice and the passive attitude of the rich *vis-à-vis* the poor. The church's prophetic witness is the mouthpiece of Jesus because if society fails to listen, its inhabitants will not be convinced if someone should rise from the dead to communicate God's anger against injustice (Luke 16:30).¹²

⁹M. Von Broembsen, and D. Davis, South Africa must address social justice. *The South African Civil Society Information Service*. Online article. Accessed from <http://sacsis.org.za/site/article/186.1>, 14/12/2012

¹⁰H. Bedford-Strohm, Prophetic witness and public discourse in European societies—a German Perspective. *HTS Teologiese Studies* 2010, 66(1):784–793.

¹¹M. J. Williams, *the prophet and his message: reading Old Testament prophecy today*. Phillipsburg: P & R, 2003, 171.

¹²M. D. Nyiawung, The prophetic witness of the church as an appropriate mode of public discourse in African societies. *HTS Teologiese Studies* 66(1): 2010, 793.

It can be argued that the themes of justice and social justice (as applied to individual believers), raised in the Old Testament, continue in the New Testament. Prophets such as Isaiah and Amos raised their voices for the poor and the marginalized in society. ‘The fifth chapter of Amos contains some of the most striking and famous “justice” languages in the Bible.’ God rebukes his people ‘for turning justice into wormwood’ (5:7).¹³ Micah 6:8 is the most beloved ‘social justice’ passage of all; ‘Should God’s people bring a burnt offering or a thousand rams or a river of oil’ (vv. 6–7)? The resounding response is, no! ‘The Lord requires that His people do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with [their] God’ (6:8).¹⁴ In his ministry, Jesus develops a Christian ethics of love. The ultimate objective of the Christian life is ‘to love God and one’s neighbour’ (Mark 12:28–34). Jesus urges his disciples always to consider how best to help one’s poor neighbour. This is portrayed in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37).

III. THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF THE PROPHETIC WITNESS OF THE CHURCH FOR PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SECULAR SOCIETY

God clearly called the prophet Amos to speak against the social ills of the people of God. To what extent is the New Testament church (and individual believers) called upon to play a similar role concerning secular society? Isn’t it the specific task of the church to proclaim the gospel of Christ and call people to saving faith? What is the connection between Israel and the Church? In this section, an attempt will be made—using three theological arguments—to demonstrate that God calls upon the church to be a prophetic witness for social justice in secular society.

Firstly, it is essential to establish the relationship between Israel and the church. Replacement Theology says, ‘the Church has replaced Israel in God’s plan’.¹⁵ Proponents of

¹³ M. S. J. Dominik, Social justice in the Bible. *Thinking Faith* Oct 14 2011. Online Article. Accessed from www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20111014_1.htm, 13/03/2012.

¹⁴ K. DeYoung, and Gilbert G, *what is the mission of the church?* Wheaton: Crossway, 2011, 159.

¹⁵ J. J. Parsons, *Israel and the Church—understanding some theological options*. Online article. Accessed from www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Israel/israel.html, 11/03/2013.

Replacement Theology ‘believe that the Jews are no longer God’s chosen people and that God does not have specific plans for the nation of Israel’.¹⁶

On the other hand, Covenant Theology ‘does not see a sharp discrepancy between Israel and the Church. Israel constituted the people of God in the OT, and the Church (made up of Jews and Gentiles) constituted the people of God in the NT ... The church doesn’t substitute Israel; the Church is Israel, and Israel is the Church (Gal 6:16)’.¹⁷

The book of Amos begins with a series of eight prophetic oracles that pronounce judgment on the nations surrounding Israel. In terms of both Replacement Theology and Covenant Theology, it can be argued that, just as God called Israel (his people) to be a prophetic witness to the nations (‘secular’ societies), denouncing their sins and calling them to repentance, so God calls the church (his people) to be a prophetic witness to secular society, calling for social justice.

Secondly, defining the church's task as portrayed in the New Testament is necessary. The spiritual mission of the church is to go into the entire ‘world proclaiming the saving message and making disciples’ (Mark 16:15; Matt 28:18–20). ‘In fulfilling the spiritual commission, the church and individual believers with reasonable limits are to do good’ to all people, especially to those of ‘the household of faith’ (Gal 6:10; 1 Tim 5:3–16; 6:17–19).¹⁸ ‘New Testament passages like 2 Corinthians 8–9 and Galatians 6:1–10 demonstrate the gospel motivation for mercy ministry. Because we have been given grace in Christ, we should extend grace to others in his name. Tim Keller correctly says, ‘ministering to the poor is a crucial sign that we believe the gospel’.¹⁹

Thirdly, in defining the contemporary role of the church, it is necessary to discuss current trends amongst Evangelical Christians. The ‘movement among evangelicals to take up a social and spiritual commission for the church began significantly at the First International Congress on

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸M. S. J. Dominik, Social justice in the Bible. *Thinking Faith* Oct 14 2011. Online Article. Accessed from www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20111014_1.htm, 13/03/2012.

¹⁹ Keller, T. The gospel and the poor. *Themelios* 33(3): 2008, 8–22.

World Evangelization called by evangelist Billy Graham, held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974'. In his paper at the congress entitled, *A New Vision, a New Heart, a Renewed Call*, Rene Padilla asks the question: 'How is the church's mission defined? What is included in its mission?' He responds: 'The church's mission is multifaceted because it depends on the mission of God, which includes the whole of creation and the totality of human life'.²⁰ The Micah Declaration was compiled at the congress to challenge the worldwide church. It was based on 'the prophetic word of Micah to "act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God" (6:8)'.²¹ Padilla 'approvingly quotes from the Micah Declaration on Integral Mission. Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together'.²² 'David Bosch puts this conception of the church's mission in a mathematical analogy: Evangelism + social action = mission'.²³ According to Bosch, the church's mission is God's complete task of reaching the world.

IV. THE PROPHETIC WITNESS OF AMOS: THE CONTEXT, THE CALL, AND THE MESSAGE

Firstly, understanding the historical setting, in which Amos delivered his oracles to Israel, will help define the context of his prophetic witness.

During the reign of Jeroboam II, Israel reached what was probably its height in terms of economic prosperity. Helped with collusion among royalty and judges, a wealthy aristocracy emerged at the expense of the poor. They lived in luxurious dwellings in the cities. It is clear 'that this economic prosperity was not accompanied by a fair distribution of the nation's wealth, hence while some were getting richer from the expanded markets owing to the expansion of

²⁰R. Padilla. *A new vision, a new heart, a renewed call*. Online Paper. Accessed from www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP33_IG4.pdf, 07/03/2013.

²¹Micah Declaration 2008. Online document. Accessed from <http://micahnetwork.org/en/integral-mission/micah-declaration>, 07/03/2013.

²²R. Padilla. *A new vision, a new heart, a renewed call*. Online paper. Accessed from www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP33_IG4.pdf, 07/03/2013.

²³P. R. Sterling, Is there a hole in our Gospel? Does the Church have a social commission too? *Grace Evangelical Society*. Online journal. Accessed from www.faithalone.org/journal/2011i/Sterling.pdf, 07/03/2013.

Israelite territory and foreign markets, most of the people remained poor'.²⁴ The prophet sums up the economic prosperity that was experienced by the elite in Israel: 'Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall' (Amos 6:4, ESV).

It would appear from the prophet Amos that corruption among the leaders, particularly in the judiciary system, was rampant. For the wealthy people in Israel, economic prosperity led to complacency and corruption. 'With all the comfort and luxury in Israel came self-sufficiency and a false sense of security. But prosperity brought corruption and destruction'.²⁵

When discussing the judges of his time, Amos says: 'For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe and turn aside the needy in the gate' (5:12, ESV). Excessive wealth in Israel led to the creation of an elite upper class—characterized by power and leisure—that increasingly adopted a decadent lifestyle, which included sexual immorality and idolatry. These greedy people profited from trade and benefited from slave labour and usury. They bought up food in the countryside and resold it to a captive audience in the cities, making enormous profits.²⁶

Secondly, Amos was called by God to the prophetic ministry. When the Lord called him a prophet, he was a humble shepherd and a cultivator of sycamore trees from the village of Tekoa, near Jerusalem. He was not an official member of the Jewish religious establishment.²⁷ While he was tending the flock, Amos heard the voice of the Lord telling him: 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel' (Amos 7:15, ESV). During the reign of Jeroboam II, God gave Amos 'a profound vision concerning the state of Israel.' It was clear from the vision that Amos was God's 'chosen person to declare God's message to Israel.

²⁴M. R. Gunda, Reconsidering the relevance of the prophet Amos in the quest for a just society in contemporary Zimbabwe. *BOTSA Electronic Forum* 3(2): 2010, 2. Online article. Accessed from www.mhs.no/article_1109.shtml, 11/12/2012.

²⁵B. B. Barton, *Life application Bible, NIV*. Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1995, 1532.

²⁶Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*. Word Biblical Commentary (vol. 31). Dallas: Word, 2002.

²⁷ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible commentary: Old Testament*. Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2007, 1415.

Thirdly, Amos employed a unique literary style to ensure that his message was clearly understood and perceived as a message communicated to him by God himself. The style of Amos's prophetic witness can be illustrated in the following ways:

- i. In his discourse, he employs the style of a messenger speaking on behalf of God: 'This is what the Lord says' (1:3, 6).
- ii. He sings a funeral lament for Israel in anticipation of its fall (5:1, 2)'.
'
- iii. He uses many popular metaphors he learned as a shepherd and farmer (1:3; 2:13; 3:12; 4:1; 9:9)'.
'
- iv. Amos uses his writing skills to join 'a series of proverbs together until reaching a climax (1:3–2:10)'.
'

His writings clearly state that 'Amos had a high view of God as the Creator, and periodically his prophecy breaks into peals of praise'.²⁸ Amos 4:13 (NIV) is a good illustration of his view of God: 'He who forms the mountains creates the wind, and reveals his thoughts to man, he who turns dawn to darkness, and treads the high places of the earth—the Lord God Almighty is his name.'

Fourthly, a closer look at the message of the prophet Amos reveals that, although he addressed various issues, his central theme focused on sin and judgment. The prophetic witness of Amos was against sin—the social injustices of the people of Israel. The wealthy got rich by exploiting the poor. On behalf of God, 'the prophet Amos denounced luxury and urged the people to care for the poor.' He condemned 'their expensive houses ... their drinking ... and costly parties.' Yet, these same people 'were "religious" and faithfully participated in temple services.' However, their 'religion' was merely a cover-up for their sins.²⁹

The prophetic witness of Amos was a message of judgment on behalf of God. Amos clarifies that commitment to God must go deeper than worship rituals, such as bringing offerings to the altar (5:18–17). God requires from his people 'genuine repentance and righteous living'.

²⁸New World Encyclopedia. *Amos (prophet)*. Online article. Accessed from [www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Amos_\(prophet\)](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Amos_(prophet)), 17/12/2012.

²⁹Warren Wiersbe, *Nelson's pocket reference Bible commentary: Old Testament*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991, 584.

Amos indicates what will happen to the people of Israel if they do not turn from their wicked ways: ‘They will be taken away as captives in a foreign land’ (6:1–14).³⁰ God would not change his mind because the transgressions of the Israelites were too many. Their rejection of God’s covenant and his repeated warnings had made the destruction to come inevitable. God cried out against their unjust practices that were harming the poor. ‘Their attention to ceremony and sacrifices has left the worshiper’s heart untouched’.³¹

Despite his message of judgement, Amos interceded on behalf of the people of Israel. He pleaded with God (Ch. 7), to which God reacted by changing his mind. Because of Amos’s intercession on behalf of Israel, the first two judgments of locusts and fire did not take place. However, Amos did not intercede after the third vision, for the nation had been measured and found wanting.

V. THE RELEVANCE OF THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF AMOS TO THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CHURCHES

The exploitation of the poor remains a concern in our society today. It can be argued that Amos’s eighth-century BC condemnations are relevant in the quest for social justice in African countries today. Gunda argues that the collusion described by Amos between the wealthy elite in Israel, the ‘judiciary and the religious leaders in the exploitation of the poor, remains a concern in our society today.’³² However, Amos’s condemnation of the wealthy elite was ‘not so much targeted against the political stability and economic prosperity, but against the injustices that were nurtured in these environments’.

To assist today’s church in promoting social justice in African countries, this writer proposes the following four biblical principles derived from the prophetic witness of Amos:

³⁰G.W. Knight, *The layman’s Bible handbook*. Uhrichsville: Barbour Publishing, 2003, 193.

³¹ T. J. Finley, An evangelical response to the preaching of Amos. *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28(4): 1985, 411-412.

³²M. R. Gunda, Reconsidering the relevance of the prophet Amos in the quest for a just society in contemporary Zimbabwe. *BOTSA Electronic Forum* 3(2): 2010, 2. Online article. Accessed from www.mhs.no/article_1109.shtml, 11/12/2012.

First, social justice is required of God's people. God speaks out against the abuse of wealth, power, and privilege. The book of Amos 'stands as an eloquent witness against those who subordinate human needs and dignity to the pursuit of wealth and pleasure'.³³

Second, the prevalence of social injustices in African countries calls for a relook at the church's role as a prophetic witness and representative of God. We live in a society where it has become apparent that God is no longer a factor in the lives of most people. Godless people are showing the same symptoms that we read about in the book of Amos. Finley suggests that the message of Amos 'has much to contribute to discussions of social justice'.³⁴

Third, the prophetic witness of Amos serves as a challenge to African churches today to take up their role as God's representatives within society (as 'salt and light') and to speak out against the socio-economic and political wrongs of our time. Nyiawung claims that it is the urgent task of the church to fight against social justice through its prophetic witness. Furthermore, the church should continue denouncing injustices for as long as the poor and oppressed exist today. 'It should remind society of its responsibility towards God, through committed and responsible stewardship'.³⁵

Fourth, the prophetic witness of Amos serves as a challenge to the ordinary believer to speak out on behalf of God against injustices committed in society, whether acting as an individual or in collaboration with other fellow believers or even globally. In his exposition of the phrase, 'maintain justice in the courts' (Amos 5:15, NIV), Motyer, quoted by Finley, raises the challenge, 'What a call this ... constitutes to Bible Christians to rediscover the moral and social teaching of Holy Scripture'.³⁶

VI. CONCLUSION

³³Warren. Wiersbe, *Nelson's pocket reference Bible commentary: Old Testament*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991

³⁴T. J. Finley, An evangelical response to the preaching of Amos. *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28(4): 1985, 411.

³⁵M. D. Nyiawung, The prophetic witness of the church as an appropriate mode of public discourse in African societies. *HTS Teologiese Studies* 66(1): 2010, 798–799.

³⁶Finley, 413.

God wants all people to come to know him and have a good relationship with him. There is only one remedy for sin— ‘Seek the LORD and live’ (Amos 5:6, NIV). Sin seeks to destroy. However, hope is found in seeking God.³⁷

With its growing economic, political, social, and ecological crises, the world has imposed an urgent responsibility on the prophetic witness of the church. This mission is about the proclamation of the kingdom of God, which has a social, political and economic dimension. Finley calls for ‘deep changes in the Christian lifestyle to reflect concern for the poor’. He connects evangelism and social action by pointing out that ‘the world is attracted to the gospel when it sees a demonstration of caring and loving concern for society’.³⁸

God calls upon us to love our neighbours, including the poor, as ourselves. Such love for the poor is demonstrated in our deeds of compassion. It is also expressed through exposing everything that oppresses and exploits the poor. As Christians, ‘our loving duty towards our suffering neighbours requires us to seek justice through proper appeal to legal and state authorities who function as God’s servants in punishing wrongdoers’.

A high responsibility rests on today’s clergy to deepen the awareness of church members of what the Bible says about social morality. With all the issues raised by Amos regarding the need for social action, believers need to remember that prayer, combined with the proper exegesis of scripture, will help them to gain a comprehensive knowledge of God’s will for personal, social, and governmental reform.

Finally, the question arises: how can today’s church promote social justice in African society? In response to this question, five practical guidelines, based on the prophetic message of Amos, are presented: (a) support those believers who speak out against the evils in our time: crimes and injustices within the socio-economic and political climate of our time; (b) address issues, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, sexual misconduct and AIDS from a Biblical stance; (c) make people aware of the needs of our time; (d) motivate people to get involved in the sustainable development of their environment, and in addressing issues such as unemployment

³⁷B. B. Barton, *Life application Bible, NIV*. Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1995, 1540.

³⁸ Finley, 418-419.

and poor education; and (e) support those people who are still oppressed, maltreated, abused and belittled.

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