



The Nexus Between Religious Practices And Human Value: Lessons From Amos 5:18-27

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide, religion does not only prepare adherents for life everlasting after the existence in the physical world, but also to ensure that adherents live a holy and pure life. Hence adherents are expected to imbibe some values and virtues to promote peace and justice within the society. As in the days of Amos, Nigeria has become a household name in the matters of injustice. There are cheating, discrimination, deprivation and unequal distribution of wealth in almost all the sphere of the society. Hence, the research examined Religion and Praxis in Amos 5:18-27 and its Implications for Christians in selected churches in Ogbomoso North Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. The study reveals that the book of Amos 5: 18-27 emphasises the disapproval of Israelites worship by Yahweh because of the disconnect between their worship and fulfillment of the covenant stipulations in their day to day living. Also the study teaches how God cares for the poor and the weak in the society as God sees it. Amos does so by portraying the God proclaimed the judgment when those nations failed to conform to those standards. Hence, the study recommends there should be structures for national reform and democratization in Nigeria. Also, there is need for the formation of a strong civil society in Nigeria. Civil society involves various sectors, including the business world, trade unions, women groups, religious groups, and human rights activists. The research also recommended that the Church should

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I. INTRODUCTION

The nexus between religious practices and human values is one major essential that uphold fairness and equity in any society. The disconnect between proclaimed religious practices and human value is the bedrock for social injustice that has been the experience in the nations of the world. Social injustice is a social problem regarded as behaviour that violates the generally accepted values of the people in a particular geographical area. These accepted values mostly stem from the religious and cultural beliefs of the people. And thus to separate the societal values from religious values may be an unachievable task. In the case of the Israelites, their societal ethical codes stemmed from their covenant stipulations from Yahweh. To disregard human societal value equates disregard to Yahweh. The passage under study (Amos 5:18-27) clearly shows the Israelites neglect of their moral ethics, and loud their splendor of religious practices; and this attracts God's fury against them and the rejection of their worship and religious rituals. In the light of this, the writer attempt to draw lessons for the contemporary churches through exegetical analysis of the given passage.

II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The prophetic ministry of Amos (760-750 B.C.) according to Larry Rector (1978:161) in the Northern kingdom is set against the background of the end of the prosperous reign of Israel's Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.). As Shalom Paul notes, "during this period, the Silver Age of Israelite history, Israel reached the summit of its material power and economic prosperity as well as the apogee of its territorial expansion,

comparable only to the era of David and Solomon, the Golden Age” (Paul 1991:1). In God’s providence, Assyria’s steady rise to prominence in the ANE’s scene, as Taylor (2009:4) put it, ... had dealt no substantive blow to Israel but it had to Syria, Israel’s neighbor and traditional rival to the north. Syria’s losses were economically and militarily advantageous for Israel, allowing Jeroboam II to reclaim strategic territory to the north and east. As well, it inadvertently created a buffer zone that helped the elite in Israel to accumulate the wealth that, as Amos and Hosea eloquently remind us, they badly abused. During this time, Israel also enjoyed peaceful relations with Judah under the reign of Uzziah (792-740 B.C.) (Paul, 2).

III. EXEGESIS OF AMOS 5: 18-27

a. *Amos 5:18-20*

The historical context of peace and prosperity is an important backdrop to the woe oracle of Amos 5:18-27. As Paul put it, blinded by their boundless optimism, which was posited on false premises, they were oblivious to the clouds of wrath and recompense swiftly gathering all about them. Amos, however, a keen and acute observer of their *modus vivendi*, was not bedazzled or beguiled by the economic, political, or religious state of affairs. He was well aware of the burrowing worm of decay and corruption that was undermining the society’s ethical and moral foundations. He constantly and consistently called the upper class to task for their bribery and extortion, for their corruption of the judiciary, for perversion and dishonesty, for injustice and immorality, for exploitation of the impoverished and underprivileged, for resolute dissolute behavior, for pampered prosperity and boisterous banquetry, for greed and arrogant security, for self-indulgence and a life of *carpe diem*, and for pride and prejudice. He unremittingly threatened that terminal consumption would undermine their conspicuous consumption.

According to Amos, the wealthy minority who practiced a careless life style, who could not care less for the poor majority (6:6), and who took advantage of the plight of the poor to advance their own selfish ends were actually accelerating the Day of the Lord, which paradoxically would be one of “darkness and not light” (5:18-20). His defiant words were aimed not only at braggarts and the unruly behavior but also at all those who exchanged the upkeep of shrines, sanctuaries, and sacrifices for God’s true desire of honesty, justice, and righteousness. He seriously questioned and sarcastically ridiculed their theology and ideology, their beliefs and practices. He polemicized unsparingly against their popular misconceptions. They who had not fulfilled their part of the covenantal obligations would not be spared on the Day of the Lord (Paul 2009: 2)

Verses 18-20 as viewed by Koehler and Walter, highlight a total reversal of popular beliefs concerning the “Day of the Lord.” The Hebrew interjection *hōy*, “*woe*,” “*alas!*” (1999:242), is found about 50 times almost exclusively in the Major and Minor prophets (the only exception is 1 Kings 13:30) (Jenni and Westermann 1997:357)). In some contexts, Weber claimed that it serves as an introductory declaration of excitement, but here, as is the case usually, it is involved in negative warnings or threats of God’s physical chastisement (1999:212). In other words, “Woe oracles say in effect, ‘You are in trouble. Here’s why and here’s what will happen to you.’” The “woe” is directed at those longing for the “Day of the Lord.” The phrase “Day of the Lord” seemingly introduced into biblical revelation here in Amos 5:18 for the first time has since become inseparable from the discussion of biblical eschatology (Hoffmann 1981:37).

Mayhue (2011) asserted that the collective biblical data regarding the phrase “Day of the Lord” and its variations seems to indicate that it can refer to both near historical and future eschatological events (65), signifying a time in which God actively intervenes in history, primarily for judgment. However, Youngblood (1995) opined that the biblical passages associate that day not only with a time of judgment, but also with restoration (Is. 14:1; Joel 2:28–32; Zeph. 1:7, 14–16; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10). The Scripture still provides a glimmer of light in the worst moments of Israelites history. Eugene Merrill writes, God’s eschatological day of judgment is also presented as a time of darkness. Amos asked, “Won’t the Day of the LORD be darkness rather than light, even gloom without any brightness in it?” (Amos 5:20). Even so, the righteous have hope and Israel can say, “Though I sit in darkness, the LORD will be my light” and “He will bring me into the light” (Mic. 7:8–9) (132).

The proclamation of woe by Amos would have shocked the Israelite community's anticipation for the coming of the 'day of the LORD.' Their expectation as God's elects was that of victory and blessing, triumph over foes and the recovery of political power from foreign nations. But the prophet's message was of doom and defeat. Instead of regaining power from foreign invasion, they will lose their lives, calamity and evil will be the sign of the day (Smith and Page 1995: 109). Driver's also comments are noteworthy, that the 'day of the LORD' would be in contrast to the expectation of the Israelites who had assumed that the day will bring about victory over the foreign invaders; but the day will signified by judgment against sin both on the Israelites and the foreign nations. If His people, the Israelites reject the way of repentance and continues to offer sacrifices as a cover up for immorality, they will discover that the day of the LORD will bring about doom instead of triumph (1915:188). In retrospect, it seems like this day of darkness spoken about by Amos referred to a specific event in the immediate future, namely, the approaching destruction of the Northern Kingdom, which occurred in 722 B.C., approximately forty years after Amos prophesied.

Amos once again resorts to a simile drawn from his own background experience to dramatize forcefully and picturesquely his message. In order to express one of his favorite themes, the inescapability from impending punishment (see Amos 2:14-16; 9:1-4), he draws upon the image of the onslaught, one after the other, of a lion and a bear, whose attacks are ferocious and usually fatal. Even if a man extricates himself from the frightening consecutive attacks of both of these fearsome animals and successfully manages to reach home alive, nevertheless, the very moment he leans his hand against the wall for a moment's respite, he would be fatally bitten by yet another threatening menace, a snake. Misfortune strikes when least expected. The point is very clear: Momentary success is only illusory. Even if Israel has escaped with its life intact in all previous encounters with its enemies, this time deliverance will not be forthcoming. Precisely when Israel feels itself secure, more than ever will the deadly "bite" of the "Day of the Lord" take place (Chisholm 1991:406).

Verse 20 forms a chiasmic *inclusio* began in verse 18.32 The familiar contrast between "darkness" and "light" is followed by another clause beginning with a ן functioning epexegetically, i.e. expanding or paraphrasing the preceding clause (Arnold 2003:147) by contrasting "brightness" with "gloom." Garrett notes, prepositional phrase with possessive ן . This actually makes for a much stronger statement; [verse 20a] ...had merely said that it was darkness and not light. With this prepositional phrase, this line says that the day of YHWH possesses no light at all. This suggests hopelessness, analogous to Dante's "Abandon all hope ye who enter here" (Garrett 2008:168).

b. *Amos 5:21-27*

In the second section of this passage the theme of contrast and dramatic reversal is continued (Paul, 188), containing the direct speech of the Lord rebuking those who longed for the Day of Lord, "and trusted in the constancy and the flamboyancy of their religious practices as a means of gaining God's favour and acceptance" Driver further points out that "the people have substitute the law and covenant acts of the Lord for ritual: His 'day,' when it comes, will be far from their expectations, and the zealous observance of religious ritual will not spare them from the impending doom. He will consign them to exile for their disregard of moral obligations" (1915:188). As Paul summarizes, "Here he [Amos] levels his most uncompromising attack against the lavishness of the official monotheistic cult. He upbraids in no uncertain terms Israel's extensive ritual praxis, rejecting it in toto: holidays, festival gatherings, and sacrifices, along with their accompanying hymns, melodies, and musical instruments"(ibid).

Verse 21 opens with a pair of fientive Qal perfect verbs of experience, "hate" and "despise," with "your festivals" serving as a direct object. Smith and Page observe that "the term for "hate" (*šānē*) is used three times in Amos, all in this chapter. Rather than hating evil (v. 15), Israel hated advocates of righteousness. Therefore God hated their presumptuous worship (v. 21)" (111). It is appalling at times to see people who maintain the outward appearance of devotion to the Lord, while flagrantly violating His expectations for personal and communal ethical behavior. In the parallel line the Lord speaks of taking no delight *rîaḥ* "smell" (Stuart 2002:354) in their "assemblies," probably referring to any other religious gatherings like Sabbaths or new moons.

Verse 22 continues denounce the Lord's acceptance of the covenant breakers' religiosity expressed here by bringing sacrifices, namely burnt, food and peace offerings. The latter *šelem*, "peace offering"), is only found here in the singular form in the Tanakh (Anderson 1995: 527). The major focus of this particular offering seems to be the communal celebration supplied by the meat of the offering. It was a fellowship or communion offering that indicated and enacted the fact that there was peace between God and his people and that the person, family, or community was, therefore, in a state of well-being (Anderson 1995:135). No wonder God has no regard *nābat* "look at" for this unabashed hypocrisy. The Lord commands the Israelites to "take away" the burdensome noise of their songs, because He refuses to hear the melody of their harps. Just a few years later, the Lord will hand out similar indictments to the Southern kingdom of Judah through the prophet Isaiah

Verse 24 begins with an adversative 'and' a Nifal imperfect *yiggāl*, let roll down) with a jussive force, contrasting their religiosity with desired ethical and moral actions. In a chiasmic structure they are told to let *mišpāt* "justice" run down like waters and *šedāqā* "righteousness" like a continuous stream. Although when found individually, *mišpāt* and *šedāqā* can be distinguished to refer to horizontal (man to man) and vertical (man to God) attitudes and actions respectively, when coupled the terms form a hendiadys (Paul 1991: 192). Hence, "precise and distinct meanings for each of the partners should not be sought. Rather, together they represent the ideal of social justice," especially applicable to kings, rulers and those who are in authority.

The only problem is that the covenant breakers have "turned justice into wormwood and cast righteousness down to the earth" (Amos 5:7; cf. Amos 6:12). This precisely why water is proposed as an analogy to *mišpāt* and *šedāqā*, since the land was in great need of not only physical refreshing and cleansing, but also social and moral (Garrett 2008: 172). Moreover, the Nifal of *gālal*, (to roll down) here "seems to refer to how water rolls over itself in waves. This suggests waters that move with speed and in abundance. Justice should come forth plenteously and not, as it were, in a small trickle" (Preez 2001:98). The message of 5:24 does not negate the importance of religious norms and practices. Rather, the passage is laying emphasis on the fact that religious ritual and practices that is/are done outside the stipulations of God for moral uprightness is/are not acceptable. Religious practices: hymn singing, offerings, tithe, dancing and so on must be done in tandem with societal values and moral uprightness according to God's commandment (Hyman 2002: 233). Any variance from this is not an acceptable service.

Another interpretation following the negative answer to the rhetorical question departs from the idea that these words are intended to communicate the fact that sacrifice is not the essence of the Lord's demand, but sees the question as a rebuke that shows that "the forty-year period was a time when obedience to the Levitical institutions had declined" (McComiskey 1986:316). Others have objected to this by noting that "the idea that the Israelites had no cult at all in the desert seems *a priori* incredible. The only question is, what kind of cult did they have?" If the answer to the rhetorical question is "yes," then the sense is that obedience is what the Lord requires, not mere ritual.

Taking v. 25 together with v. 26, "Did you lift Sikkuth, your king and Kiyyun your images, the star gods that you made for yourself?" Sweeney and others believe "that YHWH cites the sacrifices of the wilderness period as an indication that sacrifice alone does not constitute a proper relationship to YHWH, especially when the people reject YHWH and turn to other gods"(Finley 1990: 227). However, it is better to take vv. 26 and 27 together. First, the fact that the gods in question, *Sikkūt* and *Kiyyūn*, are most probably Assyro-Babylonian astral deities, suggests that they are probably a feature of contemporary worship in Israel, already infected by influences from that quarter, hence, v. 26 must be linked with what follows, rather than describing the idolatry during the wilderness wanderings (Gevirtz 1968:26). Second, it is the natural meaning of the *waw*-consecutive used with the initial verb. Third, the verb *ūnesā'tēm*, "You will carry") is a perfect consecutive future linked with the following verse. Finally, the consequential Hifil perfect plus *waw*-consecutive *wehiḡlētū* in v. 27 can be translated "therefore, I will send you into exile," indicating that v. 26 speaks of idolatry during Amos's time.

The last verse (Amos 5:27) is the climax of the oracle announcing the imminent punishment of exile. It reads, "And I will send you into exile beyond the Damascus," says the Lord God of Hosts, is His name." Although Assyria is never mentioned in the book, Stuart is correct that "there can be no doubt that Amos'

words imply the Assyrian captivity of Israel, fulfilled a few decades later” (Stuart 356). Sadly, instead of abandoning their sinful and idolatrous ways and returning to the Lord, Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, (no doubt speaking on behalf of the complacent Israelites), opposed Amos and his message (Amos 7:10-17) and sought to drive the prophet out of Israel. It is interesting to note Shalom Paul’s comment about the ironic tones of the vague destination “beyond the Damascus,” he writes, “Israel during this period, had extended its boundaries as far as Damascus (2 Kgs 14:28). Well, now they shall go even farther, “beyond the Damascus-” not in victory, but in exile!” Whose doing will it be? “The Lord, God of hosts.’

In conclusion, the comments of Lloyd J. Ogilvie seem very appropriate: There is no more seemingly effective way to hide from God than in religion. When Amos came to Bethel, he called it for what it was—an evasion of righteousness. God was not impressed by the piping of pious songs and psalms while the people forgot their responsibilities to their fellow women and men, as they ground the poor into the mire and loaded the overburdened with misery. Burnt offerings that were to be an outward sign of total dedication to God were a religious mockery; peace offerings affirming fellowship with God were contradicted by the people’s unwillingness to obey Him. What God wanted was inner righteousness, an inward moral commitment to do what He had declared was right. He demanded that this inward righteousness be expressed in justice, righteousness in action. And so, in the midst of Israel’s covenant confidence that had led into complacency and complicity with social injustice, Yahweh roared, “*But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream*” (v. 24). Yahweh did not want a high mountain trickle or a little rivulet of righteousness and justice, but a rushing white-water river, running fast and pure (1990:355-6).

The Israelites are told that they would be taken into exile beyond Damascus. This is the place where the Israelites will go as exiles. Mays notes that “the phrase points to the territory of Assyria and that nation may be concretely in mind here. ‘Exile’ is a word with implications of horror which outrun the ruin and pain of defeat and capture by an enemy.” He further writes that “for Israel it meant being removed from the land promised to the fathers, displacement from the geographical locus of the unfolding history of election, and so was in effect a kind of excommunication” (Mayhue 2011: 133).

IV. IMPLICATIONS

Having analyzed Amos 5:17-28 as they concerns religious practices and the neglect of human value in the form of social injustice and deductions were made, this section is aimed at drawing implications for individual Christians, Christian Political leaders, the wealthy, and the Church in Nigeria.

i. Individual Christians

Amos 5: 18-27 emphasises the disapproval of Israelites worship by Yahweh because of the disconnect between their worship and the fulfillment of the covenant stipulations in their day to day living. Religious services cannot be substituted for moral ethics. Thus, individual Christians should live in consciousness that the God of the Church is as well the God of the society. The Christians must not live in the society in contrast to the value the Church and the Scripture upholds.

ii. Christian Political Leaders

Amos dealt with the fallen and rebellious humanity which is not different from the current human condition in Nigeria. Political and social disorder which denied people of their dignity and integrity was the problem. This study has revealed that the book of Amos has taught us how God cares for the poor and the weak in the society and how serious it gets when they are oppressed. The Christian Political leaders need to look at the society as God sees it. God wants a healthy, harmonious, and just society. It is important to understand that the object of the social concern is the poor and weak. Moral ethical standards need to be viewed in the light of God himself as Amos saw it. Thus, they must not be involve in making policy that leads to oppression of the masses nor amass wealth at the detriment of the poor and the weak.

iii. Church Leaders

The book of Amos gives the church the challenge of collaborating with other non-Christian creeds and institutions that support human dignity and integrity. Amos does so by portraying the God who recognizes the moral ethical standards from the Israel’s neighbouring nations. God proclaimed judgement

when those nations failed to conform to those standards. It is time that the church views God who also recognizes those virtues from other religions and institutions.

The church should be more effective in her prophetic role; the church leader needs to prepare a teaching on ethical and moral standards with regard to social justice in the community. This teaching will help the church in her discussions with the government and be a guideline in her follow up on justice issues in the community. One of the roles of the prophets was to emphasize the equality of all people before Yahweh. The church in her prophetic role needs to assume the same duty of preaching that equality. The teaching on justice issues will help the church in educating the community through media and pulpits and above all in her educational programmes in Sunday schools, Baptismal classes and other groups in the church and the whole community at large.

CONCLUSION

In the face of the contradiction and the embarrassment of a booming Christianity in the midst of an environment that stinks with corruption and indiscipline, the conclusion seems to be that what is spreading like wild fire in contemporary Nigeria is not genuine Christianity at all, but a mass movement of some sort with Christian elements of ritualism; one that is largely shallow, superficial, noisy and devoid of substance and depth. Popular Christianity in Nigeria appears to be largely materialistic, unspiritual and with emphasis on prosperity, success, healing and with little attention on social morality and spirituality of the believers. This brand of Christianity does not seem to have a place for the notion of the cross, suffering and sacrifice which constitute the center of biblical Christian doctrine and life. Worship experiences and religious observance that is disconnected with upholding social justice as seen in the interpretation of Amos 5:17-28 is rejected by Yahweh and punishment is declared on such adherent. Thus, God expect no disparity between religious life and everyday living.

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