

Theology of the Prophet Amos: A Paradigm for Addressing Ghana’s Socio-Political and Religious Challenges

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Abstract

Amos is often considered one of the most important prophets, mainly for his uncompromising message about social justice and God’s righteousness. This article examines the theology and social ethics of the prophet Amos, who ministered to Israel during the reigns of King Jeroboam II of Israel and King Uzziah of Judah. In Amos’s time, materialism was prevalent, hedonism and selfishness increased, and social disparity intensified. This condition necessitated his theology of social justice and true worship of Yahweh.

This paper, through a critical analysis of data extracted from textbooks, theses/dissertations, and scholarly articles, compares the context in which the prophet prophesied with the Ghanaian context—intimately associated with poor governance, fraud and corruption, abuse of power, social injustice, religious hypocrisy, misallocation of resources and self-centredness. While admitting that Ghana’s current socio-religious climate is not wholly similar to that of ancient Israel, the paper identifies similarities between the present Ghanaian context and that of Israel of Amos’s time, and points out how Amos addressed the challenges. This then becomes a basis for drawing lessons for church and political leaders in addressing socio-economic challenges in Ghana.

Keywords

judgement; justice; prosperity; righteousness; sovereignty.

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1. Introduction

Positively, the history of ancient Israel in the 8th century BCE was characterized by peace and economic growth and consolidation. This positive situation, however, affected Israel negatively as the people forgot their roots and did what they liked. Israel, as we shall discuss shortly, began to bear the common fruits of prosperity—pride, luxury, selfishness, and oppression. Sunukjian (1983:1425) describes Israel's situation as follows:

Commerce thrived (8:5), an upper class emerged (4:1–3), and expensive homes were built (3:15; 5:11; 6:4, 11). The rich enjoyed an indolent, indulgent lifestyle (6:1–6), while the poor became targets for legal and economic exploitation (2:6–7; 5:7, 10–13; 6:12; 8:4–6). Slavery for debt was easily accepted (2:6; 8:6). Standards of morality had sunk to a low ebb (2:7).

In response to this situation, Yahweh raised the prophet Amos to give a message of condemnation, indictment, punishment and hope upon repentance. Thus, Amos's prophetic utterances took place against the background of a politically-stable, economically-prosperous, and religiously-decadent society. He demonstrated immense bravery against the established order of the day as he proclaimed Yahweh's gross displeasure and divine judgment for the manner in which those in power had treated the poor.

This article contends that Amos's message is relevant to the contemporary Ghanaian context, which is comparable to Amos's context in several respects. For example, Ghana, like Israel of Amos's time, has become intimately associated with poor governance, fraud, bribery, corruption, abuse of power, social injustice, religious hypocrisy, misallocation of scarce resources and self-centredness. While we do not claim to know of any study that has proved this assertion, the fact that a majority of political debates in Ghana today, whether on television or on radio, in newspapers or even public buses never fail to lament that the problem of corruption is not in doubt. Top political leaders, either from the ruling government or the opposition often lament corruption and make various suggestions to address it. The situation, we believe, calls for a thorough assessment of how people engage politically, socially, economically, and religiously with one another. This article therefore examines the theological views of the prophet Amos and attempts an answer to the question: what lessons can we draw from Amos's message for politicians and ministers in Ghana?

2. Amos the Prophet and His Calling

Barre (2011:209) describes the prophet Amos as the “first of the ‘classical prophets’, the first whose oracles have come down to us in the form of a book.” The prophet’s name, Amos, means ‘burden-bearer’ or ‘load-carrier’ (Constable 2015:np). Amos was a shepherd and he described himself as a herdsman (7:14). He was more than a shepherd. He evidently owned or managed large herds of sheep and goats and was probably in charge of shepherds. Amos also described himself as a grower of sycamore fig trees (7:14–15). The prophet’s hometown, Tekoa, stood ‘twelve miles’ (Ironsides 2004:95) south of Jerusalem in Judah and he ministered during the reigns of King Jeroboam II of Israel (793–753 BCE) and King Uzziah of Judah (792–740 BCE), specifically two years before ‘the earthquake’ (1:1). Archaeological excavations at Hazor and Samaria point to evidence of a violent earthquake in Israel about 760 BCE (see Boaheng 2020:17–18). Amos might therefore have ministered in about 762 BCE. Following this analysis, one also deduces that Amos was a contemporary of the prophets Jonah, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah who also lived in the eighth century BCE (see Boaheng 2020:18).

Amos ‘tells us that he neither was born into the goodly company of prophets nor chose that calling himself’ (Ironsides 2004:95). But when he was shepherding his flock and gathering his sycamore fruit, the Lord called him and said to him, ‘Go and prophesy unto my people’ (7:14–15) (Ironsides 2004:95–96). The prophet responded promptly to God’s call and left all that he was doing and ‘began declaring the word of the Lord far away into the capital of the northern kingdom’ (Ironsides 2004:96). After declaring God’s message, the prophet went back to continue his usual activities. One may therefore argue that Amos performed a prophetic role but was not called to be a prophet all his life (Boaheng 2020:16).

In order to understand Amos’s message, it is necessary to have a closer look at the political, economic, and religious contexts within which the prophet ministered. At the end of it all, it will be discovered that Amos’s prophetic utterances took place against a background of a politically-stable, economically-prosperous, and religiously-decadent society.

3. The Historico-Political Context

In Amos’s time, Syria lost its military might and Assyria was too weak internally to be a threat to Israel (Fosbrooke 1969:764). With the reigns of Jeroboam II in Israel and Uzziah in Judah, both kingdoms entered a golden age in terms of political expansion. Ben-Sasson

(1979: 128) attributes this success ‘not only to the weakening of Aram-Damascus and the end of its hegemony over Syria-Palestine but also to the close commercial and economic ties between the two kingdoms during that half of the century.’ The two kingdoms took advantage of the foreign political situation and the absence of an Israelite-Judean war to form an alliance which brought about peace and expansion of their territories. Israel was able not only to recapture its territories previously taken from it (2 Kings 13:25) but also to extend its border as far north as Hamath (2 Kings 14:25, 28; Amos 6:14). For Judah, Uzziah, its king, had subdued the Edomites and the Philistines, put the Ammonites under subjection, encouraged agriculture and the domestic acts of peace, and raised a large, powerful army, fortifying Jerusalem strongly (2 Chron 26:1–15).

Having restored the former boundaries, Israel became the largest and most influential country along the eastern Mediterranean coast, and king Jeroboam II certainly became famous for that. In addition, the alliance of the two kingdoms resulted in the emergence of a new power, the consequence of which was Israel’s political and military superiority over the Syrians, Ammonites and Moabites. This situation ensured a period of stability in which trade boomed, making the two kingdoms very prosperous (Scheffler 2001:105).

4. The Socio-Economic Context

In the words of Ben-Sassan (1979:126), Jeroboam II’s reign was ‘a period of economic growth and consolidation’. In the final half of Jeroboam’s tenure, Israel had reached its height in terms of economic prosperity (Stuart 1987:283). Israel, at this time, once again gained control over the major trade routes joining Mesopotamia and Anatolia with Egypt, thereby making Israel gain profits through trade (Ben-Sassan 1979:129). Considerable wealth was generated through the major trade routes spanning the Transjordan, northern Arabia, the coastal plains, the hinterland, and the Phoenician ports. Tolls were extracted from passing caravans and goods were exchanged freely, adding to the wealth generated (Bright 1981:258). People became rich and began to build more elaborate houses to replace the old clay houses in which they had lived since their settlement in the Promised Land (Boaheng 2020:45). The extravagance of the buildings was referred to when Amos speaks of the summer and winter houses (3:6, 11, 13–15) some of which were constructed from carved stones, which was unusual (5:11). The fittings of the houses were expensively furnished, beds inlaid with ivory and provided with damask cushions (3:12–15; 6:4).

2 Akan is one of the major ethnic groups of Ghana comprising of Bono, Akyem, Fanti, Akuapem, Ashanti and others.

The economic growth certainly affected the people's lifestyles. Bitrus (2006:1063) rightly observes that, 'Human beings generally fall prey to a sense of false security when they become wealthy and live comfortably. Their way of life insulates them from the real issues of life.' This observation is expressed differently in Akan² parlance in the saying *asetena pa ma awerefire* literally meaning, 'good living has the tendency of leading one to forget his or her roots'. This saying was proven true when Israel forgot their roots and did what they liked. The common fruits of prosperity—pride, luxury, religious laxity, selfishness, oppression—were ripening plentifully in both kingdoms during this time of peace and economic stability. Knight (2011:63) describes the macro-sociological pattern of Israel and Judah as that of an agrarian state or society characterised by 'a pronounced social inequality in power, privileges, and honour'.

The market was occupied by profiteering commerce, false weights, and fraudulent economic practices (8:5–6). Corrupt merchants indulged in dishonest business practices to make money. There was no justice in the land (3:10) for every judge was corrupt (3:12) and they turned 'justice into poison' instead of healing, and 'the fruit of righteousness into wormwood' (5:7). Coote and Coote (1990:48) even contend that, at this time, better quality oil and wine were exported and reserved for the wealthy internally while a second pressing of the olive pulp, yielding a lower quality fuel, was sold to the poor. The result of this situation was the creation of a blunt contrast between the luxury of the rich and the misery of the poor, such that the rich enjoyed an indolent, indulgent life (4:1ff; 6:1–6) while the poor became a tempting target for legal and economic exploitation (2:6–8; 4:1; 5:10–12; 8:4–6). In reality, the rich prospered at the expense of the poor (4:1) by crushing the needy, taking possession of the land of those who had fallen into debt or subjecting them to slavery (2:6; 8:4, 6), denying them justice in the lay courts at the city gates (2:7; 5:10, 12), and cheating them in the marketplace (8:5–6).

People excelled in drinking wine, often from sacral vessels (2:8, 9, 12; 6:6). The wealthy women were likened to fat cows of Bashan (4:1). They were addicted to wine and had no compassion for the poor and needy. Banqueting tables were provided with the choicest foods—lambs, calves, and fatted beasts (5:22; 6:4). Unfortunately, not all the people of Israel enjoyed such luxurious living. It was only, in fact, experienced by very few people, mostly the ruling elite of Israel who were also the governing class. The society was thus divided into rich communities and embittered, poor communities as a result of spatial injustice.

5. The Religious Background

Israel's economic growth led to an increase in religious activities. The shrines at Bethel, Dan, Gilgal, and Beersheba were constructed and people trooped to these shrines with sacrificial animals. These shrines provided spiritual identity to the nation (5:5; 8:1–14). Amos tells us of many sacrifices (4:4), peace-offerings (5:22), meal offerings (5:22), thanks offerings (4:5), freewill offerings and tithes (4:4–5). These were, however, only ritualistic observances lacking in any internal holiness and having little effect on the day-to-day lives of the people. The religious interests of Israel were summed up by Amos, 'Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days. Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened and proclaim freewill offerings; publish them for so you love to do, O people of Israel.' (4:4–5)

From the perspective of the Israelites, this religious 'awakening' was closely related to economic success, because they believed, from the Deuteronomistic tradition, that economic success was a sign of God's favour towards them (Deut 28). It seems therefore that the people's eagerness in building religious temples and high places was a way of expressing their gratitude for God's blessing and favour. Unfortunately, this motivation was ironically turned into self-satisfaction. While these religious activities happened, the ruling elite still oppressed the downtrodden and poor. Stuart (1987:284) asserts that 'Israel was a people often orthodox in style of worship but disobedient in personal and social behavior.' Sharing the same view, Achtemeier (1999:170) directly points out, 'the conscience of the rich was placated by participation in an elaborate cultus'. The Israelites thus were in a paradoxical situation in which the economic and formal religious ascent co-existed with the moral and social decline.

Clearly, the people were self-centred. By self-centredness, we mean a situation in which the self takes on a central point of reference regarding many psychological activities (i.e., conation, motivation, attention, cognition, affect/emotion, and behaviour) (Ricard 2011:140). The exaggerated importance given to the self emerges mainly from self-centredness and refers to the increased degree with which the individual considers that his/her own condition is more important than that of others and this takes unquestionable priority. Self-centred psychological functioning includes characteristics such as biased self-interest, egoism, egocentrism, and egotism (Ricard 2011:140). It could be contended that the more the Israelites built their shrines and offered sacrifices, the more they treated the poor and the powerless unfairly and discriminated against them. The point

is that, the frequency with which Israel went to the shrines to make sacrifices did not reflect in their moral, spiritual and social lives. In fact, 'The pilgrimage to the shrine was the occasion for pleasurable feasting, with opportunity for extraordinary observances as might attest a man's social position' (Fosbroke 1969:768).

Furthermore, the Israelites worshipped the native Canaanite deities together with Yahweh (4:4–5; 5:4–6, 14–15, 21–27; 8:9–10), treating their God as one of the gods of the land of Canaan (Fosbroke 1969:768). Accordingly, the Israelite religious institutions and theology were being perverted, misunderstood and rejected, and although they performed elaborate rituals as proud demonstrations of piety (4:4–5), those activities were unrelated to justice and righteousness (5:21–24) or to really seeking after God (5:4–6).

6. The Theology of Amos

The main message of Amos was to call the attention of God's people to their sins and tell them of their imminent judgment. Firstly, the prophet establishes the sovereignty of God. By sovereignty is meant 'God's control over his creation, dealing with his governance over it: Sovereignty is God's rule over all reality' (Geisler 2011:536). As Boaheng (2020:85) notes, the Sovereignty of God makes him comparable to a potter who chooses to mould a piece of clay into whatever form he likes (cf. Rom 9). In an attempt to emphasise Yahweh's sovereignty, Amos referred to Israel's God as Yahweh (YHWH) and deliberately avoids the use of the expression 'the God of Israel' because of the tendency of such expression leading to the thought that 'God' is the God of Israel alone and not for other nations (Boaheng 2020:51). Brueggemann (2002:238) writes that Yahweh is the 'proper name' for the God of Israel, unlike the other names that are either 'generic names for deity', or 'titles that give respect or identify attributes for this God'.

For the prophet, Yahweh was indeed a sovereign God. He stressed the sovereignty of Yahweh over history, saying, 'If he had brought Israel up out of Egypt, he had also brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir (9:7)'. His judgment fell not only upon Israel but also upon the neighboring peoples' (Fosbroke 1969:769). As sovereign God, Yahweh controls the movements of peoples (9:7) and the order of nature (4:13; 5:8). Amos had no doubt that Yahweh was Lord and Master above all gods, the Creator and Sustainer of nature, because: 'he who forms the mountains, and creates the wind and declares to mortals what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness and treads on the heights of the earth, the Lord, the God

of hosts is his name' (4:13). According to Amos, Yahweh is great, and possesses all power, over and even beneath the earth and fixes the stars in the firmament. The interests of Yahweh spread beyond the confines of Israel and Judah and for this reason he can punish all the nations such as Damascus, Gaza, Edom, Tyre, and Israel's neighbours (Amos chs. 1, 2).

Secondly, Amos establishes the righteousness of Yahweh and his demand for social justice. For the prophet, 'Yahweh is preeminently the God of righteousness' (Fosbroke 1969:769) and hence his true worship (true religion) comprises justice informed by righteousness. This is the message he expounds, especially in chapter 5. Amos (5:6–7) demonstrates that, justice and righteousness are absolutely part of the presence of God as the life-bestowing force. For Amos, the Israelites perceived evil as good and were practising it in the society. As a result, the so-called 'justice' had turned into its opposite term 'injustice' and the people were striving for wealth by exploiting and oppressing the weak and the poor. They hated and opposed those who spoke the truth (5:10). Therefore, Amos reminded the people that their opposition to the essence of the court-justice system, in which the truth lay, was an embrace of death in God's eyes. Only when God's concern for the weak is disclosed and heeded, would the people of Israel live in justice and peace. For Amos, the key to experiencing the presence of God is not meaningless, formal piety, but the exercise of justice between and among humans (5:21–24) (Grimsrud 1999:73–75). Sunukjian (1983:1439) observes:

'Justice' was proper functioning of judicial procedures that enabled a court to declare who or what was right in a given case. 'Righteousness' was the behavior of one who sought this end, who did 'right' to those involved in the case. A righteous man was willing to speak in defense of an innocent person who had been wrongly accused. Righteousness was the action; justice was the end result.

Yahweh showed no interest in Israel's rituals (5:21–27) but instead sought justice and righteousness (1:17). In 4:4 the prophet writes sarcastically, 'Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days'. Some Israelites naively thought that practising religion could cover their sins. But Amos bluntly declared that no matter what religious rituals they performed, these empty and superficial acts (rituals) were futile. Thus, the law broken through unrighteousness could not be mended through any sacrifice, festival or ritual alone, because the most elaborate ritual that the people carried out remained detestable to God as long as it was offered by people who

fell below God's holy moral standards (5:18–27). Amos, like Samuel, insisted that, 'To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fats of rams' (1 Sam 15:22). He wrote, 'I hate and despise your feasts. I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals. I reject your sacrifices. Let me hear no more of your chanting. But rather let justice flow like water and integrity like an unfailing stream' (5:21). In Amos's view, true religion had to come from the bottom of the heart, and had to rise from true faith in God. True religion is justice informed by righteousness rooted in the righteousness of God. It is a kind of religion that cares for the poor, widows and the needy. James makes the point when he says, 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world' (1:27). To Amos, a vertical relationship with Yahweh should automatically lead to a healthy horizontal relationship with one's neighbour and the environment. In this sense, the rich should stop exploiting the poor and rather help the poor come out of their miserable states.

Amos's message about Israel's relationship with Yahweh is closely related to his theology of divine judgment upon the ills of his contemporary society. Due to Israel's social injustice and porous cultic religion, what was to come next was the Day of the Lord. Amos declares, 'The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness, that, behold, the days shall come upon you, that he will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fishhooks' (4:2). Further, Amos said, 'And it shall come to pass on that day that I will turn your religious feasts into mourning' (8:10). This punishment is ensured by Divine Oath. Yahweh swears by his holiness that severe punishment will come upon Samaria. Clearly the holiness of God had been defiled by the people's disobedience and covenantal violations. Surely this had become the guarantor of their punishment. The oath is enforced by his holiness and guarantees and strengthens its validity. That is, through their disobedience, they had violated Yahweh's covenant and he is now determined to enforce his covenant. It was a universal punishment that no one could escape. In the words of Boaheng (2019:68), the day 'would be as if someone runs away from a lion and was met by a bear. In an attempt to avoid the second danger, he runs to his house, but as he leans his hand against the wall, a poisonous snake concealed in a corner bites him with its venomous [sic] fangs (5:18–19)'. Due to their sins, God's judgment will fall upon all social classes of the nation including the king and his house, the royal chaplain and his family, the leaders and the nobles, the luxury-loving men and the pampered women, the rapacious landowners and the idle rich. Under the judgment, the common people will be included

along with the nobles. On the other hand, the Day of Yahweh will be characterized by a pouring of divine blessing upon God's people (9:11–15; cf. Isa 4:2–6; 30:26).

7. The Ghanaian Socio-Politico-Religious Context

Ghana made history in the sub-Saharan African region by becoming the first country to break the shackles of colonialism. However, after Ghana's independence in 1957, the country's history was primarily characterized by social and political violence and bloodshed through coups d'état and military rule. Military rule led to violent suppression resulting in numerous detentions without trial, political deaths in detention, capital punishment and a general and continuous state of emergency. However, in 1992, the nation decided to go back to constitutional rule—a decision that was reached through a referendum. For close to three decades since then, Ghana has enjoyed political stability. There have been seven peaceful general elections of a four-year term each. The next election is due in 2020. Ghanaians are always proud that the practice of democracy has stabilized their political system. With this background, Ghana's current political situation can be said to be analogous to that of the nation Israel in the time of Amos. Despite its momentous achievement of transitioning from military rule to democratic rule, Ghana remains an enigma.

Today, many of the issues that were confronted by Amos in eighth-century Israel run through the Ghanaian society. Issues such as corruption in both public and private sectors for the purposes of accumulating wealth, the alleged opulent lifestyles of some politicians, clergymen, government officials and senior corporate executives, bribery and corruption in our criminal justice system and the issues of national disasters like fire outbreaks and inadequate supply of electric power (*dumsor*) are common. These social challenges coupled with labour unrests and a struggling economy ultimately manifest in poor service delivery and large-scale unemployment affecting the poor and marginalised most profoundly. Agboluaje (2007:175) is therefore right to contend that the OT prophets 'still speak to our age with tremendous challenge'. Corruption is found in various aspects of our lives. Heads of departments, heads of institutions, civil servants, the security services all express corruption in one form or another.

At the heart of the social problems of ancient Israel at Amos's time lay poverty, social inequality and a combination of practices that perpetuated social chaos and facilitated illicit wealth. The story in Ghana is probably not different. Poverty and social inequality are some of the key challenges facing the country. In his *Inequalities*

Country Report – Ghana, Osei-Assibey (2014:np) observes that ‘Ghana’s growing overall economic inequalities reflect to some extent large and growing spatial and gender inequalities’. Like Israel in the time of Amos, Ghana has also experienced a situation where the rich are getting richer and the poor are becoming poorer, even though Ghana cannot generally speak of enjoying economic prosperity on the scale Israel experienced in the time of Amos. The following facts and figures come from Osei-Assibey’s (2014:np) report:

There is growing evidence that while the incidence of income poverty in general has reduced, income distribution has widened. ...Whereas the poorest average income has fallen from 6.9 in early 1990s to 5.2 in the mid-2000s, the richest incomes have increased from 44 to 48.3 over the same period. One of the worrying aspects of this growing income inequality is that it actually reduced the impact of economic growth on poverty reduction in the country over the periods under consideration.

The implication of this situation is that Ghana’s modest economic growth appears to have benefitted the rich more than the poor. Not only is the gap between rich and poor extremely wide, justice systems are often inaccessible, especially to the poor, and rights and entitlements are unknown to many. Civic, socio-economic, and political rights are therefore frequently flouted, and conflict is rife. Discrimination against the poor is not uncommon these days. Boachie (2015:23–25) avers that, ‘in Ghana, the basis for discrimination among people includes gender, ethnicity, age and social class’, a situation similar to that of Amos’s Israel.

In addition, territorial social injustice finds expression in Ghana such that socio-economic development is spatially concentrated in few regions while vast areas of the country remain largely undeveloped. The result is that, while the poor majority of rural residents live without social amenities such as accessible roads, electricity, drinking water, schools and health facilities, urban residents enjoy these and other. Many citizens are victims of poverty, hunger, ignorance, malnutrition, disease, unemployment, low life-expectancy, and hopelessness. That spatial injustice is present in Ghana is also confirmed by Osei-Assibey’s (2014:np) assertion that, in Ghana ‘Over 70% of people whose incomes are below the poverty line can be found in the Northern/Savannah areas.’ Thus, there is the widening of income and infrastructure disparity between rural and urban dwellers.

What about religious hypocrisy and malpractices? Ghana is known to be a Christian country. Out of a population of about 32 million, about

22 million are professing Christians. In our churches, exploitation of the poor abounds as seen on many television stations today. Some ministers take advantage of people's situation and take huge sums of money from them. Consultation fees are charged as high as five hundred Ghana cedis (Gh¢ 500.00, about \$100). Deliverance practices abound in Ghanaian churches whereby the dignity and human rights of unsuspecting and vulnerable members of congregations are blatantly violated. Obeng (2014:32) rightly observes that deliverance practices in Ghanaian churches are characterized by 'the demand for monetary support from the vulnerable in exchange for blessing....' Some pastors 'charge exorbitantly, sometimes even before attempting a cure. The patient's generous donation in form of tithe is sometimes made a prerequisite for healing' (Umoh 2013:663). At the end of it all the signal sent to viewers or listeners to television and radio respectively in Ghana is that God's 'blessings can be bought or earned' (Obeng 2014:37). Writing about the quack pastors in Ghana, Adofo (2014:np) observes:

Their foremost priority is to make money rather than to seek the salvation of their congregants. They entice their church members, victims I may call them, with completely false prophecies in most instances. Their churches have they turned into mints; their members subserviently brainwashed to churn out money at the crack of the pastor's fingers. What a pity!

Today, the evangelistic purpose for using electronic media has been turned into 'church advertisement' and the projection of the image of pastors. Large billboards are erected in advertisement of ministers rather than Christ. This situation has prompted some churches (like the Methodist Church Ghana) to ban the use of photographs (of ministers, speakers or any other church official) in publicizing church programmes. The church hierarchy has directed that the picture of Christ or the Cross should be used instead. Though this directive comes with its own challenges (for example, the challenge of getting the photograph of the historical Jesus so as to avoid projecting the image of someone who acted in a movie as Jesus), it definitely tells us that most contemporary ministers are projecting themselves rather than projecting Christ.

The priorities of many contemporary Christians have shifted from the pursuit of the kingdom of God and its righteousness to the accumulation of material wealth, the pursuit of upward social mobility and the fixation on earthly gratification, among others. In the spirit of agreement, Asamoah-Gyadu (2012:140) asserts that today's church is 'committed not to the core business of mission

or the things of the Spirit as defined by the Cross, but carnality that manifests in foolish jesting, ecclesiastical pomposity, and the exploitation of the Gospel for economic gain'. In his recent article, Atiemo (2016) laments over the church's over-concentration on mega revival meetings which, in effect, do not result in shaping the conduct of participants. He describes modern Christianity as 'clouds that gather without giving rains'. People gather for religious activities which are expected to inform their daily-life choices—yet, sin abounds in the society because the expected impact of those rituals is not achieved (Atiemo 2016:7). The Methodist Bishop of the Sunyani diocese, The Rt Rev. Daniel Kwasi Tannor, made a similar point when he preached against those who use false scales in the market for economic gains.³ The bishop advised those who claim to be Christians but do not live according to the ethics of Christianity to change their ways or face the wrath of God. His observations and pronouncements underscore the fact that many contemporary Ghanaian followers of Christ are superficial.

3 Rt Rev. Daniel Kwasi Tannor made this and other observation during a diocesan crusade organized from 15th to 19th January 2020 at Fiapre, Sunyani, Ghana.

In contemporary Ghana, some pastors use the media to showcase their 'spiritual gifts' and not to preach the gospel to the perishing. A typical message often heard on radio goes like this: 'There is more blessing in giving than receiving. Take my number, 024410...., tomorrow meet me here or there for *akwankyere* (spiritual direction). Once you see me all your problems will be gone'. Eventually, attention is drawn to the minister rather than the Saviour. Some ministers have bodyguards around them, making it extremely difficult for people to get access to them. It is interesting how ministers with bodyguards could convince their followers to seek protection from Christ when they themselves seek it from armed men. Some ministers are full of pride, behaving as if they are the only people who know God.

There are also sexual abuses involving ministers. Some ministers engage in sexual immorality with their church members, associate ministers' wives and sometimes even defile children. In the October 25, 2011 issue of *The Chronicle*, Apostle Kofi Nkansah-Sarkodie⁴ was reported to have drawn attention to cases of fornication, rape, armed robbery, adultery, stealing, and fraud, among other vices allegedly involving some 'men of God'. He stated, 'Our church leaders, who should be shepherding the flock towards salvation, are themselves shamefully leading ungodly lifestyles.' More so, some ministers preach messages that only entertain people without convicting them of sin. In other words, they preach what people want to hear and not what God wants them to preach. Preaching against sin has been replaced by preaching about prosperity and good health. Preaching for Christ has been replaced by Preaching for Cash (PFC). Some

4 Apostle Kofi Nkansah-Sarkodie is the General Overseer of the Open Arms Ministries at North Suntreso in Kumasi.

ministers intentionally exchange their pulpits with others in order to receive fat envelopes after supplying their colleagues with pulpits. The situation makes it very difficult to distinguish between a true minister of God and a false one. Certainly, the credibility of the Christian Church in Ghana is now at a low ebb.

Obeng also mentions noise pollution caused by religious bodies as one of the bad religious practices going on in Ghana. In his view, though Christian churches claim to promote the wellbeing of their members, they cause 'immense harm to their parishioners and their surrounding communities through their noise pollution' (Obeng 2014:33). 'The noise that keeps others awake throughout the night or during the day', as Obeng rightly observes, 'is harmful to people and the environment'. Unfortunately, those who complain are often accused of being demon possessed.

Analogous to the Israelites in Amos's time, many Christians in Ghana boast of their obedience to rituals such as tithing, thanks-offerings, church attendance, and fasting. Just as the Israelites made sacrifices to the shrine, with the aim of showing their social position, thereby distinguishing the poor from the rich, so are Ghanaian churches filled with activities that distinguish the rich from the poor. Fund-raising activities are done in such a way that those who are able to give bigger amounts are not only distinguished from the poor and hailed, but are also showered with special prayers filled with words of blessings that are clearly different from prayers offered for those who give smaller amounts. Will God bless a rich person for giving a big amount according to his or her strength and not bless the poor widow for giving the little she has? Clearly, anybody who studies the book of Amos diligently and prayerfully will come to the realization that Amos's world and ours have several similarities. Thus, Wiersbe's (2007:1416) assertion that, 'If the prophet Amos were to come to our world today, he would probably feel very much at home; for he lived at a time such as our[s]', is right when understood from the perspective of the task the prophet undertook.

8. Lessons from Amos for Ghanaian Church and Political Leaders

To turn our present circumstances around, it is important for both political and church leaders to listen to the prophet Amos. If political leaders and the Church heed the preaching of Amos to break the bonds of injustice and economic exploitation (5:7), God will restore the nation to life and vigour. Reken (1999:201) suggests that individual Christians must be responsible, compassionate, law-abiding citizens.

In this regard, Christians must regard economic inequality as unjust. If leaders of the society are led by godly standards, they would make policies to ensure the redistribution of resources in society in order to bridge the gap of inequality. In this sense, social justice must be seen as taxing away some of the justly acquired income and capital of the better-off in order to give it to the worse-off. Part of our responsibility as Christians is to exercise mercy and love for others in tangible ways. Amos is urging Ghanaian political leaders and Christians to feed the hungry, comfort the mourning, and visit the sick. John Wesley shared this view when he charged the rich, 'Be ye ready to distribute to everyone according to necessity' (Asante 1999:104). This idea is expressed in Wesley's economic principle, 'Gain all you can; save all you can and give all you can' (Asante 2014:130). If all Ghanaian Christians put this principle into practice, it will go a long way to change the current situation for the better.

How do we as Ghanaian Christians, political or church leaders heed Amos's prophetic call? As a prophet, Amos was a spokesman for God. The Church is a prophetic institution. It should thus be the first to endorse the preaching of the prophet Amos. 'A prophet', in the words of Kudadjie and Aboagye-Mensah (1992:41), 'is a person called by God to stand between him and his people.' The Christian Church should be the first to put its house in order as a response to Amos's prophetic message so that it does not lose its relevance. The idea of social justice must be understood in light of this relationship, especially 'the covenanted relationship' between God and his people, and the relationship among his people. Social justice is overwhelmingly related to the idea of relationship and the life of the community. Thus, justice in biblical thought concerns fidelity to the demands of relationship, to God and to one's neighbour. Confirming this point, Mays contends that, 'righteousness expressed in justice is the indispensable qualification for worship—no justice, no acceptable public religion' (Mays as quoted by Wright 2004:267).

Empowered by the message of Amos, the Church must rediscover itself by exemplifying godly obedience, to powerfully influence the rest of society as light and salt of the earth (Matt 5:13–14). Knowing God's displeasure and divine judgment for the maltreatment of the poor and the promotion of inequality, the church should be the first to reverse such situations within its ranks to serve as a worthy example to the rest of society. Ministers of God are called upon to shun greed and materialism, discrimination against the poor, and suppression of patrons, just as Amos did in his time. This will send clear signals to political leaders, especially those who profess to be Christian and yet do not apply Christian principles in their political

activities. The centrality of justice in Christianity is pointed out by Mott (as quoted in Wright 2004:267), who contends that, 'The duty of justice to the afflicted is so central that if it is not fulfilled, God will not even accept the divinely ordained sacrifices and worship.' Once the Church heeds and lives out the message of Amos in the Ghanaian society, it will then become a matter of course for it to speak the language of Amos as well, so that no one has occasion to accuse it of preaching virtue and practising vice. In that event, the Church could truly serve as the conscience of society.

What lessons can we draw from Amos's message for political leaders in Ghana? Firstly, political leaders, at all levels, are 'charged with the primary function of maintaining or restoring righteousness and justice, in their various senses' (Wright 2004:269). Government policies must be fair and just in response to Amos's call. 'A just policy or state of affairs' according to Miller 'is one that ensures that no person, or more usually category of persons, enjoys more or less of the advantages due them or bears more or less of the burdens they ought to bear relative to other members of the society' (Miller 1999:1). In this sense, a situation of social justice exists when all members of a given society, irrespective of status or class, receive equitable shares of public assets and bear equitable shares of collective burdens. Political leaders are called upon to seek good and not evil (5:14). Political leaders are expected to help people regardless of their political affiliation. This is not currently the case in Ghana. It is true that political leaders help people to find jobs—however, the people they help are usually those who are affiliated to their (the politicians') party. Developmental projects are done to win votes and so they are usually situated in communities where the majority of the people are likely to vote for them. This is unfair and unbiblical.

The national cake must be distributed equally. Political leaders are urged to establish justice in the gate (land) so that the grace of God may be bestowed upon the people (5:15). From the above review, the central concern regarding social justice seems to be one of fairness and equity in the allocation of societal rewards and burdens among people. 'Given that about 46 percent of all households in Ghana are agricultural households, of which a higher proportion is engaged in crop farming (95.1%)..., if the agricultural sector is not doing well ... then the country is not winning the battle against inequality, since those in that sector will continue to be poor and their conditions worsened' (Osei-Assibey 2015:n.p.). Government must therefore formulate policies to help improve the agricultural sector.

Judges are called upon to 'exercise justice with integrity and impartiality' (Wright 2004:269). Lawyers must be ready to help the poor by ensuring that justice prevails. Justice should not be given to

the highest bidder but to those who deserve it. It should be ensured that no one takes the law into his or her own hands and abuses the helpless. The lawyer's call as well must not be motivated merely by the desire to attain economic comfort but an overriding concern to serve God by helping improve the administration of justice in the society.

Amos dealt with local, national, and international matters and relationships as well. He called for absolute social justice and also condemned Syria for treating Gilead with savage cruelty (1:3–5). In the same way, political leaders should not only confine themselves to their nation but address international malpractices as well.

9. Conclusion

We have considered the context of Amos's message, his theology, and the implications of his message for church and political leaders in Ghana. From the study of Amos, the following conclusions could be made. The socio-religious contexts of the time of Amos and that of the contemporary Ghanaian society are comparable to some extent, but there are also marked differences. Oppression of the poor and the righteous, immorality, rejection of divine messages, pretentious religiosity, corruption in business, and idolatry mark the two situations. The Church must heed the message of Amos to reverse this. Individual Christians are called to be responsible, compassionate, law-abiding members of society. The Church must also exemplify obedience to the prophetic call of Amos. Political leaders at all levels are called upon to maintain or restore righteousness and justice and redistribute the national cake equally. Judges are called upon to 'exercise justice with integrity and impartiality'. Political leaders should not only confine themselves to their nation but address international malpractices as well. Finally, just as God punished Israel for non-compliance with his word, so he could visit Ghana with judgment if we refuse to heed his counsel.

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