

“THREAT OF JUDGMENT IN AMOS AND ITS LESSONS FOR NIGERIA”

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Abstract

Prophet Amos was a great man of God whose message rattled but rarely influenced his contemporary to positive change. He had the difficult task of proclaiming YHWH's message of judgment to the perceived enemies of Israel for failing God. His work provides material for the study of threat as a motivation for socio-religious change. Unlike the people of Nineveh who responded to threat with repentance, threat in Amos did not bring about repentance even though the prophet pleaded for such. Amos evaluated his audience from other nations on the basis of general revelation, but he evaluated Israel and Judah on the basis of the stipulations of YHWH's covenant. While some scholars hold that the "sins" identified by Amos are exclusively social, some think that they are primarily spiritual with only social implications. This study shows that all the sins found among the audience of Amos are found in abundance among contemporary Nigerians. Strangely, oppression is not limited to the rich: in Nigeria, even the poor do oppress fellow poor men/poor women. Both the audience of Amos and the contemporary Nigerian society are religious to a fault but their religion is not positively reflected on their moral. Threat, even of divine discipline, at times do not lead people to change their ways of life. Since the use of threat as a motivation for change in religion is unpredictable, leaders of religion are advised to use it with caution.

Keywords: Judgment, privilege, exploitation, worship, corruption.

Introduction

This article focuses on the motif of divine discipline and the effect of using threat first in Amos and by transference, in religion generally. The

book is named after its writer, Amos, whose name means “Burden bearer.”⁶¹ The book does not explain the meaning of the name but it has been suggested to be the shortened form of “Borne by God” in which case, its parallel would be Amasia.⁶² One wonders if he adopted the name by coincidence through divine direction because the prophet proclaimed divine judgment. This article traces the motif, “Judgment for abused privileges” as developed in the book of Amos. It investigates the purpose of divine discipline on Israel and the effectiveness of threat as motivation for change in religion. It does not examine the relationship between subjective religious commitment and objective ethical behavior found in Amos 3:2; 5:4; and 6:14. It does not examine the apparent contradictory messages in Amos 3:8 and 5:13 on how a man of God should behave in evil days. And it does not examine the difficulty besetting the fulfilment of the prophecy in Amos 9:11-15. It does not attempt to resolve the question if the prophet bore the name retrospectively or prophetically. While there are also questions on the genuineness of some parts of the book (e.g. 1; 2; 4; 5; and 9), answering those questions is outside the scope of the present work. Finally, while Amos prophesizes blessing of restoration (9:11-15),⁶³ it is again outside the focus of the present work to delve into that in detail.

Historical Background

The political changes that began to affect Israel from the early part of the eighth century with the expansion of Assyria and the capture of Damascus also led to its economic improvement. The country extended its hegemony over a greater area of the Transjordan. Both Israel and Judah had strong kings in the first half of the eighth century

This made it easier to establish a comprehensive economic policy that concentrated on the mass production of export items such as grain, olive oil and wine. Now, in the eighth century, the elite were able to impose this economic policy on the small hill country farms and villages. As a result, previous agricultural strategies that attempted to distribute potential risks between herding and farming were overturned, and the land was given over to specific cash crops. The smaller holdings of the peasant farmers, overburdened with debts, were enclosed into large estates. Under this new policy, an attempt was made to increase exports to the extent that there was a real hunger problem for the peasant class, while the nobility and

⁶¹ R.F. Youngblood, F.F. Bruce, and R.K. Harrison, eds., “Book of Amos,” *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995, 1985), 50. This is the superscription of the book.

⁶² John D.W. Watts, “The Man Amos,” *Review and Expositor*, 63 (Fall 1966), 4:387-388.

⁶³ E.J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 258.

merchant-class were able to indulge in the luxury goods supplied by their Phoenician trading partners. Thus in addition to facing rising prices at home on basic goods, such as wheat and barley, the impoverished peasant farmers now found themselves forced into debt servitude or day labor.⁶⁴

The above quotation clearly describes the situation at the time Amos gave his prophecy. He ministered to an affluent society where the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. The society to which he prophesied had the feeling that all was well. The age of Jeroboam II to which Amos prophesied was luxuriant, and this “produced an atmosphere of materialism and carelessness in the carrying out of...worship.”⁶⁵ Thomas Edward McComiskey puts it thus, “The kingdoms prospered financially and at the same time expanded their borders. But as their economic wellbeing and national strength continued to foster their security, an internal decay was eating at their vitals.”⁶⁶

W.O.E. Oesterley and T.H. Robinson observe,

It is ... significant that when, in the time of the monarchy, the corruption of national life reached its height, the first protests made in the name of Yahweh came from two men of the wilderness or semi-wilderness community, Elijah (1 Kings 17:1) in the ninth century B.C. and Amos in the eighth (Amos 1:1). All through the history of Israel there persisted the tradition of a high moral standard demanded by Yahweh, and, indeed, it was this influence which in the end proved to be the decisive factor in making Israelite religion unique in the ancient world.⁶⁷

In the prophetic book of Amos, YHWH revealed his plan to deal with the abuses of Israel and her neighbors of the privileges he bestowed on them.

This shows that opportunity leads to accountability.⁶⁸ To the Jews, history revolved round Israel and Judah. Thus the references to the Damascus, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab were to sharpen

⁶⁴ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, eds., “Amos,” *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2000),

⁶⁵ Eugene H. Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed 1966; rept. 1980), 271; cf. Samson Olanisebe, “The Prophetic Vocation of Amos in Amos 2:6-16 and Its Relevance for National Development in Nigeria,” *African Journal of Biblical Studies*, 24 (2007), 125.

⁶⁶ Thomas Edward McComiskey, “Amos,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (With the New International Version of the Holy Bible) in 12 vols. (eds. Frank E. Gaebelien and Richard E. Polcyn; Grand Rapids: Regency, 1985), 7:269.

⁶⁷ W.O.E. Oesterley and T.H. Robinson, *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development* (London: SPCK, 1930), 168.

⁶⁸ George O. Folarin, *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy* (Bukuru: African Christian Textbooks, 2004), 46.

YHWH's condemnation especially of Israel.⁶⁹ It should also be remembered that the OT prophets, YHWH controls world history (cf. Amos 9:7).

Structure of Amos

Scholars agree that the book of Amos has a well-defined structure although they disagree on the specifics of verse division.⁷⁰ Thomas Constable states,

Scholars have observed that Amos wrote in the covenant-lawsuit structure and style that was common in the ancient Near East in his day (the *rib* oracle). His words are covenant-lawsuit addresses. The Great King (God) is introduced in the third person (1:2), and then begins to speak in the first person (1:3). Amos' phraseology illustrates the covenant background against which it was written, namely, the Mosaic Covenant. One writer called the genre of the entire book a covenant enforcement document. Other stylistic features that Amos employed prominently include repetition (e.g., 1:3, 4, 5), summary quotation (e.g., 4:1; 6:13; 8:5-6; 9:10), and irony (e.g., 4:1).⁷¹

Of course, some scholars are of the view the Amos used the purest and the most classical Hebrew in the OT. One way to structure the book of Amos is: Introduction of Amos as a prophet (1:1-2); Judgment against the nations, including Judah and Israel (1:3-2:16); Sermons of judgment against Israel (3:1-6:14); Visions of God's judgment (7:1-9:10); and a conclusion, which is a promise of Israel's restoration (9:11-15).⁷² Merrill divides the book to: Punishment of the nations (1-2:5); and punishment of Israel (2:6-9:15).⁷³ McComiskey divides the book to: Superscription (1:1); introduction to the prophecy (1:1-2); the prophetic oracles (1:3-6:14); and the prophetic visions (7:1-9:15).⁷⁴ He further splits section 1:3-6:14 to two: Oracles of judgment against the surrounding nations (1:3-2:5), and oracles of judgment against Israel (2:6-6:14). He splits 7:1-9:15 to four: the vision of the locusts, fire, and the plumb line (7:1-9); a historical interlude (7:10-17); the vision of the summer fruit (8:1-14); and the vision of the Lord standing by the altar

⁶⁹ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. J.A. Baker; Philadelphia: The Westminster, 1967), 2:171.

⁷⁰ Paul R. House, "Amos and Literary Criticism," *Review and Expositor* 92 (Spring 1995), 2:181.

⁷¹ Cf. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Amos* (Sonic Light, 2014), 4-5. Cited 18 August 2014. Online: <http://www.soniclight.com/>.

⁷² Youngblood, Bruce, and Harrison, eds., "Book of Amos," *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 51.

⁷³ Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament*, 273.

⁷⁴ McComiskey, "Amos," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 278.

(9:1-15). It is however the structural analysis of Amos presented by Stephen J. Bramer that is adopted for this work: Prologue - superscription and theme (1:1–2); oracles to the nations (1:3–2:16); oracles to Israel (3:1–6:14); visions (7:1–9:6); and restoration (9:7–15).⁷⁵ Section 1:3–2:16, has eight oracles to the nations. It is defined by the repetition of three phrases: the messenger formula, “This is what the Lord says;” a numerical formula and indictment, “for three sins ... even for four, I will not turn back my wrath;” and a punishment clause, “I will send fire.” Bramer rightly notes:

[the] fourth phrase, “says the Lord,” concludes the first, fifth, and sixth oracles The eighth oracle, against Israel, has several more accusations than the others and is unique in its punishment. A rhetorical emphasis is achieved by this expanded content and by the fact that Israel is mentioned last. This oracle leads to the next section, which deals exclusively with Israel.⁷⁶

Following Bramer’s structural analysis makes obvious the emphasis of Amos on judgment for abused privileges, and can be used to interpret the whole book.

Development of the Motif of Judgment in Amos

Amos was called from the South (Tekoa in Judah) to preach a hostile message in the North (Samaria in Israel).⁷⁷ He attacked the abuses of his day in a manner that became classical.⁷⁸ When Amos said that he was no prophet neither was he a prophet’s son (7:14), was Amos setting himself apart from contemporary *nabis* as a whole, or was he demanding another status for himself? Bright says that Amos only rejected belonging to prophetic orders.⁷⁹ Klaus Koch adds:

[The] opening should be understood as referring to the past – once I was not a *nabi*, but now I am one, because I prophesy The differing interpretation goes together with contradictory views about the institutional background of Amos. Was he a charismatic, independent peasant farmer, or had he through his call become an office holder, bound to the cult? At the same time ... the carefully structured poetical

⁷⁵ Stephen J. Bramer, “Analysis of the Structure of Amos I,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (1999), 622: 172.

⁷⁶ Bramer, “Analysis of the Structure of Amos I,” 173.

⁷⁷ C.E. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Volumes 10: Minor Prophets* (2 vols. in one; ed. C.E. Keil, and F. Delitzsch; Grand Rapids: Wm Eerdmans, rept. 1980), 235-236.

⁷⁸ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (3rd ed.; London: SCM, 1980), 262.

⁷⁹ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 262.

sentences and the use of the common *nabi* genre of prophecy show that Amos had undergone training. ... The call made him practice the prophetic way of listening to the “inner” voice, as well as visionary withdrawal and inwardness.⁸⁰

Bruce E. Willoughby supports the view that by the statement in 7:14, Amos was distancing himself from the prophets of the palace. This translates the clause, “I *am* not a prophet,” in the past tense. But in the Hebrew text, Amos 7:14 being a nominal clause contains no verb. The tense of its implied verb “to be” could therefore either be present from the influence of verse 13b or past from the influence of verse 15.⁸¹ The reading, “I *was* not a prophet” on the other hand suggests that Amos was not a prophet at the time of his calling, had no prophet training, and did not turn to prophecy for economic reasons, but that he later became a prophet.⁸²

It should be borne in mind that the two kingdoms were enemies of each other. Amos was therefore tactical in the way he presented his message. He needed to win the right to be heard by his audience. He succeeded in this by firstly pronouncing judgment on the enemies of Israel (1:3-2:25). As his audience were enjoying his message, he also descended upon Israel (2:6ff).⁸³ This is rhetoric of entrapment.⁸⁴

Eight nations were addressed in his book with the prophet predicting judgment on each nation. Amos compared YHWH’s proclamation of the immediacy of his judgment to the roaring of a lion: “The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem ...” (1:2). Owens explains,

A lion is extremely quiet as he stalks his prey. It is not until the very moment that he springs upon his victim that he gives forth a roar. When the shepherd hears the roar of the lion he knows that one of the lambs is about to be pounced upon by the lion. This figure dramatizes the immediacy of the situation. The crisis is not pending any longer, it is expanding.⁸⁵

The analyses of the cases of the eight nations addressed in the book of Amos reveal the following:

⁸⁰ Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: Volume One – the Assyrian Period* (London: SCM, 1982), 38.

⁸¹ John J. Owens, “Exegetical Studies in the Book of Amos,” *Review and Expositor* 63 (Fall 1966), 4:438.

⁸² Bruce E. Willoughby, “Book of Amos,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D.N. Freedman et.al; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:203-212.

⁸³ Cf. John H. Hayes, “Amos Oracles against the Nations,” *Review and Expositor* 92 (Spring 1995), 2:166; McComiskey, “Amos,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 281.

⁸⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985), 144.

⁸⁵ Owens, “Exegetical Studies in the Book of Amos,” 429.

1. Each case is introduced with the phrase “For three transgressions ... and for four” (1:3, 6,9,11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). Christensen opines that this phrase is simply a literary device and could be interpreted differently.⁸⁶ The formula was never intended to list the total number of the transgressions of each nation named. Other opinions of scholars on the meaning of “For three ... or for four” have been summarized as follow: It is a way of referring to innumerable crimes committed by nations condemned; the paraphrastic translation “again and again” stresses the persistence of the wrongdoers; “three” and “four” may be another way of alluding to number seven which signified completion; ancient Rabbis held that three transgressions could be forgiven but not the fourth one; and its staircase graduation may be a way of saying that a limit had been passed.⁸⁷ Thus, “For three transgressions ... and for four ...” could simply mean “For repeated transgression ...” Keil notes, “[...] the number merely serves to denote the multiplicity of the sins, the exact number of which has no bearing upon the matter.”⁸⁸ The position of this article is that while number “three” did imply that the sins of the people were full, number “four” in this context implied that their sins were running over.

2. In each case, this introduction is followed with the name of the nation or city-state addressed: Damascus (1:3), Philistia (1:6-8), Tyre (1:9), Edom (1:11), Ammon (1:13), Moab (2:1), Judah (2:4), and Israel (2:6). Damascus, a city-state, was a neighbor of Israel. Gaza, another city-state, was a neighbor of Judah. Tyre, a city-state, was a neighbor of Israel. Edom was a nation, and a neighbor of Judah. Ammon was also a nation and a neighbor of Israel. Moab was another nation that was a neighbor of Judah. Judah was a special nation and a neighbor of Israel. Israel itself was, at that time, a special nation and by implication, a neighbor of Judah.

3. The abuse of each nation is listed after its name:

a. The Syrians of Damascus “... threshed Gilead with sharp iron” (1:3). Damascus was the capital of Syria, and by implication, its center of culture and influence. It has also been argued that by metonymy, the city of Damascus stood for the whole nation.⁸⁹ For a long time, beginning from the time of Ahab, it had a hostile relationship with Israel. Amos 1:3 cites only one crime of Damascus

The crime that provoked the judgment against Damascus was that the people had threshed Gilead with iron threshing sledges. ... The incident Amos referred to here is most

⁸⁶ D.L. Christensen, “The Prosodic Structure of Amos 1-2,” *Harvard Theological Review* 67 (1974), 727-736.

⁸⁷ Hayes, “Amos Oracles against the Nations,” 156.

⁸⁸ Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Volumes 10: Minor Prophets*, 242.

⁸⁹ Constable, *Notes on Amos*, 14.

probably the one recorded in 2 Kings 13:1-9. There an incursion of the Syrians into Israel during the reign of Jehoahaz is described as making of Jehoahaz “like the dust at threshing time” (v. 7). We do not, of course, need to understand the metaphor as a literal act in which the bodies of the Israelites were torn apart by sledges. The intensity of the metaphor, however, implies the most extreme decimation and may hint at especially cruel or inhuman treatment.⁹⁰

Charles C. Ryrie holds to the literalistic interpretation of this statement. He argues, “The Syrians (Arameans) of Damascus literally threshed and mangled the bodies of prisoners under heavily studded threshing sledges.”⁹¹ Aramean rulers, Hazael and Ben hadad III, repeatedly invaded and conquered Israel between 842 and 802 B.C.E. The names Hazael and Ben hadad either represented all the Aramean rulers, or their two named dynasties.⁹² While the developing events in the contemporary world have shown such atrocities to be possible in the context of terrorism, it is necessary for contemporary readers of this prophecy to cautiously note that Amos wanted here to only prove that the people of Damascus were terribly wicked.

b. The Philistines sold a whole population into slavery (1:6). Philistines occupied the coastal plain in southwest Palestine and raided Israel many times before King David defeated them. They lived in the five cities of Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza, each ruled by a separate lord (cf. Josh 13:3; 1 Sam 6:16-17). Amos mentioned all these cities except Gath in his prophecy. Gaza was the chief city of Philistia as Damascus was of Aram. Gaza trafficked in slave trade. Many of the slaves were sold there: “Though the events referred to here cannot be identified, it was probably a series of border raids in which slaves were secured and sold to the Edomites.... whole communities were taken in this way, thus underscoring the enormity of the crime.”⁹³ It is possible that some Israelites were involved in the enslavement.

c. The Tyreans sold a whole population into slavery and broke a covenant of brotherhood (1:9). Tyre was the capital of Phoenicia. The crimes of the Tyreans listed by Amos were similar to those of the Philistines with an exception. Keil explains thus,

If ... Tyre is only charged with delivering up the captives of Edom, and not with having carried them away, it must have bought the prisoners from an enemy of Israel, and then disposed of them in Edom. From what enemy they were

⁹⁰ McComiskey, “Amos,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 283.

⁹¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 1359.

⁹² Constable, *Notes on Amos*, 14.

⁹³ McComiskey, “Amos,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 286.

purchased it is impossible to determine with certainty. ... For a commercial nation, carrying on so extensive a trade as the Phonicians did, would have purchased prisoners in more than one war, and would also have disposed on them as slaves to more nations than one.⁹⁴

d. The Edomites perpetually hated and pursued their brother with sword (1:11).

Edom was another name for Esau, the twin brother of Jacob. The Edomites and Israelites thus had close ethnic ties ... [but] in their wilderness journey the Israelites sought access to the king's highway that ran through Edom. But the Edomites refused passage and even sent a military force to block them (Num 20:14-21).⁹⁵

It has also been suggested that the brotherhood here refers to treaty partner and not ancient blood relationship with Israel.⁹⁶ Whatever it is, hostility characterized the relationship of the Edomites and the Israelites. Edomites were regarded as Saul's enemies in 1 Samuel 14 and David placed a military garrison in Edom in 1 Samuel 8.

e. The Ammorites ripped open pregnant women of Gilead (1:13). Israelite women were at one time or another inhumanly treated by the Ammorites (cf. 2 Kgs 8:12; Hos 13:16). Though the particular case involved in this verse is not certain, such repugnant atrocities were common in ancient Near Eastern warfare.⁹⁷

f. The Moabites burned bones of kings to powder (2:11). Many scholars have pointed to the burning by Moabites of the bones of the King of Edom. Such is heinous for several reasons: Moabites and Edomites were related, and it was considered a sacred duty in the ancient Near East to give the dead a proper burial.⁹⁸ Tim Philips comments thus:

[...] the Jewish Targum interprets this reference to mean the Moabites then took the ashes of the king's bones and used the substance to whitewash houses. Moab was content neither with the death of the king, nor the plunder of his burial site, nor even the desecration and burning of his body. So utter was

⁹⁴ Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Volumes 10: Minor Prophets*, 247.

⁹⁵ McComiskey, "Amos," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 288.

⁹⁶ "Amos 1:11," NETBible, (n.d.). Cited: 16 August 2014. Online: <http://classic.net.bible.org/bible.php?book=Amo&chapter=1#v55>. Note 54.

⁹⁷ Claude Mariottini, "Ripping Open Pregnant Women," 19 June 2014 <<http://claudemariottini.com/2014/06/19/ripping-open-pregnant-women/>> 8 September 2014.

⁹⁸ J. Niehaus, "Amos," *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (ed. T.E. McComiskey; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992), I: 358.

its contempt that the body was destroyed as much as was humanly possible, and the remains were most likely used in a less than honorable manner. The depths of hatred and depravity seem to know no bounds in the crime of Moab.⁹⁹

The Moabites were devoid of social sensibilities and were guilty of desecrating the dead.¹⁰⁰ Even if Amos' criticism of other nations was a gimmick, the points he raised in 1:2-2:16 were credible. First, "the denunciations of the foreign nations were genuine statements of judgment ... The atrocities condemned would have been sufficiently contrary to customary law that the prophet's references would have convinced his audience of the nation's guilt."¹⁰¹ Again the announcement of YHWH's intention to execute judgment on the guilty parties would have led them to acknowledge that he would judge in matters of all other wrongdoings: if YHWH would judge other nations that neither recognized him as their Lord nor worshipped him as God, then he would ultimately judge the Jews.

g. The Judeans rejected the law and statute of the Lord (2:4); and

h. The Israelites were oppressive to the righteous and the poor (2:6-8; 5:11; 8:5-6), were immoral (2:7), made Nazirites drink wine and forbid prophecy (2:12; 3:7), were hateful of honest judges (5:10, 15), were corrupt through bribery (5:12), perverse justice (5:7; 6:12), were pretentiously religious (5:21-23), cheated in business (8:5), and worshipped idols (5:5; 8:14).¹⁰² Four renowned centers of worship are identified in Amos. They are Bethel (3:14; 4:4), Gilgal (4:4; 5:5), Beersheba (5:4), and Dan (8:14). Donald L. Williams is right that "despite the categorical nature of these judgments on cultic centers of Israel, the position cannot be substantiated that Amos was advocating a complete destruction of all formal worship; Amos was combating a popular conception of worship which had become automatic and lifeless."¹⁰³ He obviously respected the sacred traditions associated with these religious centers, but the people's worship had lost its spirituality and became merely formal and ceremonial (5:4; 8:14; cf. 1 Kgs 12:28-30).

The abuse of the nations in alphabets a-f is "oppression" while that of Judah and Israel mentioned in alphabets g-h is "apostasy." These sins are surprisingly similar to the sins found in the contemporary Nigerian society. The mention of the seven nations of Damascus, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah had relevance to Israel, otherwise the message of

⁹⁹ Tim Philips, "Bone Burning," (4 February 2008). Cited 15 August 2014. Online: <https://gairneybridge.files.wordpress.com/2009/08/amos-exposition-paper.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ Owens, "Exegetical Studies in the Book of Amos," 430.

¹⁰¹ Hayes, "Amos Oracles against the Nations," 166.

¹⁰² Cf. Constable, *Notes on Amos*, 3.

¹⁰³ Donald L. Williams, "The Theology of Amos," *Review and Expositor* 63 (Fall 1966), 4:395.

Amos would not have interested the Samaritans. The abuses of the six nations affected the Jews: The Israelites living in Gilead suffered the same inhuman treatment with other captives of Gilead from the Syrians of Damascus and the Ammorites; the Philistines and Tyreans were perpetual enemies of the Jews and at various times, captured and sold Jews from various settlements to slavery. The Edomites literally pursued the Jews with swords away from their territory. The Moabites were enemies of the Jews, and Judah was regarded by Israel as her enemy.

4. The privilege abused is then identified but only for Judah and Israel: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities” (3:2). According to John J. Owens, this “[...] is the clearest early statement of the special election of Israel from among the entire earth.”¹⁰⁴

Timothy Agboluaje is right that the worship of YHWH was perverse in Israel and Judah. Religious worship “[...] was characterized by superstition, hypocrisy, and degrading immoralities. Israel’s religious life was only a matter of form and outward observance of religious practice rather than a true religious ideal ...”¹⁰⁵ The Israelites were treating YHWH as another Baal to be pacified by ritual. Walther Eichrodt surmises the message of the eighth century prophets, including Amos, thus:

What, however, gives the prophetic message of doom its urgent and irrevocable quality is that it seeks to give an explicit picture of *the final frightful blow* with which Yahweh dispatches his faithless people. Because Israel has been singled out above all other nations for the divine favour, she must also endure a special severity of divine judgment. All the scourges of Nature, all the horrors of war, all the powers of death and the underworld must combine to root out the infamous nation from the earth.¹ Yahweh brings his whole world controlling power to bear to ensure that not one single sinner shall escape him. 2. And the people’s hope that in the judgment they will be the remnant who are spared is twisted with bitter mockery into its opposite, and the miserable lot of the remnant is made to testify to the completeness of the destruction.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ John J. Owens, “Exegetical Studies in the Book of Amos,” 432.

¹⁰⁵ Timothy Agboluaje, “The Ministry of Amos in Israel and its Socio-Religious Implication for the Nigerian Nation,” *Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa* (Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2007), 177-178.

¹⁰⁶ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. J.A. Baker; Philadelphia: The Westminster, 1961), 1:465-466.

Judah and Israel abused their “election” (3:2). Note the phrase, “... the entire family which he brought up from the land of Egypt” (3:1) which shows in 3:2 that the privilege referred to concerned both the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms. The privilege abused by Damascus, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab is not named in but can only be implied from the book of Amos. The privilege abused is “power.” The six nations oppressed their weaker communities to the point of extinction.

5. The judgment of each nation addressed by Amos is presented in the form of divine fire, “I will send fire ...” (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5 5; 5:6). Several scholars have observed that while Amos never used the term “covenant” he evaluated the national sins of Israel and Judah against the background of covenant law.¹⁰⁷ Commenting on Amos 3:2 Bernhard W. Anderson notes that the word “know” is a covenant verb which refers to personal knowing involving relationship and commitment. The only twist here is that God’s knowing Israel was not irrevocably supporting and approving but judging and punishing when the need arose. God’s discipline of Israel might not have involved the complete rejection of the people but Amos reveals that it involved a terrible doom in which only a pitiful remnant would be left (3:2; 5:15-16).¹⁰⁸ The last reference in regards to the judgment of Israel is put differently as “Lest he break forth like fire ...” (5:6). For Damascus (1:4-5), Philistia (1:7-8), Tyre (1:10), Edom (1:12), Ammon (1:15), Moab (2:2-3), Judah (2:5), and Israel (3:11-12; 5:3, 27; 6:7-11, 14; 8:11-12), the divine “fire” was to be in the form of the destruction of their cities. Commenting on the use of “fire” in Amos 1:4, McComiskey states, “[It] is not a description of an isolated occurrence relating only to Damascus, for it appears in all but one of the oracles. Only the oracle against Israel lacks it (2:6-16). It is best understood as a metaphorical representation of God’s judgment (cf. 7:4).”¹⁰⁹ “Fire” is therefore used here for judgment. The observation of Jeffrey Niehaus on the use of fire in warfare is noteworthy, “Ancient Near Eastern armies commonly used fire to burn and weaken a city wall.”¹¹⁰ In addition, the inhabitants of Damascus, Israel, and their kings and princes of Ammon would go into captivity. There would also be famine of prophetic word among the Jews in exile (8:11). The gravity of the judgments shows that responsibility demands accountability, and that accountability and that privileges misused would be judged by God. YHWH would judge the religious and the non-religious, the monotheist and the polytheist, the elect

¹⁰⁷ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 262.

¹⁰⁸ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 182.

¹⁰⁹ McComiskey, “Amos,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 283.

¹¹⁰ Jeffrey Niehaus, “Amos,” *The Minor Prophets: an Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (ed. T.E. McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 1:345.

and the non-elect. Everyone would be judged for the privileges he has.¹¹¹ This was the message of Amos to Israel. This is the abiding message of Amos to the contemporary Nigerian society.

The Purpose of Divine Discipline

The book of Amos shows that the purpose of divine judgment is corrective rather than punitive. Basing one's understanding of the Old Testament (OT) prophecy on the view that history revolves round Israel, one is able to see the pronouncement of judgment on Damascus, Philistia, and other Gentile nations were meant to heighten the need for Israel to repent: Or how can one explain the fact that the Gentile nations addressed in Amos were never sent copies of the prophecies that pertain to them for necessary changes?

Amos told Israel of how on various occasions, God disciplined it with a view to bringing the nation to repentance but the nation failed to change (4:6-11). YHWH chastised Israel with famine, drought, plagues, and other "natural" catastrophes to no avail. God's disappointment is expressed in the statement "Yet you have not returned to me" (4:6, 8, 19, 11).

While Amos never denied that those who were relatively righteous, needy, poor and meek existed in Israel (cf. 2:6, 7; 5:11, 12; and 8:4), his proclamation that these would suffer with the wicked in their discipline is most embarrassing. Geerhardus Vos puts it thus:

[There] is solidarity in punishment, and that ... behind solidarity of judgment, a solidarity of guilt, though we may not be able to reckon this out in detail. ... Amos knows of a sifting that will take place, although he refers to this not so much in order to console, as rather to frighten: it will be as bad as sifting, the saving of two legs or the piece of an ear out of the mouth of the lion (3:12; 9:9, 10).¹¹²

That means that Amos told the Israelites of other impending judgment of God awaiting them if they refuse to return to him. The Assyrians would overrun Israel, 90% of them would be destroyed (5:3; cf. 3:12), and the remnants would be led captive (4:2-3). In view of these impending dangers, YHWH again called on Israel to "Seek me that you may live" (5:4, 6, 14), but Israel never repented. This led her to Assyrian captivity in 721 BCE (cf. 2 Kgs 17:6; 18:10-12). This suggests that threat or fear of judgment alone is an unpredictable motivation in religion.

¹¹¹ Oesterley and T.H. Robinson, *Hebrew Religion*, 229.

¹¹² Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1948), 265.

Amos' Message in Nigerian Socio-Religious Context

Agboluaje is right that the OT prophets “still speaks to our age with tremendous challenge.”¹¹³ The point was made at the beginning of this work that prosperity was at its height in Israel and Judea at the time of Amos (cf. Amos 4:1; 5:1; 6:4, 6), and that “[...] prosperity brought complacency, pride, and insensitivity to the voice of the Lord.”¹¹⁴ The wealth was however not evenly distributed, as the rich got richer, the poor got poorer until they lost all they had (cf. Amos 2:6-7; 5:10-12; 8:4-5). Yet the people were very religious: “The religious centers were apparently thronged, sacrifices were punctiliously offered, the musical side of worship was keenly performed.”¹¹⁵

Malachy I. Okwueze's analysis of Amos' prophecy is persuasive:

There is no doubt that affluence, exploitation and the profit motif were the most notable features of the society which Amos observed and in which he lived and worked. The rich were affluent enough to have several houses with ostentatiously expensive furniture while on the other hand the poor were really poor and were helplessly exploited. The surprising thing was that popular and official religion was still at its best while the participants were decayed morally.¹¹⁶

Prosperity, exploitation and moral decay summarize Amos' criticisms of his audience. In these his criticisms are relevant to Nigeria today.¹¹⁷ In 2005, the Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (NABIS) held a conference in Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma to discuss the theme, “Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa,” to which biblical scholars in and outside Nigeria gathered to examine the problem and proffer solution. Some of the papers relevant to the ongoing discussion which were presented in the conference and published in a book after the conference are briefly reviewed below.¹¹⁸

Confirming the existence of poverty in Nigeria, Chimobi Uche notes, “In Nigeria, widespread and severe poverty is a reality. It is a reality that depicts a lack of food, clothes, education and other basic amenities. Severely poor people lack the most basic necessities of life to a degree that it can be wondered how they manage to survive.”¹¹⁹ He is not alone in this

¹¹³ Agboluaje, “The Ministry of Amos in Israel and its Socio-Religious Implication,” 175.

¹¹⁴ John J. Davids and John C. Whitcomb, *A History of Israel from Conquest to Exile* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1970; rept. 1986), 427.

¹¹⁵ Okwueze, *The Old Testament as History, Religion and Literature*, 155.

¹¹⁶ Malachy I. Okwueze, *The Old Testament as History, Religion and Literature* (Nsukka: AP Express, 2001), 151-152.

¹¹⁷ Olanisebe, “The Prophetic Vocation of Amos,” 30.

¹¹⁸ S.O. Abogunrin, ed., *Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa* (Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2007), 1-654.

¹¹⁹ Chimobi Uche, “Poverty in Nigeria: Some Dimensions and Contributing Factors,” *Global Majority E-Journal* 1 (June 2010), 1: 47.

observation. Segun Oshewolo points out, “Poverty holds sway in the midst of plenty, a situation described in Nigeria’s political lexicon as a ‘bewildering paradox.’”¹²⁰ Majority of the citizens have been reduced by poverty to hunger, ignorance, malnutrition, disease, and unemployment, poor access to credit facilities, low life expectancy, and hopelessness. Strangely, Nigeria is richly endowed with great wealth, resources and potentials which are not prudently shared among the populace.

Exploitation is not strange to Nigeria since the society can be classified into the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploited and the exploiters. J.A. Oladunjoye is apparently right in saying that there is connection between corruption, exploitation, and poverty in the country. He opines that corruption is a major cause of poverty, and exploitation is one of the ways adopted by the rich and the powerful to cheat the weak.¹²¹ Oladunjoye, notes three inducers of corruption to be secrecy, inappropriate influence of the elites, and distorted political finance.¹²² Justifiably, Oladunjoye¹²³ and Abogunrin¹²⁴ separately agree on three points in regards to corruption: It is a liability from “the Fall,” though universal to humanity corruption differs in levels from one place to another, and it has reached a disturbing stage in Nigeria. The problem with this theological position that pollution of corruption is from Adamic sin is that it may limit the fight of corruption to the spiritual, although another interpretation of the position is that it indicates that every person and society has a tendency to be corrupt if not checked.

Pauline Mark Lere blames Nigerian leaders for folding their hands and watching the decay of morality in the society.¹²⁵ In her work on the challenge of Amos to the Nigerian society she notes, “Amos denounced the social injustice practiced among the people and condemned the religious corruption of the period. Like Palestine, Nigeria ... is endowed with both human and material resources, but despite the natural and human resources, the masses are greatly improvised. This is due largely to social injustice.”¹²⁶

¹²⁰ Segun Oshewole, “Gallopings Poverty in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Government’s Interventionist Policies,” *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 12 (2010), 6: 264.

¹²¹ J.A. Oladunjoye, “Chairman’s Keynote Address,” *Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa* (ed. S.O. Abogunrin; Ibadan: Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies, 2007), 1.

¹²² Oladunjoye, “Chairman’s Keynote Address,” 4.

¹²³ Oladunjoye, “Chairman’s Keynote Address,” 1-4.

¹²⁴ S.O. Abogunrin, “Introduction,” *Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa* (ed. S.O. Abogunrin; Ibadan: Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies, 2007), 8-10.

¹²⁵ Pauline Mark Lere, “Prophet Amos and the Unjust Society of Israel: The Challenge to the Nigerian Society,” *Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa* (ed. S.O. Abogunrin; Ibadan: Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies, 2007), 130.

¹²⁶ Lere, “Prophet Amos and the Unjust Society of Israel,” 131-134.

Agboluaje points out four implications of Amos' message for Nigeria.¹²⁷ The first is that like the nations which the prophet initially criticized, the Nigerian society is also plagued with injustice and economic oppression culminating in economic disparity with discontentment and destitution. The second is that the socio-economic situation in the contemporary Nigerian society is characterized with widespread corruption. The third is that corruption in the contemporary Nigerian society extends to worship. Finally the contemporary Nigerian society wrongly holds that performing religious rituals is sufficient to satisfy God. The problem of Nigeria is more complex than this however. Even as recently as December 2013, Fredrick Nwabufo agrees that the poor even exploit their fellows, and encourage the rich to dispossess them: The oppressed is a potential oppressor.¹²⁸ This comparison suggests strongly that Nigeria is ripe for divine visitation and the way out of its self-chosen destruction is to repent and do justice.

Conclusion

Bright opines that Amos, in his prophecy, did not hold any hope for the northern kingdom.¹²⁹ Unlike Jonah's message of threat which brought about repentance to Nineveh, even though Amos held that the people of Israel could be saved by practicing justice (5:14-15), he allegedly did not see the people doing so. He therefore predicted the destruction for Israel (5:2; 7:7-9; 9:1-4, 8a). But did he predict a complete destruction of Israel? House adopts a different interpretation: that renewal takes precedence over punishment (9:11-15), that God would restore the people for David's sake (9:11; cf. 2 Sam 7:7-17), that he would give them Edom as a gift (:12), return them from exile (9:14), and plant them in the land permanently (9:15). "Renewal, restoration, and return will be the results, then of all these terrible events."¹³⁰ Because there is considerable argument among scholars of the Bible if Amos delivered the message in 9:8b-15 called the epilogue of hope,¹³¹ the passage is not discussed much further here. This commentator is however not necessarily rejecting the genuineness of the passage, he is only acknowledging the debate surrounding it.

¹²⁷ Agboluaje, "The Ministry of Amos in Israel and its Socio-Religious Implication," 181-183.

¹²⁸ Fredrick Nwabufo, "Hypocrisy of the Oppressed in Nigeria," *Vibe Ghana*, 13 December 2013, <http://vibeghana.com/2013/12/13/hypocrisy-of-the-oppressed-in-nigeria/>, accessed on 8 September 2014.

¹²⁹ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 263.

¹³⁰ House, "Amos and Literary Criticism," 182.

¹³¹ Clyde T. Francisco, "Teaching Amos in the Churches," *Review and Expositor* 63 (Fall 1966), 4:425.

From the study of Amos presented above, the following conclusions and recommendations are made:

1. The situations of the time of Amos and that of the contemporary Nigerian society are similar. Oppression of the poor and the righteous, immorality, rejection of divine messages, pretentious religiosity, corruption in business, and idolatry, mark the two situations.

2. Though judgment may appear to be slow, God will finally deal with those who abuse their privileges. This is a warning to the contemporary Nigerian society.

3. The religious should be sensitive to the voice of God in their situations. What others call natural calamities may in fact be the discipline of God to call human beings to repentance.

4. Threat of punishment should be used with caution in religion because of its unpredictable nature. This does not mean that threat should not be used at all since God himself allegedly used it in Amos. The love of God and the mutual benefits accruing from responsible living should be emphasized.

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