

## **An Overview of Corruption as Condemned by Prophet Amos**

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### **Abstract**

*In the Old Testament book of Amos, the basic message of prophet Amos stresses the divine demand for social justice and concern for the oppressed in Israel. Many among Israel's wealthy members of the society at the time of Amos chose to be unjust and treated the disadvantaged Israelite as they wished. The injustice behaviors like the rich oppressing the poor, selling Israelites to slavery, robbery of lands, rich being selfish and bribery in courts made some Israelites' bend on wealth and prosperity while being forgetful of the true worship of God. As justice was denied in Amos' time, so also it is being denied in contemporary Kenyan society. The paper examines some of the social injustices observable in Kenya such as: social economic injustice, social political injustice, social religious injustice and social judicial injustice. It is the conclusion of this paper that for a prosperous development in Kenyan society, Kenyans should learn to practice social justice as demanded in the book of Amos.*

**Keywords:** *Social justice, Injustice behaviour, True worship of God*

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### **1. Introduction**

The vocation of Amos is to go to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, to preach against the corruption of the religion, and to defend the poor from exploitation by the wealthy. With prosperity in Israel and Judah came numerous evils and a general decay of right values. The prophet thus comes as religious reformer to call a remnant of the people back to justice and righteousness before it was too late.

From the Book of Amos (1:1) it is clear that Amos came from Tekoa, a little town in the hill country of Judah about 18 km south of Jerusalem. Amos was a specialist in agriculture and a professional farmer. From the occupation of Amos is well explained that he planted and looked after sycamores, fruit trees which belong to the family of the mulberry tree which produce a fig-like fruit. His prophetic activity is the result of Yahweh's initiative and call. In fact, Amos is very clear when he says; "Yahweh took me away from herding the flock, and Yahweh said; Go prophecy to my people Israel" (7:15). He claims that his prophetic mission is subject to the authority of Yahweh alone. He says, he could not but speak, because God had spoken to him (3:7-8).

Amos lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II, who reigned Israel from about 786 to 746 B.C., and Uzziah, who reigned Judah from about 790 to 750 B.C. Because of sickness he was replaced by his son Jotham and died in 742 B.C. Under Jeroboam II Israel knew her best years of prosperity and peace. Assyria's power had waned but the kingdom of Damascus (Syria) had not yet recovered from an earlier defeat by Assyria and was at war with Hamath in the North. There

was peace with Judah and Jeroboam II used this situation for a vigorous policy of expansion to the East and the North. In fact, he re-established the Salomonic boundaries of the kingdom. Along with political success came prosperity and wealth for the ruling class and the rich but poverty and misery for the poor and ordinary people. Large and expensive houses were built, the temple cult flourished, but the poor were exploited and lived in misery (Gotthard, 2009). This paper therefore gives an overview of the Book of Amos and who was prophet Amos before exposing the corruption that Amos condemns in his society.

## **2. An Overview of Corruption as Condemned by Prophet Amos**

The paper provides an overview of evil deed condemned by prophet Amos. It also gives a brief message of Amos before addressing some of the social disorders in the Kenyan society supported by a few examples. The paper takes the following organization: a) Amos Condemnation of Corruption b) The message of Amos c) Corruption cases in Kenya.

### **2.1 Amos Condemnation of Corruption**

Beside Judah and Israel Amos mentions six neighboring nations which are responsible for terrible crimes and, therefore, will be punished by God. God is not only the God of Israel, but the God of all nations. Thus saith the LORD; for three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have threshed Gilead with threshing instruments of iron (1:3). The crimes mentioned are: War against other nations, torture with different methods, raids in order to capture men and women and to sell them as slaves, attacking innocent people and killing pregnant women, desecrating the tombs of enemy kings.

Amos says, Israel has failed to live up to its covenantal obligations especially in its treatment of the poor. Amos wants his hearers to see not to turn away, but to see that the poor are being crushed, oppressed and trampled (5:11) by their more powerful neighbors. According to Amos, the poor of the land are afflicted and vulnerable (8:4). Amos proclaims that the poor are innocent" or "blameless according to the Torah. In (2:6) Amos shows the extent of corruption in the Northern Kingdom: Thus saith the LORD; for three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes. It is such acts that the prophet is protesting. He is a voice for the oppressed that have done nothing to deserve the oppression that has been inflicted on them by their rich countrymen.

He also makes a distinction of the poor and the needy. Amos is against the status quo and the complacency that is expressed by those 'who have' and in power. Since the poor must borrow money at exorbitant rates in order to survive through poor harvests, they frequently fall into debt slavery and lose their family land. In (8:6) he highlights the systematic injustice of this debt

slavery, a way of "acquiring the poor," as if they were a commodity like any other. The image of the sandals (8:6) indicates that these transactions are recognized as legal. Nevertheless, legal does not equal just (Fred, 2008). When he sees how the rich are engaged in conspicuous consumption of material goods and an endless search for sensual pleasure he is outraged and also moved by compassion for the poor. Their farms and vineyards are dedicated to profitable luxury crops, while the basic needs of the poor are being ignored (8:5). Those at ease in Zion have both summer and winter houses (3:15). The furniture on which they sprawl in their drunken banquets is made of imported ivory (6:4). What they have accumulated has been gained through dishonesty or crooked, deceitful scales (8:6) he says.

In the city gate, he has seen how people shamelessly use their riches to undermine the judicial process: "Woe to those who change judgment into wormwood" (5:7). They are guilty of subverting justice through bribes (5:12). In 2:7 Amos exposes the sexual misconduct in the society. He says, and a man and his father will go in unto the same maid, to profane my holy name. The verse refers either to sacred prostitution exercised in the pagan temples or to slave girls who were sexually abused by father and son and used as concubines (Gotthard, 2009).

He condemns also formalism in Religion. The religion in Israel had become a state religion which celebrated the national optimism, the wealth and pride of the leaders and their preoccupation with themselves. They wanted to be seen, to boast and show off and adored themselves more than they adored God (4:4-5). They made gifts to the sanctuary coming from the money which they had taken unjustly from the poor (2:8) or gained through corruption of the courts (5:15). But through the prophet God says: „I hate and despise your feasts, I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals. When you offer me holocausts, I reject your oblation... Let me have no more of the din of your chanting, no more of your strumming on harps. But let justice flow like water and integrity like an unfailing stream (5:21-24). This part shows how God rejected their cult, because a personal relationship to him was missing and their religion was not put into practice by helping the poor and oppressed.

## **2.2 The Message of Amos**

Amos is grounded in Mosaic traditions that teach the depth of the Lord's compassion for the poor. The Lord upholds them and sustains them. He performs mighty deeds on their behalf. Through the message He gives to the prophets, the Lord also means to shake the conscience of the oppressors, to overturn their moral indifference. He censures their selfish ways and threatens them with appropriate forms of punishment. His aim, however, is not their destruction. His desire is that they might change their ways; that they might be restored to the covenantal relationship with Him; that they might walk in the ways of justice (Fred, 2008).

In present societies similar things as they did happen during the time of Amos. There still is a terrible gap between the rich and the poor. Some have built huge houses, whereas others live in the compounds. Corruption is found everywhere including the judicial institutions which should administer justice. The attitude of greed is growing, and a new culture of money emerges (Gotthard, 2009). It is this view that prophet Amos calls for repentance and equal justice to all.

### **2.3 Corruption Cases in Kenya**

Some of the contemporary issues in Kenya that can be compared with what Amos exposes in his book are related to corruption in the spheres of economy, politics and social governance, religious corruption and rejection of God in replaced by power and wealth.

Corruption as understood is the practice whereby some public money is illicitly diverted for private gain. This practice is present to some degree in all societies. Corruption has been identified as a major barrier to economic and social development in developing countries, and considerable research has been done into the causes of and the solutions to corruption in these countries. The wide spread corruption in developing countries has raised substantial concern. Developing countries, particular circumstances rapid economic and social change, strong kinship and ethnic ties, new institutions, overlapping and sometimes conflicting views about what is proper public behavior appear to contribute to corruption's saliency (Gould & Amaro-Reyes, 1983). However, it does not go without consequences. Mismanagement of economic affairs has contributed highly to economic and social poverty which affects the people in so many negative ways.

In countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, DRC, it has become a part of everyday life. Indeed, those who refused to cooperate with corrupt officials were barred from receiving government contracts. As a result, people found it necessary to bribe public officials in order to carry on business. To date corruption, is prominent in most of African nations, Kenya inclusive (Mbaku, 1996).

Just to mention a few cases; at the beginning of 2004, the government had granted a contract worth about \$41 million to an entity that did not exist. The Kenyan anticorruption authority proceeded to investigate the case. The Kenya anticorruption authority found that about \$1.3 million that had been paid out as a “commitment fee” by the Kenyan government (Githongo, 2007). Another case happened this year in May and June where Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission detected and stopped the flawed procurement involving Kshs 700 million by the Catering and Tourism Development Levy Trustees who wanted to build a hotel and training centre in Coast.

Nepotism is another evil that affects the people negatively. It is a term that is used to bring out a form of favoritism that involves family relationships. It occurs where by one decides to favor a relative to another person in terms of offering services, distribution of resources or even when administering jobs to people (Anti-Corruption Trust of Southern Africa, 2007). This form of corruption is mostly practiced by individual's country wide. These individual's who carry out these activities are sometimes referred to as the godfathers by those relatives that they favor with opportunities in life.

Cronyism as another form of corruption is where one offers favorable treatment to personal friends and associates in the distribution of resources, administration of jobs and positions without regarding their objective qualifications and professionalism. This form of corruption is one big problem that is leading to poor performances by companies, increase in the level of people who have the required documents and qualifications to work but have no place to work in since they have no "connection" (Anti-Corruption Trust of Southern Africa, 2007).

Extortion is another form of corruption an act whereby one unlawfully demands, receives property or money through the use of force or threat. It involves coercive incentives such as the use or threat of violence or exposing an individual through divulging damaging information in order to induce cooperation. This form of corruption is mostly carried out by the mean people in the society who harass other people by taking their properties with a threat that if they pursue it they may be taken to jail or their families may be harmed. Sometimes the peace keeping forces like the Kenya police extort money from innocent citizens who are afraid to exercise their rights and are afraid of being taken to jail (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2006).

Extortion is one practice that is carried out on daily basis by government and private individuals. Most of these individuals who carry out this exercise are people who are only filled with greed and they want to get successful without struggling themselves. Gotthard (2009) speaks of triumphalism, clericalism and formalism in the religion. He says, "Do we put in practice what we celebrate on Sundays?" This justifies many cases of oppression and misuse of position by religious leaders in the churches and religious communities.

### **3. Conclusion**

Amos calls for conversion in (5:14-15): Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live: and so the LORD, the God of hosts, shall be with you, as ye have spoken. Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.

The Book of Amos is (among other things) a teaching document, and what it teaches is justice. It speaks to us mainly through concrete images and story rather than through abstractions, because the goal of justice in Amos is the formation of a beloved community that is faithful to the Lord. From the cases presented it is clear that corruption in Kenya resembles the one in the times of Amos who were rich and influential. He was condemning corruption, oppression of the poor and so on evils that are also experienced in Kenya and many other corrupt countries. It is in this perspective that change and administration of justice must be sought for.

The paper therefore provides the following recommendations: a) Amos says, Israel has failed to live up to its covenantal obligations, especially in its treatment of the poor. Amos wants his hearers to see not to turn away, but to see that the poor are being crushed, oppressed and trampled (5:11) by their more powerful neighbors; b) Amos proclaims that the poor are innocent" or "blameless according to the Torah; c) When he sees how the rich are engaged in conspicuous consumption of material goods and an endless search for sensual pleasure he is outraged and also moved by compassion for the poor; d) Amos is grounded in Mosaic traditions that teach the depth of the Lord's compassion for the poor. He performs mighty deeds on their behalf. Through the message He gives to the prophets, the Lord also means to shake the conscience of the oppressors, to overturn their moral indifference e) The Lord censures their selfish ways and threatens them with appropriate forms of punishment. His aim however, is not their destruction but desire that they might change their ways; that they might be restored to the covenantal relationship with Him; that they might walk in the ways of justice.

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