




A Thematic and Literary Analysis of Amos 5:4-7, 10-15: Implications for Ghanaian Leaders

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ABSTRACT

This paper conducted a thematic and literary study of the book of Amos to ascertain how Amos' message should inform contemporary Christianity. The prophet ministered to pre-exilic Israelites who were about to be destroyed because they had abandoned their covenantal responsibilities. The rich trampled upon and exploited the poor and the weak. Amos' message was meant to call attention to the impending judgment and to give hope of future restoration. This paper used literary analysis to examine key themes in the book of Amos; including, Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh, Israel's sin, call to repentance, social justice and future restoration. The study also provides a useful model for contemporary Ghanaian leaders on God's expectations for governance and leadership responsibilities especially towards the vulnerable in the society.

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INTRODUCTION

The book of Amos is popular for its teachings on social justice, sin and repentance among others. The prophet ministered to pre-exilic Israelites who were about to experience divine judgment because of their faithlessness. The rich trampled upon and exploited the poor and the weak. Rich land owners confiscated the land belonging to the poor due to slavery or debt. The people were very religious but had no divinely-acceptable relationship with their neighbors. They thought their religiosity could please God even if they practiced evil. They equated their religious and economic prosperity and political stability to God's favor upon them. Elsewhere the authors have drawn remarkable similarities between Amos's eighth-century Israel and contemporary Ghana.¹ The political stability of Ghana, religious enthusiasm of Ghanaians, material prosperity of a few and the existence of social classes were identified as key areas in which Amos's society shows continuity with contemporary Ghana. The message of Amos, therefore, applies to Ghana and other parts of the world. The purpose of this paper is to examine key theological themes in the book of Amos; including, Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh, Israel's sin, call to repentance, social justice and future restoration. In this paper, the authors explore how the prophet developed his message and persuasively engaged his audience.

¹ Isaac Boaheng and Alfred Appiah, "A Study of the Background to the Book of Amos," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 3, no.9 (2022):372-381. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2022391>

Israel's Covenant Relationship with Yahweh

In Amos 3:1-2, the prophet refers to the Exodus and affirms Yahweh's unique relationship with Israel.² Yet, Amos believes such a relationship is not unconditional and does not give the Israelites immunity from Yahweh's punishment when they sin.³ As Amos argues, Yahweh's relationship with Israel comes with responsibilities. That is, Israel's election is not cheap, but exists for a purpose, and includes accountability and judgment. As Harold H. Rowley affirms, an election is for service.⁴ According to John Hayes, because Yahweh called Israel to this relationship, Yahweh is obliged to judge Israel.⁵ John Barton adds that "the nature of Yahweh is not to be Israel's helper but to be Israel's judge."⁶ But according to Amos, the Israelite leadership understand their relationship with Yahweh to be unbreakable and eternal, because Yahweh is the Yahweh of Israel. Therefore, Israel is the people of Yahweh; so, Yahweh will bless them and recuse them from judgment simply because they are the chosen people. Amos argues that Israel's faith in Yahweh's presence and blessings has provided them with a false sense of security and a skewed perspective on Yahweh's character. For Amos, however, the relationship is dependent on how Israel responds to both Yahweh and their covenant obligations. Special privileges require special responsibilities, and power is for service.⁷ Hence, those who wish to have and maintain a relationship with Yahweh and avoid Yahweh's wrath must live according to Yahweh's will and nature, showing love and compassion for others, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized, using their power for liberation and not subjugation.

Yahweh's love and compassion for the vulnerable were not only shown to the people of Israel, who were brought out from slavery and bondage in Egypt but to the "Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir" (3:2; 9:7). In the same way, Amos constantly underscores Yahweh's love and concern for the poor, needy, and underprivileged (5:10-13; 8:4). Erhard Gerstenberger claims that Yahweh's relationship with the weak and marginalized is universal because "everywhere in the ancient Near East, the socially weak have a particular relationship to the divinity..."⁸ Jeremiah Unterman affirms that the desire to protect the poor and weak from being exploited by the powerful and wealthy class is a common theme in ancient Near East literature, particularly in Egyptian literature, where the Yahwehs punish individuals who abuse and mistreat the poor.⁹

While the Jewish Bible expresses similar concerns for the poor and the weak as other cultures, Unterman contends that it is the first text to enact laws to protect the underprivileged in society. He avers "of particular significance are the laws providing food for the poor, including the needy resident alien. The ancient world was constantly under the threat of drought, food shortages....in such a world, the Jewish Bible is the first text to legislate food supplies for the poor."¹⁰ As a result, if the people of

² John Hayes believes that the term "to know" used in this context does not imply any reference to "special divine election, to the exodus, or to the giving of the land," nor does it imply any reference to "a covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh." This term doesn't mean that Israel has greater responsibilities than any other nation, but it does imply that Yahweh has had a special relationship with Israel that Yahweh hasn't had with anyone else; John H. Hayes, *Amos, The Eighth Century Prophet: His Time and His Preaching* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1988), 123.

³ John Barton, *The Theology of The Book of Amos* (New York Cambridge University Press, 2012), 71.

⁴ H.H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1950), 25.

⁵ Hayes, *Amos*, 123..

⁶ Barton, *The Theology of The Book of Amos*, 103.

⁷ Roy L. Honeycutt, *Amos and His Message: An Expository Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press 1963), 61-62; Barton, *The Theology of The Book of Amos*, 103.

⁸ E. Gerstenberger, "אֲדָמָה", in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 1:18.

⁹ Jeremiah Unterman, "Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics." The Jewish Publication Society, 2017, 83. Charles Fensham agrees with Jeremiah Unterman when he writes, "the protection of widow, orphan, and the poor was the common policy of the ancient Near East." F. Charles Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 2 (1962): 129. S.J Lohfink also argues that although reality was often cruel, caring for the destitute had a higher profile in ethical consciousness in Egypt, Mesopotamia, among the Hittites, and among the Canaanites than in our contemporary societies."; S.J. Lohfink, Norbert, "Poverty in the Laws of the Ancient Near East and of the Bible," *Theological Studies* 52, no. (1991): 34.

¹⁰ Unterman, "Justice for All," 83.

Israel wish to walk with Yahweh in a relationship, they must be concerned about that which Yahweh is concerned—the poor and the vulnerable—mainly because Israel was once weak in Egypt. Regardless of Israel and Yahweh's relationship, Israel will be judged when it sins, just as any other nation would be; after all, Israel is the only nation that received Yahweh's commandments according to Exodus 20-22, so, Israel must know better. The obligations associated with Yahweh's election are many, and failure to meet these obligations will result in severe consequences.¹¹ The irony is that Israel has recognized and accepted the benefits and blessings from its relationship with Yahweh. But they have fallen short of meeting the demands and fulfilling their responsibilities to the same.

To have a relationship with Yahweh means to live according to Yahweh's expectations (3:3). Amos's concern was that the people of Israel had violated their relationship with Yahweh because Israelite elites were trampling on the poor, due to systemic injustice. Therefore, Yahweh will dismantle Israelite systems of power so that they will not continue to perpetuate this state of violence, just as Yahweh will dismantle the kingdoms surrounding Israel to stop their perpetration of war crimes (chs 1-2). Amos addressed the rich, the kings, the counsellors, the royal prophets, who are perpetrating crimes against their own people, as they also have the power to change the systems that are oppressing the populace. This affirms why Amaziah, the high priest of the royal chapel of Bethel, and Jeroboam, the king of Israel, both interpreted Amos's prophecies as treasonous speech that was punishable by execution (7:7-9). The prophet Amos could not bear what he saw; Israel elites were about to experience the fatal effects of its sins. After a series of warnings and failure to heed Amos's appeals in chapter 4, Amos gave them a final call back to their covenant obligations (5:4-6, 14-15). They ended up as captives in foreign lands and the results of their actions are recorded accordingly in the Bible.

Israel's Sin

It is possible to summarize the Israelite elite's many and great sins in 5:7, 10-13 by reciting the litany of condemnations against them.¹² First and foremost, they are accused of perverting the course of justice and oppressing the poor (5:7, 10-12). Among Amos's concerns is that human personhood cannot be abused or ignored without repercussions. The poor were subjected to injustice; the rich took advantage of their vulnerabilities to enrich themselves and seize control of their property through the corruption of the court system (5:7, 10-12). Shalom Paul contends that the poor were "bullied and oppressed by the wealthy, who deprive and block them from obtaining the privileges and prerogatives to which they are naturally entitled."¹³ The prophet characterizes and identifies those he accuses of being offenders. Though the wrongdoers remain anonymous, it is reasonable to presume that Amos is referring to the ruling elites and the upper class in Samaria who turn and "abhor the one who speaks the truth (5:10)," "trample on the poor, (5:11)," "afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground (5:7; 6:12) the gate (5:12)." Thus, an abdication of justice and righteousness are at the core of Israel's sin and abuse.¹⁴ It is important to note that Israel is not condemned because of its idolatry or sin against Yahweh; instead, the Israelites are charged because of the atrocities committed against their fellow humans.¹⁵

Justice and righteousness are the central themes in the book of Amos and are used in parallel by Amos in v.7 and elsewhere (5:24; 6:12), as well as frequently throughout the Hebrew Bible.¹⁶ The word משפט has a wide range of meanings, all of which are connected to the contemporary idea of law

¹¹ William L. Coastes, Jr., "On Walking with Yahweh," Amos 3, in *Interpreting Amos for Preaching and Teaching*, ed. Cecil P. Staton, Jr. (Smyth & Helwys Publishing: Macon, Georgia, 1995), 45-47.

¹² Edmon L. Rowell, Jr., *You Did It to/for Me: Amos 5:1-17 in Interpreting Amos for Preaching and Teaching*, ed by Cecil P. Station, Jr. (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. Macon, Georgia, 1995), 71.

¹³ Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 81.

¹⁴ M. Daniel Carroll R, "Seeking the Virtues among the Prophets: The Book of Amos as a Test Case." *Ex Auditu* 17 (2001): 88.

¹⁵ Rowel, Jr., *You Did It to/for Me*, 71

¹⁶ Gen. 18:19; 2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Kings 10:9; 1 Chron. 18:14; 2 Chron 9:8; Isa. 1:21; 5:7; 9:7; 28:17; Jer. 22:15; Ps. 72:1-2; 89:14; 119:121; Prov. 1:3; 2:9; 8:20; 16:8; 21:3; Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 245; Hayes, *Amos*, 161

and justice.¹⁷ Derived from the verb *שפט*, which means to judge or govern (Gen. 16:5; 18:26; 19:9; Exod 18:13, 22; Isaiah 33:22),¹⁸ *משפט* is translated as "justice" in the New Revised Standard Version but it sometimes refers to "jurisdiction, judgment, judicial case, verdict, regulation, custom, and judiciousness."¹⁹ In Israel's tradition, the *שפט*, or judge, was a person who arbitrated disputes and rendered legal decisions (Exod 18:16; Deut 25:1). Deuteronomy 1:17 uses the word in the sense of a legal determination. Yahweh's legal case against the princes and elders of Israel is described in Isaiah 3:14 by the word *משפט*. Yahweh's universal judgeship was founded on Yahweh's creation of the world and the establishment of equity and justice (Ps 99:1-4). Even though there are many different interpretations of this term, when used in a legal context, it refers to the action of a person acting in the capacity of a judge.²⁰ James Mays agrees that *משפט* refers to the judicial process of determining what is right and who is right in a case before the court and then presenting that opinion as to the court's final judgment.²¹

Yahweh is described as the Yahweh of justice in Deuteronomy 32:4 and Isaiah 30:18, the Yahweh who demands and exemplifies moral rightness in the lives of his people. Psalm 106:3 describes justice as the requirement for Yahweh's blessings for those who observe it. Thus, justice is centered on the highest values associated with an upright relationship with Yahweh and others.²² The prophet Micah upholds justice as a major requirement for pleasing Yahweh (6:8). Again, in the Hebrew Bible, justice is sometimes equated with fairness (Deut.16-19-20; Lev.19-15) and may refer to how one treats others. Deuteronomy 16:19-20 particularly warns against perverting justice, partiality, and bribery. Like Amos, Isaiah demonstrates Yahweh's concern for the poor and recognizes that exploitation of the poor leads to judgment (Isa 10:1-3a). Again, the Psalms demonstrate Yahweh's particular concern for the poor, particularly widows, fatherless children, and oppressed people (Ps 10:17-18; 82:1-8; cf. 109:16), who call to Yahweh for their salvation. Several texts in the Hebrew Bible likewise connect justice and the correct treatment of the defenseless (Deut. 10:17–18; Jer. 7:5–7; Isa. 1:17). Therefore, justice does not only imply equality and impartiality before the law, irrespective of social status²³ but, "justice is an authoritative rule that shows a person or a group of persons how they carry out a particular task or how to act in a particular situation."²⁴

The Hebrew word *קדקד/קדקד* has a variety of meanings, translated by the RSV as "acquittal, deliverance, honest evidence (Prov 12:17), integrity (Job 31:6) ...vindication."²⁵ A. Jepsen is one of the scholars who distinguishes between *קדקד* and *קדקד*. He argues that *קדקד* is related to "right order; it is concerned with a situation that in fact is as it ought or must be." That is, *קדקד* is "an action directed towards the right order of the community and accordingly to its well-being." On the other hand, he defines *קדקד* as the "used of human well-being or right behavior; it is that which puts one in order

¹⁷ Robert Culver, "משפט", in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 948-9; Peter Enns, "משפט" in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997), 1142. Justice was also a notion and a practice in the ancient Near East. It was usually represented in royal rhetoric by the phrases *kittu* and *misarū*. Which means "firm and reliable" and straightened respectively; Choon-Leong Seow, "Justice." Vol. 14 (*Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, Berlin. Boston, De Gruyter, 2009), 1084-1088.

¹⁸ Seow, "Justice," 1084.

¹⁹ Seow, "Justice," 1078-1080.

²⁰ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (eds.) *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford University Press), 1047–1048.

²¹ James L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 192.

²² Harold V. Bennett, "Justice, OT [משפט]," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, Insert Year), 476.

²³ G. Ernest Wright, "Exegesis: The Book of Deuteronomy," in *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York-Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), Vol. 2, 436.

²⁴ Bennett, "Justice, OT [משפט]," 476.

²⁵ J.J. Scullion, "Righteousness," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 5, Edited by D. N. Freedman. (New York, Doubleday, 1992) 724.

before Yahweh.”²⁶ Other scholars, see “no essential difference between the two and treat them without distinction.”²⁷ The root צדקה translated as “righteousness” when used in the Hebrew Bible, denotes a covenantal relationship between two parties where both parties are engaged actively. Mays contends that צדקה is “the quality of life displayed by those who live up to the norms inherent in a given relationship and thereby do right by the other person or persons involved.”²⁸ As a relational term, צדקה is concerned with the relationship between Yahweh and Israel as defined by the covenant and how humanity relates to society.²⁹ Thus, Birch argues that justice flows out of righteousness supporting Amos’s claim that “justice is the fruit of righteousness” (6:12). He concludes that believers can seek to fulfill their obligation to righteousness in relationships with neighbors, communities, and nations by doing justice.³⁰

The pair צדקה / משפט have comparable implications in the Hebrew Bible when put together. Moshe Weinfeld has suggested that combining the two words justice and righteousness was intended to serve a specific purpose, that is, to indicate the concept of social justice.³¹ He writes, “the concept of social justice was expressed in ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East by means of a *hendiadys*. The most common word-pair to serve this function in the Bible is משפט וצדקה.”³² The prophets measured Israel’s faithfulness and held them accountable to משפט וצדקה because their fulfillment was the foundation of Israel’s existence.³³ Mays relates Amos’s use of משפט to the judicial proceedings at the city gate and establishes that וצדקה is inherent in the given relationship between Yahweh and Israel. Weinfeld argues further that the concept of משפט וצדקה in the prophetic literature is not limited to judicial proceedings and processes. Instead, the term is associated primarily with the improvement of the conditions of the poor.³⁴ Therefore, when Amos uses משפט וצדקה, he is not only referring to the proper execution of justice but the expression of “social justice and equity that is bound in love, kindness, and mercy for the poor and vulnerable.”³⁵ While Daniel Carrol R. recognizes the richness and complexity of משפט וצדקה in the prophetic literature, he affirms that Amos’s use of these terms relates to both legal matters and moral principles.³⁶ Wolff, similarly, associates Amos’s use of משפט וצדקה with the “proper functioning of judicial procedures” and the proper order of society. Thus, Amos’s complaint is against the rich for subverting the proper order of the society willed by Yahweh. As Mark Arnold avers, “. . . rather than order, the actions of the rich had brought bitterness and chaos,”³⁷ and the will of Yahweh had been undermined (v. 7). The point is that Yahweh is very much concerned about righteousness as what is due to Yahweh and the welfare of others without neglecting the

²⁶ A. Jepsen, ‘sdq und sdqh im AT’, in *Gottes Wort und Gottes Land*, ed. Reventloh, H. G. (München, 1965), 78–79. H.H. Schmid agrees with Jepsen and affirms that sdq concerns proper order, sdqh means the proper order of the world, willed by Yahweh, which brings prosperity, sdqh its appropriate, proper, prosperous state.”; Schmid cited by Scullion, “Righteousness,” 725.

²⁷ Scullion, “Righteousness,” 725.

²⁸ Mays, *Amos*, 93.

²⁹ Mays, *Amos*, 93; Bruce C. Birch, *Hosea, Joel and Amos* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Pres, 1997), 216.

³⁰ Birch, *Hosea, Joel and Amos*, 216.

³¹ Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995), 29.

³² Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, 25.

³³ Weinfeld explains that Yahweh’s mission to Israel was to do “Justice and Righteousness” which was first communicated to Abraham in Gen. 18:19, and on that mission Israel was judged, Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, 7; Seow, “Justice,” 1086.

³⁴ Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, 25.

³⁵ Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress Publishing, 1977), 245; Hayes, *Amos*, 161.

³⁶ M. Daniel Carroll R, “Seek Yahweh, Establish Justice: Probing Prophetic Ethics. An Orientation from Amos 5:1-17,” in *The Bible and Social Justice*, ed. Cynthia Long Westfall & Bryan R. Dryer (Eugene, Oregon PICKWICK Pub., 2015), 64-80.

³⁷ Mark D Arnold, “The Ethics of Amos in Light of Its Ancient Near Eastern Context” (2012). MSU Graduate Theses, 136 <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses/1>

fulfillment of the moral demands of the law.³⁸ Accordingly, Yahweh's law requires and outlines what constitutes just behavior; the law requires impartiality and honesty, special attention to the poor, widows, orphans, and the vulnerable in the society (Deut 24:17) –something Israel has failed to observe.

The prophet's concern about the legal system's lack of justice becomes evident in v. 10. The expression used in v. 10 indicates that the judicial system has been compromised to suit the whims and caprices of the ruling elites. They "hate the one who reproves in the gate," In ancient times, the city's gate served as the nation's official courthouse where justice was to be served equally for all people in the city.³⁹ The advocate of justice, also known as the one who "reproves in the gate," was anyone who spoke the truth or rebuked wrongdoing (Isa 29:21; Job 9:33; 32:12). The integrity of judges in speaking the truth and preserving justice was critical to the court's competence. The prohibition in Exodus 20:16 against bearing false witness affirms how the court should be guided. To despise those who stand up for what is right and hate those who speak the truth would put the entire judicial system at risk. Mays suggests that royal administrators and people in power corrupted the courthouse and gained control over people's social lives.⁴⁰ Essentially, the courts became a place for enslaving the poor and stealing their possessions, land, and produce from them. The court system, which was supposed to protect the rights of the vulnerable, had been transformed into a place of abuse, corruption, oppression, and injustice.

The evidence of injustice was palpable; the poor were abused and oppressed. Here, the anonymous wrongdoers are identified (v. 11).⁴¹ Amos accuses the ruling elites of "trampling on the poor"⁴² and taking "from them levies of grain (v. 11)." The prophet indicts the wealthy for stealing from the poor to enrich themselves. Consequently, the rich used the profits taken from the sweat of the poor to construct houses of hewn stone and established lavish vineyards in the fields they had taken from the poor farmers.⁴³ Additionally, Amos compares the wealthy's economic and legal misdeeds to acts of rebellion and crime against Yahweh— transgressions which Amos says are in the full knowledge of Yahweh (v. 12). The wealthy, according to Amos, are guilty of three specific sins—they "afflict the righteous," "take a bribe," and "push aside the needy in the gate." The law forbids the payment and receiving of bribes (See Exod 23:6–8; Deut 16:18–20). However, the word כֶּסֶף, translated as "bribe," means the price of a life or ransom. Thus, Amos is accusing the wealthy of not only bribing the court system and turning away those who seek justice but also of selling the poor into debt slavery and for a ransom (Ch 2:6-8).⁴⁴

³⁸ Birch, *Hosea, Joel and Amos*, 221.

³⁹ Mays, *Amos*, 93

⁴⁰ Mays, *Amos*, 94, According to Wolff "the one who reproves" is the one who renders judgment and the "one who speaks the truth" in a case is referred to as the witness; Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 241-49; Paul, *Amos*, 167.

⁴¹ Although Amos identifies the wealthy as the wrongdoers, he does not specify whether or not these wealthy individuals are members of the royal establishment, Jeroboam's royalty or leaders of the anti-Jeroboam organization. According to Hayes, the latter is the most likely scenario; Hayes, *Amos*, 164.

⁴² The verb "to trample" according to Hayes, comes from an Akkadian term *shabasu* that refers to the imposition of levies, or a grain tax; Hayes, *Amos*, 164; Paul, *Amos*, 172-3.

⁴³ Mays, *Amos*, 94-95. In his thesis, Arnold argues that Vineyards and stone houses imply permanence. Stating that the wealthy believed they were building for their descendants as well as themselves. Thus, the wealthy seemed unaware that their actions were preventing peasant farmers from passing their land on to their children. For the wealthy, land represented wealth and status; for the poor, it represented life. Land ownership gave peasants hope of adequately providing for their families. Arnold, for further discussion on land ownership; J. Andrew Dearman, "Property Rights in the Eighth Century Prophets: The Conflict and its Background," *Dissertation series / Society of Biblical Literature* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 77.

⁴⁴ In Ch 2:6-8 Anderson and Freedman resolve that the righteous are exchanged for a small penny and some sold into debt slavery, Francis I. Andersen, and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 310-313. Wolff takes this claim further and states that the elite few sold humans to pay off creditors seeking monetary payment for silver owing to them, or, as a substitute for other payment for things such as pair of sandals, Wolff, *Amos*, 165. Paul, however, argues differently, and states that the wealthy sold the needy out because poor were considered less human and no profitable value. Thus, Israel treated their own without pity and dehumanized the needy for their personal gains. Paul, *Amos*, 77.

The notion of justice and righteousness in the ancient Near East was to protect the impoverished and restore the individual who has experienced deprivation or damage to the position in which they ought to be.⁴⁵ The protection of widows, orphans, and the poor, according to Charles Fensham, was crucial to the proper functioning of the ancient Near East society.⁴⁶ As the stability of the cosmos depends on divine justice (Ps 75:4), the stability of every nation and land also depends on its kings and leaders (Prov 29:4). Therefore, in the ancient Near Eastern society, it was the duty of the royal authority (kings) to ensure that justice prevailed in the society by enacting social reforms that sought to protect the poor and bring order to the society. Some of the reforms undertaken by the kings and heads of states to achieve social justice and protect the poor in society include the liberation of enslaved people, the restitution of land to its primary owners, and the cancellation of debts.⁴⁷ In that regard, Yahweh calls the rulers of the earth, including the kings of Judah, and Israel to do justice and establish righteousness (Jer 21:12; 22:3). Consequently, Amos's cry for justice and righteousness is to protect and correct the situation of the widows, strangers, orphans, and other vulnerable groups in Israel. It can be said that some individuals, particularly the nobles, may have abused the poor for their selfish interests; it is, therefore, the responsibility of the king to ensure that this does not happen. Amos believes that the leaders and the upper class of Israel have not done enough to protect the poor but have used their power to oppress and take advantage of them. His accusations in 2:6-8 and 5:10-13 show that the upper class and the royal leadership cannot be excused from blame but must take full responsibility for their actions. They cannot escape Yahweh's judgment unless they repent.

The Call to Repentance

The message of the prophet Amos is clear: If Israel abandons its ethical obligations to care for the vulnerable, then Yahweh will dismantle the leadership and the structures by which it organizes and exercises its power. According to Amos 1-2, Yahweh judges the nations surrounding Israel for their abuses of vulnerable people (cf. 1:6; 9; 11; 13) and the desecration of human remains (2:1). Israel is no exception: while the foreign nations are judged for the perpetration of war crimes against the vulnerable among the civilian population, Israel is condemned for abusing, enslaving, and brutalizing their own people (2:6-7). This, according to Amos, is an offense not only against the vulnerable: it is an offense against Yahweh, as well (2:6, 11-16). For Amos, an oppressive lifestyle cannot be perpetrated by the Israelite leadership with impunity because Yahweh gives power to humankind for responsibility and service, not as an opportunity for self-fulfillment and exploitation.⁴⁸ Accordingly, Israel cannot escape Yahweh's judgment because it has misused its power against the righteous, the poor, and the needy by perverting justice and oppressing them—a theme that recurs throughout the entire book (2:6-8; 5:7, 10-12). Therefore, Israel has fallen, its doom has been decided, an impending disaster awaits it (3:11, 14-15), its funeral dirge has been written (5:2-3; 6:9-10), and nothing will save it, unless Israel repents, returns to Yahweh, and change its ways (5:4-6, 14-15). Chapter 5 of the book of Amos is constructed to show the possibility of potential pivot from judgment to hope. Shalom Paul upholds that, although impending destruction awaits the Israelites, their judgment is yet to be signed.⁴⁹ Hence, Israel has the chance to turn to life for one last time, and its fate is in its own hands. Amos, therefore, passionately exhorts and calls Israel to repentance to avoid the imminent punishment. (5:4-6, 14-15).

⁴⁵ K.D. Irani, "The Idea of Social Justice in the Ancient World," in *Social Justice in the Ancient World*, ed. K.D Irani and Morris Silver (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995), 3

⁴⁶ F. Charles Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21 (2), (1962):129

⁴⁷ Weinfield, *Social Justice in the Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* 9, 75-96; Hayes, *Amos*, 161.

⁴⁸ Honeycutt, *Amos and His Message* 93.

⁴⁹ Paul, *Amos*, 161

Social Justice and Future Restoration

The glimmers of hope and the possibility of avoiding the impending doom are fundamental to Amos's message in Chapter 5. After all, why should Amos preach if there is no hope for reforms and no way to avoid disaster and Yahweh's wrath? Yahweh does not wish for Israel to perish. Even when Yahweh's wrath is at its peak, even when Yahweh is wreaking havoc, Yahweh's heart aches for his people, and Yahweh longs desperately to save them. So, for the first time, Amos offers an alternative and calls Israel to repent and change their ways by seeking Yahweh, or else they will perish. Amos believes there is a chance for survival if Israel 'seeks' Yahweh. Chapter 5 is the only chapter in the book of Amos in which the prophet explicitly calls Israel to return to Yahweh and promises them salvation. In the words of Amos, Yahweh's decision is subject to change, but that change is conditional and contingent on the people's return.⁵⁰ That is, Yahweh's salvation is not unconditional but is achieved through appropriate reforms that break the existing political, religious, and social-economic structures that oppress and bring injustice to many people. Consequently, repentance can overturn destruction and the death penalty for both the individual and the nation.

There are two sub-verses in Chapter 5—verses 4-6 and 14-15—that capture the call for repentance. The former begins with the messengers' formula and continues with an exhortation, "seek Yahweh," while the latter begins with "seek good." These two statements, "seek Yahweh," and "seek good," are the primary purpose of Amos in addressing his audience.⁵¹ Verse 4 begins with a divine speech that offers Israel the only way to live, but with a prohibition of pilgrimages to the cultic centers and a warning of their impending destruction (4-5). To the people of Israel, 'seeking Yahweh' is associated with going to the sanctuary where Yahweh's presence is found, and where the priest pronounces Yahweh's blessings of life to Yahweh's people (Deut 30). The phrase "seek Yahweh" has a cultic connotation and may refer to Yahweh's worship in the sanctuary (see Deut 12:5; Ps 34:5, 11). It may also refer to making inquiries concerning the will of Yahweh by consulting oracles (see also Gen 25:22; 1 Kgs 22:5). Mays supports this when he writes that "it was in the sanctuary as the sphere of the divine presence that life was available and was bestowed on the pilgrims who came there to seek Yahweh."⁵²

The audience of Amos's message probably thought they were seeking Yahweh all the while; they went to the sanctuary, prayed to Yahweh, offered sacrifices as the law required, and sought the face of Yahweh in the hopes of receiving blessings and protection. They were worshipping Yahweh at the cultic centers where their forefathers had worshiped in ancient times and believed their pilgrimage was analogous to that of seeking Yahweh (2Kgs 14:16; 17:24-28 Amos 4:4; 8:14). Indeed, the Israelites would have been shocked by Amos's oracle of the prohibition against the traditional shrines. They would have thought it was "a total absurdity and paradox to declare that the centrality of the sanctuary and all its rites and ceremonies were odious to the Deity."⁵³ The pilgrimage to the sanctuaries had become an end in itself, rather than a means for drawing near to Yahweh, who is the source of life and death.⁵⁴ Their pilgrimage to the shrines and elaborate sacrifices were for their self-gratification, separating worship from daily life. The priests at the sanctuary offered the way towards cheap grace to worshipers without telling them what Yahweh's will was.⁵⁵ The people of Israel only became accustomed to the traditions and rituals of the past, and all they thought was that Yahweh could be identified and worshiped through rituals and sacrifices. Although the authors do not deny that traditions and rituals are part of worship, the significance of Amos's call to seek Yahweh and not the shrines is clear: life is only found in Yahweh and not through sacrificial worship and pilgrimage.

According to Donald Gowan, Amos's exhortation to "seek Yahweh" and the prohibition against the northern shrines were intended to encourage pilgrimage to Jerusalem for worship instead. He

⁵⁰ Paul, *Amos*, 162

⁵¹ Marvin Alan Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2000), 234.

⁵² Mays, *Amos*, 87.

⁵³ Paul, *Amos*, 164; Mays, *Amos*, 88.

⁵⁴ Larry J. Rector, "Israel's Rejected Worship: An Exegesis of Amos 5." *Restoration Quarterly*, 21 (3), (1978): 161–75.

⁵⁵ Mays, *Amos*, 87.

argues that Amos advocated for Jerusalem as a substitute to Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba because he was a southern prophet when he claimed that Amos admonished his hearers to pay attention to Yahweh's oracles and to offer sacrificial gifts to Yahweh, "preferably in Jerusalem."⁵⁶ However, the text does not say, 'seek me in Jerusalem,' nor suggest that Yahweh desired a replacement cultic center in Jerusalem. Hayes observes that Amos's exhortations "are not a condemnation of certain sanctuaries and, by implication, an advocacy of Jerusalem as the only legitimate place of worship."⁵⁷ Instead, Amos's call is to elevate morality over piety, therefore, the demand of Amos in this exhortation is for the people of Israel to seek Yahweh directly instead of the cultic centers. The prophet repeatedly stated that the Yahweh of Israel is not primarily concerned with or approached through sacrifices and cultic rituals (5:21-24). Yahweh can only be approached from the right and humble heart that is not self-seeking but faithful to Yahweh and others regardless of social class or circumstance.

The verb translated as "seek" is *דרש* in Hebrew, which means to care about, inquire (of), consult, seek, require (of), study, investigate, examine, and ask.⁵⁸ Since the verb is followed by another imperative, "live," [חיה] Amos used the verb with urgency and a call to action; it is the last hope in the midst of Judgment because those who ignore this summon will be punished. Mays contends that the verb *דרש*, as used by Amos, "does not mean 'inquire about' or search for something or someone lost or inaccessible." Instead, when Yahweh is the object of the verb "seek," it means "turn to Yahweh" for help in a specific situation, and then by extension "hold to Yahweh" as the way of life.⁵⁹ Thus, humans find life only when they seek Yahweh. Amos emphasized the urgency of repentance as the only hope of survival in v. 6 by repeating the exhortation in v. 4b. However, this time, the prohibition of the shrines and the announcement of judgment come with the threat of destruction.

Amos explains what "seek Yahweh" is not in v. 4, 6, but offers answers to what it is in v. 14-15; to "seek Yahweh" is to "seek good and avoid evil" (v. 14a). In fact, it is to "hate evil and love good" (v. 15a). In verses 14 and 15, the focus of Israel on seeking Yahweh through the cultic centers has been replaced by ethical and social admonitions because Yahweh cannot be found at the sanctuaries but through justice. Won Lee suggests that Amos's shift explains his concerns about the disconnection between religion and morality in Israel and does not suggest the prophet is anti-cult.⁶⁰ To do good in the eyes of Yahweh entails abiding by the covenant's regulations and fulfilling its social obligations to enjoy the fullness of Yahweh's bounty and protection; disobedience results in the covenant's curses (Hos 8:1-3; Mic 6:8; cf Deut 4:39f.; 6:17-19; 12-28). Amos accused the Israelites of their willful turning away from Yahweh's covenantal and ethical requirements (7, 10-13). Nevertheless, the prophet gives the people of Israel an opportunity to reaffirm their commitments to their covenantal obligations.

Amos clarifies Yahweh's requirements for survival; "seek Yahweh" by doing good by restoring the judicial system through the establishment of "justice in the gate" (v. 15a). Thus, Amos affirms what the prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 1:17; "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphans, plead for the widow." Amos believes that 'love good' is communal because it is an integral and inseparable part of society's legal, social, and economic structures. For Amos, the love of good is the equitable distribution and provision of life's necessities in "the context

⁵⁶ Donald E. Gowan, "The Book of Amos: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 156.

⁵⁷ Hayes, *Amos*, 123; Mays however argues that Amos call is a prohibition against the current shrine, and his emphasis is seeking Yahweh in the right way as stated in v.14-15. Mays, *Amos*, 89.

⁵⁸ David Denninger, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis (NIDOTTE)*, ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 993. The synonym of the word *דרש* is *בקש*. The verb occurs 225 times in the Old Testament (222x in Piel stem and 3x in Pual stem [Esth. 2:23; Jer 50:20; Ezek 26:21]). There is no attestation of this verb in Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Habakkuk, and Haggai. This verb occurs one time in the book of Amos (Amos 8:12). In Piel stem it means "seek, find, look for (an object)." When the verb appears in Pual stem it means "be sought (for), be searched, be examined." Chitra Chetri, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis (NIDOTTE)*, ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 720-1.

⁵⁹ Mays, *Amos*, 89.

⁶⁰ Won Lee, "The Structure of Amos 5:1-17: Reconsidered." *Canon & Culture*, 13 (1), (2019),73.

of that moral, covenant community, which Israel was called to be."⁶¹ To hate evil—the opposite to 'love good'—is to eschew all the social, political, and economic structures that intimidate innocent people at the gate and rob them, take advantage of the powerless through unjust taxation, and the perversion of justice through bribery (vv. 10-13). To love good or love evil respectively is a decision to stand for or against Yahweh that invokes Yahweh's blessing or judgment.⁶² Amos appeals to the Israelites to choose the former as a condition for their survival (Deut 30:19). He cautions them that Yahweh requires the moral quality of their life, not participation in extravagant rituals and pilgrimages that have no effect on their human relations.

The prophetic promise for repentance concludes with a conditional hope for salvation. Forgiveness is not certain unless the people obey the prophetic exhortation and repent, and even when they do, the final decision is in the hands of Yahweh alone. As Paul puts it: "Repentance in and of itself is a sine qua non, but it does not operate absolutely or automatically. It cannot be resorted to as a magic device or opted for as a guarantee to change the will of Yahweh. Complete certainty of its acceptance or rejection is never really known, for the final decision is always reserved for Yahweh alone."⁶³ Israel's actions cannot compel Yahweh to favor Israel. Amos's conditional promise shows that even though Israel may seek to repent, Yahweh decides who Yahweh shows favor and mercy to because "salvation is conditional upon Yahweh's will."⁶⁴ Yet, the phrase, "the Yahweh of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph" (v. 15b) confirms that Yahweh does not give up on Yahweh's covenant people. Even in the face of judgment, Yahweh's mercy, love, and power for life still abound to all who seek it.

Implications for Ghanaian Leaders

The authors believe that political and religious leaders in Ghana must pay attention to Amos's message of repentance and care for the poor and vulnerable. If politicians, heads of government agencies, the judiciary, the security services, and the Church follow Amos's call to nip injustice and economic exploitation (5:7), Yahweh will favor and bless the nation. Ghanaian Christians and political and traditional leaders are encouraged by Amos's message to consider economic injustice to be sinful and repent from it.

If societal leaders were to repent and lead according to Yahweh's principles—justice and righteousness—they would put in place policies to ensure the equitable distribution of resources in society, thereby closing the gap in income and wealth distribution between the rich and the poor. Bribery, corruption, misappropriation and mismanagement of state funds must be checked and the national cake must be shared fairly.

Amos's message requires the Church to use her prophetic voices in seeking justice for the poor, widow, children, and the weak in society. The prophet's message also calls on political leaders to be accountable to the people, providing the social amenities and infrastructures that will better the lives of the indigenous, including those in the deprived villages of the country, instead of enriching themselves with national resources at the expense of the masses.

Traditional leaders are also expected to rule with justice and godliness. They must acknowledge the fact that Yahweh is the ultimate source of power; therefore, whoever rules, rules on behalf of the Creator of the universe. Given this understanding, their leadership must bring peace and prosperity to the people both in the physical and spiritual dimensions. The chieftaincy institution has the potential of giving a glimpse of what the kingdom of God is. Therefore, abuses and misuse of power, which sometimes characterize this institution, must be checked.

⁶¹Carroll , "Seeking the Virtues among the Prophets: The Book of Amos as a Test Case.", 87; John Hayes defines Amos use of 'good' not as "some ethical or moral idea but rather a political matter, Hayes, *Amos*, 166.

⁶² Mays, *Amos*, 100.

⁶³ Paul, *Amos*, 178.

⁶⁴ Paul, *Amos*, 178; Won Lee, "The Structure of Amos 5:1-17: Reconsidered." 74.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the authors addressed Amos' message to Israel, a nation misled by prosperity and wealth. The prophet criticized Israel's disregard for the poor and vulnerable members of society. Amos condemns Israel for their transgressions and warns them that God's judgment is near unless they repent. He identifies the ruling elites as wrongdoers and calls for their repentance. Again, Amos admonished the leaders of Israel to be accountable and responsible for the needs of the marginalized people. He reminds them that true worship is not sought in elaborate sacrifices but in love and care for one another. The message of Amos is relevant to contemporary Ghanaian society because it provides a valuable tool for policymakers (politician and traditional leaders) and the Church in pursuing national transformation, equity, and development.

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