



**Research Paper**

## **The Timeless Nature of Amos' Prophecy in Ancient Israel.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The prophecy of Amos in the bible had been adjudged as timeless by scholars of biblical studies for so many cogent reasons. This is because the prophetic prediction not only spoke to its immediacy but its very relevant messages aptly captured contemporary challenges and present lopsided religious, political and economic arrangements. Amos of Tekoa prophesied during the era of economic boom and orchestrated religious festivities with very little spiritual impact. Thus this paper explored the personality of the prophet, prophetic word, setting and the contemporary situation. The paper harps on the societal semblance of the prophet's time and the present day realities steeped in lopsided economic position, despicable violence, bizarre corruption and largely compromised judiciary in most countries of the world.*

*Received 04 October, 2021; Revised: 16 October, 2021; Accepted 18 October, 2021 © The author(s) 2021. Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)*

### **I. INTRODUCTION :**

Prophecy as a phenomenon exists in almost all religions. It involves a kind of mediumship which man seeks to explore and interpret the mind of the divine. In Hebrew religion, prophecy forms a large part of its sacred scriptures. Little wonder, Davidson (1902:17) states that prophecy is the dominating factor in Israel's religion. Therefore, the real history of people is a history of which men of prophetic rank and name stands at the great turning point of the people's way of life and directs the movement. The Hebrew prophets were Moses, Miriam, Deborah, Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, Gath, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, Obadiah, Zechariah, Ezekiel just to mention a few. These prophets were classified as non literary, exilic and post-exilic prophets. Notably, the prophets were at various periods of Israel history as religious guards to the covenant people of the expectations of Yahweh at various points of their history. Prominently, prophecy as a phenomenon came to its golden era during the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Numerous political turns and points at this era precipitated its advancement. The overall "paxHebraica" of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC Israel give rise to became an extreme religious laxity and social inequality. The prosperity and boom occasioned in this era led to a monstrous decadence that led to the eventual destruction of the covenant people among the prophets of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC was Amos of Tekoa. Amos was not a card-carrying member of any prophetic guild of his time. Neither was he a cultic prophet. From his farming profession, he received a message from Yahweh to denounce the cancerous injustice being perpetrated in Israel of his time. He was best known as a prophet of social justice. Amos preached against the injustice perpetrated by the stronger nations, against the poorer ones and the abysmal corruption of the judicial system of his time. His prophecy which some scholars give of Israel's religious and social life. Therefore, the aim of this study is to x-ray the nature of Amos prophecy through researching into the brief history and development of prophecy in Israel, the personality of Amos, his career and call, prophetic inspiration and words, Sitz - in Leben, social justice and the relevance of his prophecy to the present world.

### **HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF PROPHECY IN ISRAEL**

Before an academic incursion is made into the prophecy of Amos, there is the need to understand the historical nature and development of prophetic phenomenon in Israel. Prophecy is the act of knowing and interpreting the mind of the divine. In Hebrew understanding, a "nabi" is both a seer of a priest, a preacher and a reformer. He is a spokesman, a holy man and one who communicates divine revelation as he speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from his own perspective (cf Opara, 2008: 8 - 9). Observably, prophecy is not unique alone to Israel. Other nations in the Ancient Near East had similar phenomenon. Recent archeological prophetic scholar like the letters of Mari and the Moabite stone inscribed by King Mesha of Moab during the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC attests to this.

In Israel, Moses was said to be the first prophet. He was revered as a mystic, law giver and a reformer. Different books of the Pentateuch mention other prophets or those who were seen as "holymen", Miriam, Aaron and a group of ecstatic prophets were among them. The Deuteronomist history also mentions Deborah as a "nebia". Later a prophetic guild was established in Israel comprising a group of ecstatic and peripatetic prophets, Samuel was said to have been a leader of the band of ecstatics. Prophets which feature prominently during the monarchical period.

During the eighth century, prophecy took a significant dimension and hence attained its zenith until its decline during the Hellenistic era. The prophetic periods in the Israel's prophecy were the era Moses the acclaimed founder of prophecy in Israel, the actors in national drama such as Deborah and Samuel, the period of Elijah and Elisha which transits from vulgar

prophecy to classical prophecy the golden age of prophecy (cf Scott, 1969:63). The relevance of the prophecy lies on the timeless religious truth they declare among the covenant people thereby directing its goal towards, realizing the union of men and God (Davidson 1902: 11). Among most prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, Amos stand out in all as in his message style and personality (cf Opara, 2008:9).

### **THE PERSONALITY OF AMOS**

Traditionally the book Amos bears the name of one Amos of Tekoa, a shepherd and dresser of sycamore. From the internal evidences from the book, it is highly improbable that the entire message contained in the book were the "ippistimaverba" of the prophet himself. The geographical location of Tekoa from which the prophet came from is obviously vague in nature. Supposedly, the city stood an immense, 2800 feet above sea level with surrounding hills from the highlands of Tekoa, the dead sea is at a very near sight and a dozen of miles distant, nearly 4000 feet below them and the Red mountain of Moab. It is possibly being conjectured that Tekoa sites about ten to twelve miles from the very sight of the temple of Jerusalem at the present modern village of Khirbert Tekus (cf Opara, 2008:15). Various distinguished scholars such as Wellhausen, Sellm, Happier, Weiser, Maag, Smend and Wolf had extraneously commented on the personality of Amos probably more than most Hebrew prophets. Yet, the study of the personality of Amos is still fresh and open-ended. Many scholarly alignments have been made with Amos to prophecy to wisdom literature (cf Terrien, 1962, Bare, 1990); the cult (Wurthein, 1950), theophany; (Crenshaw) hope (Ebo, 1984) and poetry (Otlo, 1966).

Calkina (1947:113) describes the commendable and inspiring personality of Amos in a sinister characteristic,

In Amos, we find the incorporated ideals of a truly prophetic ministry. His speech is simple, homely, directly to definitive moral end, to urged problems of the time. His passion was not tempered with love, sympathy or pity. He warns, he condemns, he threatens, but this he does without a sob....He attack evil with passionate directness" (Calkin, 1943:13).

From the depth and favour of his prophecy, it is obvious that the man Amos had a strong personality. He was stem, tearless, strong as granite possesses an independent character, a strong mind with a clear indignation (cf Boer 1965:25). Though legend had it that Amos was a stammerer, but from a careful peruse over his prediction, it could be discerned that he was an eloquent orator or rhetorician carefully utilizing his local setting to convey his message in a simple passionate and absorbing manner. It however not a hyperbole to underscore that Amos was one of the best of the Hebrew prophets.

### **CAREER AND CALL OF AMOS**

Amos whose name means burden bearer was not a prophet per se (cf Amos 7:14ff). He identified himself as a "neqed" (meaning breeder of small cattle) and a "boqer" (herdsman). He also introduced himself as a tender of sycamore. No scholarly consensus has ever been right at the exact social class of this distinguished prophet.

It could be obvious that Amos was from a poor class and later climbed the social mobility ladder through a tincture of hard work. His message were pro-oppressed and reactionary but obviously his language was not that of a rustic. It was as if Amos has tasted the two different worlds, the world of extreme poverty, emaciated and emasculated by a prevailing culture of poverty. It could also be possible that he knew too well the world of the upper class characterized with opulent luxury, revelry, extravagance, concupiscence, insensitivity, complacency and laziness (cf Amos 6: 1-6). He was probably a man of two worlds, who understands the pitiable poverty of the poor and the amorous affluence of the wealthy. This qualifies him to be a competent judge of the two extreme social positions.

From this background, Amos received his call to ministry. He was a non-stipendiary minister who was more concerned to urgently discharge the task assigned to him by Yahweh. He refused to be cowed by the prevailing injustice and insecurity of his time, neither would he bow to religious stooges of times (cf Amos 7:14). To Amos, his religious experience was too "scary" and compelling that he was left with no other option than to unreservedly pronounce Yahweh's message to the drifting nation (cf Amos 3:3-8). This forms the background of his career and call.

### **PROPHETIC INSPIRATION AND WORD.**

Amos lived at the time of Israel history when the social margins were embarrassing parallels. The rich were becoming richer while the poor were wallowing in squalor. The accruing wealth of the nations were no doubt unevenly distributed. Amos was irritated with this inexorable situation. He was greatly touched with the plight of the weak and the poor. This does not in any way label him a social critic or analyst his message contained theirresistible impulse of one who is a messenger of Yahweh himself.

According to Boer (1965:28), all these and other evils caused Amos \* heart to bum him and made him open his mouth in protest. He discovered everywhere that the heart of the people were not healthy. He was deeply

convicted that the Lord has appointed him to be the corrector of the life of Israel, (Amos, 3:15 7:15). The evils of the world in which he lives press heavily on him. He cannot walk through Samaria and behold what is going on at Gilgal and Bethel without an overpowering conviction of the tragic meaning of it all, of the destruction to which it surely leads (Calkins, 1947:23)

The predictions contained in the book, Amos can be subdivided into three major areas namely oracles (Amos 1 -3; 16) exhortation or sermons and visions Wellhausen Unequivocally states Amos message was that of blood and iron rather than rose and lavender (Wellhausen, 1963:63). The presence of the hope motif in the book has been a case of scholarly disputations. Various schools alludes it to the characteristic imprint of later redactor while others trace then to the prophet himself. In a nutshell, the prophetic word of Amos was addressed to the social and religious corruption of his time. Yahweh's judgment is inevitable as a direct consequence of Israel's misdemeanor evident is its ugly social setting.

### **AMOS SITZ - IM -LEBEN**

Amos prophesied during the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Two kings featured prominently in Israel and Judah. They were king Jeroboam II (ca 786 -748BC) of Israel and uzziah his southern contemporary. At the international level, Assyria was an emerging superpower. The reigns of kings Assumsirpal) and Shalmaneser III (ca 869 — 824BC) were exceptionally a threat to Meditterean as those kings took Assyrian power to its apogee. In later 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Assyrian influence began to wane. The kingdoms of Israel. And Judah came to limelight again. Trades were revived, towns were rebuilt and Israel controlled to a very large extent the international commerce in the Ancient Near East.

### **AMOS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Suffice it to note that Amos prophecy on social justice was not novel (cfThorogood, 1991). The Deutemomist historians harped on the need to ensure social justice among the covenant community (Deut 15:7 -18, 24:4).

Social justice in Amos entails concern for the poor and less privileged and living in "Sedeqa" (righteousness). This type of justice is dual in character in the sense that it insists on justice between God and man and also between man and man (Opara, 2008:20)

Social justice was the great desire of the prophets' soul. It all pervasive all embracing and comprehensive in nature, theocentric, humanistic and contain a sinister international flair.

Social justice in Amos is not in any way limited to the covenant community. Neighbouring nations such as Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Amon, Moab were indicate for various offences ranging from cruelty to prisoners of war (Amos 1: 3- 5 6- 8), treachery, betrayal (1:9 -10), lack of compassion (1: 11-12) and breach of natural war convention Also, Israel was accused of extravagance, materialism insensitivity (3:15), self indulgence complacency (6: 1 -6) fraud, extortion and enslavement (8<sup>th</sup>6 -14).

The state of Israel extremely strong and prosperous were inwardly rotten and sick past curing (Bright, 1972: 239 -41). The ensuring economic boom gave rise to a religious doom and social inhumanity. A very wide margin exists between the upper and the lower classes. At the social level, the rich lived in houses of hewed stones, paralleled in wood, ivory in lay, partook in sumptuous banquets, attended multiplicity sacrifices, procession with the accomplishment of music but oppressed and exploited the poor through exorbitant loans rents and commercial deceit (cfNyoyoko, 2003: 31, Opara, 2008: 10). Against this backdrop came the prophecy of Amos on social justice

### **THE TIMELESS RELEVANCE OF AMOS' PROPHECY**

One of the intriguing aspects of Amos' prophecy is its timeless relevance to every age and race. Diganagi (1985:41) Shearman (2003:41) Kemdirim (2006: 7) and Opara (2008:1), affirms that Amos' prediction has an unparallel relevance to the present day world, Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Applying Amos prophecy to the dichotomy between the Western countriesand developing countries Shearman (2003:45) writes:

The Western nations do not have clean hand, we engage in arms - length bombing campaigns, describing civilian casualties as "collateral damage. We oppress the poor to sustain our comfortable lifestyle. The trademarks

of injustice are stamped on our cloths and most of us wear it with pride”(Shearman, 467).

The tale of impropportionate treatment meted to the developing countries is inexhaustive. Opara (2008: 106) from a Nigerian perspective submits,

If Amos, were to minister in Nigeria, he would condemn the opulent luxury of the political class...., Indict the corruption, nepotism of the executive class....condemned the savage capitalistic tendencies which are far driving the poor to be over dependent on the rich.

To summarize, the relevance of Amos' prophecy to contemporary society is plausible because:

(i) The social conditions in most countries of the world resemble the actual situation of Amos' world of the 8th century BCE Israel.

The crimes of injustice and sharp practices of which Amos indicated the rich of neocolonialism which perpetually enslaves the third world to their former colonial masters still pervades the global scenery are still found in our present society if not in an alarming proportion. An uneven balance exists between the so called super powers and developing nations. A system

(ii) Both the economic and social arrangements have been patterned to favour the affluent at the detriment of the poor and less privileged.

(iii) The Judiciary in most countries just as in Amos era are corrupt, weak and ineffective

(iv) Despite this looming social scenario, religion and its observances are still at its apogee with the extravagant display of religious piety with very little spiritual worth. This situation were also prevalent as at the time of Amos

## **II. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Amos was a typical Hebrew prophet who changed the face of prophecy in Israelite religion. He was called from his farming profession into prophethood as a result of Yahweh prodding and his immediate social setting. His main theme was on social justice and his message is adjudged timeless and relevant to contemporary times. Hence the nature of his prophecy was reformative and epochal in style and nature.

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