

A Study of the Background to the Book of Amos

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ABSTRACT

The book of Amos is among the most studied books in the Bible. The high scholarly interest in Amos is due to the prophet's emphasis on true religion. Amos' message cannot be understood without a proper understanding of the context in which it was delivered. Amos ministered in eighth-century Israel when the nation had prospered economically and politically. The nation's prosperity had yielded a high level of religiosity evident in the payment of tithes, offerings, religious gatherings and singing of hymns. Unfortunately, the religiosity of the people had no positive impact on their social lives. This situation prompted Amos' prophecy of an impending divine judgment which was to decimate the nation and finally send the people into exile. The purpose of this paper is to explore the contextual issues within which Amos' message emerged and then compare Amos' situation with the contemporary Ghanaian socio-religious and political contexts. The paper used literary research methodology as well as textual and historical analyses. The findings from the study serve as a hermeneutical framework for interpreting and applying Amos' message. Lessons are also drawn for contemporary leaders. The paper contributes to Old Testament scholarship, particularly scholarship on the minor prophets.

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INTRODUCTION

Amos is widely regarded as one of the most important prophets of all time, primarily because of his uncompromising message of social justice and Yahweh's righteous judgment. His book is a locus classicus of Yahweh's compassion for the poor, with much to say about injustice, oppression, abuse, and the plight of the marginalized in Israel at the hands of the wealthy and the ruling class. Despite Israel's apparent economic prosperity in the 8th century BCE, the continuous display of opulence, selfishness, hedonism, and materialism resulted in social disparity and excruciating hardship for the poor and vulnerable, who were abused and exploited by those in positions of power. Therefore, Amos condemns Israel for various domestic crimes and goes into more significant details about Israel's sins, accusing them of economic, judicial, and religious transgressions (2:6-8; 5:7,10-13; 6:1-6). The prophet declares Yahweh's judgment on Israel and predicts their ultimate destruction for their sins. While Amos message is primarily directed at Israel's elite, it appears that the entire nation (except for

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the remnant of Joseph) will be destroyed (5:15-16). Accordingly, Israel's disaster is inevitable, and their funeral dirge had been written (5:2-3; 6:9-10). The paper found that chapter 5 of the book of Amos presents the possibility of transformation that would alter the character of Yahweh's judgment. Thus, beyond the impending judgment and Israel's imminent destruction, is the message of hope.

The paper explores the background within which Amos' message emerged and then compares it with the contemporary Ghanaian socio-religious and political contexts. It also draws lessons from it for Ghanaian leadership. The paper contends that Yahweh has a glorious future planned for Yahweh's people, and that, despite Amos pronouncement of judgment and doom for Israel's elites, Yahweh is not portrayed as a merciless judge. Consequently, Yahweh offers mercy to the sinful Israelites through the prophet Amos by calling on them to repent of their sins and seek Yahweh as the only way to avoid Yahweh's punishment and judgment (5: 4-6, 14-15).

Historico-Political Context

The ministry of Amos is dated to the reigns of Jeroboam II (786-746 BCE) of Israel, and Uzziah (783-742 BCE) of Judah, according to the superscript (Amos 1:1).¹ Precisely, the superscript confirms that his ministry "was two years before the earthquake" (1:1). While Zechariah 14:5 likely mentions this earthquake, evidence from archeological excavations at Hazor and Samaria attest to an earthquake in Israel sometime around 760 BCE.² Israel expanded its borders during Jeroboam's reign.³ Also, Israel and Judah enjoyed growth, development, and prosperity (cf. Amos 1:6; 6:2; 2 Chr 26:1-15; 2 Kgs 12:23-29) due to the expansion of the forces of production that determined the demand and supply of goods and services.⁴ It is important to note that the peasant farmers in Israel and Judah bore the burdens of this economic expansion. Amos oracles were a direct response to the economic and social changes that emerged in the 8th century BCE, including both the factors that drove the expansion of production forces in Israel and Judah and the broad impacts of these changes. In this section, the paper analyzes three areas of change that influenced the expansion of Israel and Judah's forces of production: namely, political stability, territorial expansion, and the regional specialization of production. The paper examines these changes within the social, economic and religious context of Israel during the 8th century BCE.

During the first half of the 8th century BCE, Israel and Judah enjoyed geopolitical stability. The lack of international and local conflicts coupled with the long reigns of Jeroboam II and Uzziah gave Israel and Judah the ability to focus on internal development, and thus the incentive to initiate changes in their political economies—in particular, to expand production to acquire more wealth.⁵ King Adad-Nirari III of Assyria (811-783 BCE) besieged Damascus in 796 BCE, which greatly reduced the power of the Aramean state—and allowed Israel to emerge as a regional power in its place.⁶ As the Aramean kingdom of Damascus recovered from its defeat to Assyria, it focused on the Hamath in the North, giving Jeroboam the freedom to expand.⁷ Moreover, after the death of Adad-Nirari III, the Assyrian kingdom suffered internal struggles; until the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 BCE), successive Assyrian kings remained weak.⁸ Therefore, during the first half of the 8th

¹ Marvin Alan Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2000), 192; Amos 7:10-11 where the name of Jeroboam is attested when Amaziah sent report about the announcement of the death of the king.

² James L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 2.

³ The expansion of Israel during the middle of the 8th century has been confirmed by archaeology. Israel's expansion into Gilead and the Upper Jordan valley, for example, was demonstrated by Finkelstein during the reign of Jeroboam the Great. As Finkelstein writes, "It is clear, then, that in the days of Jeroboam II Israel reached its maximal territorial range and included the entire northern part of the Jordan Valley and possibly even beyond"; Israel Finkelstein, "Stages in the Territorial Expansion of the Northern Kingdom," *VT* 61 (2011): 241.

⁴ Itumeleng Mosala, "A Materialistic Reading of Micah," *The Bible and Liberation Political and Social Hermeneutic*, edited by N.K. Gottwrd & R.A. Horsley (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 108.

⁵ Marvin L. Chaney, "The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor," *Journal of Religion & Society*, no. 10 (2014), 35.

⁶ Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 2.

⁷ Mays, *Amos: A Commentary*, 2.

⁸ Mays, *Amos: A Commentary*, 2.

century BCE, Israel was not threatened by foreign powers; Israel and Judah also remained peaceful during the reigns of Jeroboam II and Uzziah.⁹

Jeroboam II pursued economic expansion primarily through the colonization of new territories, driven by the ambition to broaden the boundaries of economic influence and international trade.¹⁰ D. N. Premnath, when analyzing the military conquest of Uzziah of Judah in 2 Chronicles 26:6-8, explains that there was the expansion of Judean boundaries in three directions: First, expansion into the West through the territories of the Philistines and the Arabs that made the movement of goods from Judah to Egypt, and the importation of “fine linen, gold, garments, minerals, and papyrus,” possible.¹¹ The second expansion was to the East, over the Jordan River and into Palestine, through the Transjordan. Premnath claims that gaining control over the Transjordan was not only important because of its agriculture and herding resources, but also the economic benefit it accrues due to its international trade routes, including the highway that links all key settlements in the Transjordan.¹² Thirdly, Judah and Israel expanded to the south into the Negev to gain control over the road network that leads to Egypt, Arabia, and Edom. Here, territorial expansion into the Negev helped Israel and Judah gain access to the copper mines of the Arabah and provided a space for settlement for the excess population. The Negev desert also served as a defense frontier that secured Israel and Judah from external threats.¹³

Peace, political stability, and territorial expansion resulted in a boom in economic activities. According to David C. Hopkins, “the expansion of borders not only meant an increase in sources of income and production for import/export trade but also could lead, given propitious geopolitical conditions, to an expansion of transit trade.”¹⁴ Also, the lack of war and conflict meant that more laborers could be deployed to increase productivity. To meet the demand for exported goods and to pay for an increase in imported goods, the royal administration intensified local production through regional specialization.¹⁵ Marvin Cheney contends that “the supply of exportable commodities was finite and varied with erratic growing conditions, but the elite’s appetite for luxury, military and monumental imports was virtually limitless.”¹⁶ Durable agricultural staples such as oil, wine, and wheat served as lucrative commodities for exportation while luxury goods, military materials, and raw materials for monumental architecture were the primary imported commodities.¹⁷ According to Cheney, herding increased in the Negev, where sheep and goats grazed during the winter and rainy seasons. The plain and piedmont regions specialized in the cultivation of cereal crops while the uplands were used for perennial trees and vine crops; the royal administration assessed the peasants' taxes on specific commodities, which forced the farmers to specialize in those commodities to pay their taxes.¹⁸

Gale A. Yee adds that, during the 8th century BCE, the monarchy required farmers to increase their production of certain goods—such as oil, wine, and wheat—which were transportable, so that the royal administration could tax and then trade these resources to acquire more wealth.¹⁹ Profit from production was redistributed among the ruling elites who bore little of the cost, and all of the increased risks were passed on to the peasants, who also received little to no benefit from their increased production. In the short term, royal specialization of production was efficient and beneficial to the few

⁹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco, Texas: World Books, 1987), 284.

¹⁰ D. N. Premnath, *Eight Century Prophet: A Social Analysis* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 45

¹¹ Premnath, *Eight Century Prophet*, 45-48

¹² Premnath, *Eight Century Prophet*, 49-51

¹³ Premnath, *Eight Century Prophet*, 44-56

¹⁴ David C. Hopkins, “The Dynamics of Agriculture in Monarchical Israel,” in *Society of Biblical Literature* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 195

¹⁵ Chaney, “The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor,” 36

¹⁶ Chaney, “The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor,” 37

¹⁷ Chaney, “The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor,” 37. For detailed discussion on crop specialization, see also, Premnath, *Eight Century Prophet: A Social Analysis*, 56-66

¹⁸ Marvin L. Chaney, “Bitter Bounty: The Dynamics of Political Economy Critiqued by the Eighth Century Prophets.” In *Reformed Faith and Economics*, ed. Robert L. Stivers (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 19

¹⁹ Gale A. Yee, “She is Not My Wife, and I am Not Her Husband”: A Materialist Analysis of Hosea 1-2: *Biblical Interpretation* 9, no. 4 (2001), 347.

elites but disastrous to the farmers. In the long run, specialization had an adverse effect on the peasant majority who could not consume what was exported, nor could they export what they consumed.²⁰ Moreover, the regional specialization of production imposed by the royal administration conflicted with the risk-spreading strategies of the peasants. Farmers were forced to abandon “their traditional risk-reducing strategies in favor of the risky, yet lucrative specialized cultivation of olives and grapes.”²¹ Monoculture is inherently riskier than the typical diversified smallholding farms of the ancient Near East. Thus, foreclosure was inevitable as weather conditions and crop failures forced farmers to depend on high-interest survival loans offered by ruling elites and creditors with no means for payments. Crop failures allowed elites to purchase and consolidate peasant landholdings into large farms in a process similar to the recent process of Latifundialization in Latin America; in this way, the crown and local elites collaborated to force many farmers into debt slavery, working on their former land that was now a large farm owned by the local elite.²² Consequently, subsistence farmers suffered as they lost their lands to creditors and the political elites who benefited from trade and crop specialization.

Evidence from the material record unearthed by archaeology suggests that an increased level of centralized control over agricultural production emerged throughout the 8th century BCE. Storage jars became standardized in shape and size, and their locations suggest that the state-organized economic regions into broader distribution networks; the stamped jar handles already appear in the record in the late 9th and early 8th centuries, but the pattern and density of the finds affirm the increasing centralization of the economy in 8th century. For example, multiple archaeological excavations reveal amphorae marked with standardized measurements for the transportation and

²⁰ Chaney, “The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor,” 37. It is important to note that the negative consequences of centralization also adversely affected the nation of Judah. Micah, made many of the same condemnations against the leaders of Judah as Amos against Israel leaders, see Micah 2:1-2

²¹ Matthew J.M. Coomber, “Caught in the Crossfire? Economic Injustice and Prophetic Motivation in Eighth Century Judah.” *Biblical Interpretation* 19 (2011), 406. In the Iron age II period, peasant farmers used risk-spreading methods that were often incompatible with increased yields, but survival always took precedence over efficiency. They spaced out the planting of cereal crops to mitigate the effects of erratic rainfall patterns. Because cultivating a single crop was risky, farmers planted a variety of crops and vegetables, as well as several different types of cereals, to diversify their crops. Farmers usually tend small vineyards and orchards that can provide grapes, olives, and nuts for their consumption, allowing them to have a greater variety of foods. See, David C. Hopkins, “The Dynamics of Agriculture in Monarchical Israel,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1983 Seminar Papers*, ed. Kent Harold Richards (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983), 187-93, and See Zohary for details on the types of plants grown in antiquity. Daniel Zohary and Maria Hopf, “Domestication of Plants in the Old World: The Origin and Spread of Cultivated Plants in West Asia, Europe, and the Nile Valley, 3rd ed.” (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²² Matthew J.M. Coomber, “Prophets to Profits: Ancient Judah and Corporate Globalization,” *Bible and Justice: Ancient Texts, Modern Challenges*, ed. Matthew J.M. Coomber (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2011), 220; D. N. Premnath, Latifundialization in Isaiah 5:8-10, in *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism*, ed. David J. Chalcraft (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 301-12, and Marvin L. Chaney, Micah-Models Matter: Political Economy and Micah 6:9-15. In *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in its Social Context* (London, SCM Press), 145-160. Premnath writes, “From the creditor’s perspective, loans were offered not with the purpose of generating income through interest. The primary motivation for the creditor was to take control of the labor or land (of the debtor) or both.” See, D. N. Premnath, “Loan Practices in the Hebrew Bible,” in *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney*, ed. Robert B. Coote, Norman K. Gottwald, and Marvin L. Chaney (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 174. Bernhard Lang concurs and notes, “As a rule, credit is advanced by a rich townsman who often becomes the actual owner of the cultivated land. Thus, ownership of land and provision of labor become separated: whereas responsibility for agricultural production remains with the small family, the land itself is entirely or in part owned by a landlord.” See, Bernhard Lang, “The Social Organization of Peasant Poverty in Biblical Israel.” In *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament*, edited by Bernhard Lang, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 50. Again, land held as collateral effectively, if temporarily, belonged to the loan owner by the creditor had right of use of the land, see Premnath, “Loan Practices,” 175. If the borrower was unable to repay their loan, ownership of the land presumably was permanently transferred to the creditor. Again, Lang notes that Syrian farmers in the 1960’s were paying 5-8% per month or 40-60% for six months. Fifth century BCE documents from Elephantine Egypt place interest rates at 5% per month. See, Bernhard Lang, “The Social Organization of Peasant Poverty in Biblical Israel” 50.

redistribution of wine.²³ Anson Rainey has proven that the *lmlk* seal imprints on storage jars is evidence of royal vineyards in Judah.²⁴ In the same regard, marine archaeology has discovered two Phoenician ships from this period that were sunk by a storm off the coast of Philistia, still laden with the standardized wine amphorae they were transporting to Egypt.²⁵ Also, the Samaria ostraca²⁶ give valuable information about the production of oil and wine and the establishment of royal and private enterprises for the mass production of vineyards and olive orchards.²⁷ The discovery of oil presses seen in excavation sites from Beth-Shemesh dating to the 8th century also attest to agricultural specialization and intensification.²⁸ The Samaritan hill survey, according to Eitam as cited by Premnath, identified the installation of forty rock-cut olive presses “discovered at Khirbet Banat-bar (17), Klia (15), Khirbet Khudesh (5) and one each at Damar, Khirbet Kasfa, and Sanniriya.”²⁹ Technological innovations in oil and wine production, including advancements in the design of beam presses, allowed for the development of large scale production in value-added commodities.³⁰ 2 Chronicles 26:10 provides evidence “for royal vineyard and olive orchards, [which] strongly suggests elements of command economy” in 8th century Judah and Israel.³¹

Socioeconomic Context

As Ben-Sasson put it, the reign of Jeroboam II saw a period of unprecedented peace, economic growth, and political consolidation.³² Trade was booming, because Israel regained control over the major trade routes joining Mesopotamia and Anatolia with Egypt, which increased its royal revenues.³³ Economic wealth was also generated from the Transjordan routes, extending into Northern Arabia, along the Coastal plain, the hinterland, and from Phoenicia. Tolls were collected from passing caravans, which became another source of wealth for Israel.³⁴ Furthermore, traveling merchants increased rapidly to supply monoculture farms with the commodities that they had previously produced in-house, but now needed to trade in order to acquire, which was another economic burden shifted on to the local farmers (cf. Amos 8:5a). Meanwhile, merchants also made money through international trade in both commodities and preciousities (3:9) and many accrued significant wealth.³⁵ Thus, the accumulated wealth from Israel's increased productivity was not distributed fairly; only the wealthy minority enjoyed the prosperity, leaving many penurious.³⁶ Excessive wealth created two classes of people: the poor and the rich. Thus, the poor became poorer, the rich flourished and became richer.³⁷ The consequences of the wealth were prominently displayed, while the opulent “enjoyed an indolent,

²³ Chaney, “The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor,” 36.

²⁴ Anson F. Rainey, “Wine from the Royal Vineyards,” *Bulletin of American Schools Oriental Research*, (1982)57-59 see, Premnath, *Eight Century Prophet*, 59; Paula M. McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 150.

²⁵ Chaney, “The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor,” 36.

²⁶ The ostraca documents shipments received by royal officials who take charge of income from the territories they supervise; Rainey 1962:62-63, 1967 :32-42. According to McNutt, “The vessels apparently were royal property and served to provision official places in various locations, although it is not clear who was supplied with the provision or where they originated.” The *lmlk* jars are thought to belong to the late 8th century. McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel 158.

²⁷ Premnath, *Eight Century Prophet*, 60; Chaney, “*The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor*,” 38.

²⁸ Premnath, *Eight Century Prophet*, 63.

²⁹ Premnath, *Eight Century Prophet*, 63.

³⁰ Premnath, *Eight Century Prophet*, 63.

³¹ Chaney, “Bitter Bounty,” 21.

³² Abraham Malamat and Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson. *A History of the Jewish people* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976), 126.

³³ Malamat and Ben-Sasson, *A History of the Jewish people*, 126.

³⁴ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 258.

³⁵ Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress Publishing, 1977), 89.

³⁶ Göran Eidevall, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 17.

³⁷ Eidevall, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 17.

indulgent existence (Amos 4:1f.; 6:1-6) in winter and summer houses" (3:13; 6:11), the lowly were exploited and impoverished (2:6-8; 4:1; 5:10-12; 8:4-6).³⁸ Amos oracles describe the luxurious and decadent lifestyle of the wealthy upper class;³⁹ as Amos asserts, they built elegant houses adorned with ivory and damask cushions (3:12-15; 6:4), ate lamb and fattened calves (6:4), composed new music (6:5), indulged in sexual immorality (2:7b), idolatry (8:14), wine and fine lotions (6:6).⁴⁰

As Amos proclaims, the prosperity and luxury made them forget their shared values and their identity. Yahweh delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery and promised to make them Yahweh's prized possession, a holy, set apart nation (Exo 19:5-6). Yahweh will personally dwell among them and lead them to the promised land. Yahweh will be their God, and Israel will be Yahweh's people (Exo 29:45). They will be a kingdom of priests who will mediate Yahweh's goodness and glory to all nations through justice and righteousness. Israel was to be a faithful people who mirror Yahweh's self of justice and righteousness.⁴¹ Yahweh's law requires and outlines how Israel must live as a covenant community that seeks above all the interest of Yahweh's people; the law requires impartiality and honesty, special attention to the poor, widow, orphan, and vulnerable in the society (Deut. 24:17). Hosea affirms Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh and their covenant obligations in 2:2-23 (Deut 8:19-20; 28:18). Yet, pride, selfishness, oppression, and laxity became the norm in Israel. For the affluent to increase their wealth and maintain their social status, they manipulated commerce in the market. They corrupted the legal system. The poor were forced into debt slavery.⁴² The underprivileged were exploited (2:7a; 4:1; 8:4), while intimidation of witnesses and bribery of judges were used to violate their rights (2:7a; 5:10, 12; cf. 1 Kings 21).⁴³ Therefore, the egalitarian tribal identity and system cultivated by the wilderness experience and tradition were lost. By the middle of the 8th century BCE, Israelite society had become a feudal society regulated by selfishness, carelessness, evil and greed.⁴⁴

Religious Context

As the economy grew and prosperity surged, a certain kind of religious devotion flourished, and the Israelite authorities encouraged particular religious activities.⁴⁵ Outwardly, the Israelite elite were pious; nonetheless, Amos claims that they were evil and corrupt in their hearts.⁴⁶ According to Shalom Paul, "this opulence was accompanied by a panoply of pomp and ceremony and by an intensive and zealous religious life... that took place at the main northern shrines (Amos 4:4-5; 5:21-22)."⁴⁷ Thus, the Israelite elite found their spiritual identities at the shrines of Bethel, Gilgal, and Beershash (5:5). The rich crowded the shrines with their substantial tithes (4:4) and sacrificial rituals such as the thanks and freewill offerings (4:5) and burnt and grain offerings (5:22). Nevertheless, according to Amos, they neglected true Yahwism as their religious rites did not impact their relationships to other people or Yahweh. "Their pilgrimage to the shrine," as H.E.W. Fosbroke argues, "was the occasion for pleasurable feasting, with opportunity for extraordinary observance as might attest to a [person's] social position."⁴⁸

³⁸ Mays, *Amos*, 2.

³⁹ Paul, *Amos*, 2.

⁴⁰ Mays mention evidence of excavation at Tirzah that shows the presence of large private and expensive housing with few small, huddled structures that affirms the social revolution that characterized the 8th century; Mays, *Amos: A Commentary*, 2

⁴¹ John Barton, *The Theology of The Book of Amos* (New York Cambridge University Press, 2012), 103.

⁴² Eidevall, *Amos*, 17; Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 90.

⁴³ Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 90.

⁴⁴ E. W. Heaton, *The Hebrew Kingdoms* (London:Oxford University Press, 1968), 28.

⁴⁵ Mays, *Amos*, 3

⁴⁶ George W. Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 114.

⁴⁷ Paul, *Amos*, 2.

⁴⁸ H.E.W Fosbroke, *Lamentation, Ezekiel, Daniel, Twelve Prophets* ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 768.

For the Israelites, prosperity and economic growth were a sign of Yahweh's unconditional favor and blessings (Deut. 28).⁴⁹ Therefore, they were zealous to build shrines for Yahweh, pay their tithes, and offer elaborated sacrificial rituals as a way of appeasing Yahweh for Yahweh's blessing. Still, Amos claims that their faithfulness to Yahweh is self-interested and shallow.⁵⁰ Amos believes that Israel's zeal for sacrifice and worship was a means to control Yahweh (Amos 5:21-24). So, they trusted and patronized Yahweh with audacious arrogance (5:14, 18-20; 6:3).⁵¹ Additionally, Paul contends that they assumed that Yahweh's protection was unconditional, and they "felt totally secure in the present and thoroughly confident in their future."⁵² It is ironic how Israel reminisced about the advantages of the covenant but forgot their own obligation towards the same. Indeed, their rituals *per se* appear not to have been a cause for concern according to Amos; rather, the Israelite attitude towards the rituals—namely, that rituals gave them an excuse to avoid ethical behavior that Yahweh demanded—was the problem.⁵³ In short, Israel's elite had become self-centered, putting their individual interests above the general good of society. Thus, their piety to Yahweh was questionable, as their heart and ways were turned from Yahweh, and they failed to meet the demands of the Torah. Therefore, according to Amos, Yahweh got fed up and said, enough is enough! Such was the nation where Yahweh commissioned Amos to preach.

Amos' Context and the Contemporary Ghanaian Context

The fact that Amos call for repentance to Israeli leaders in the 8th century BCE still speaks to the twenty-first century Ghana and its leaders cannot be over-emphasized. While it is clear that Ghana's socio-economic, religious, and political environments are distinct from 8th-century Israel, it is believed there are some parallels between the present-day Ghanaian context and the context to which Amos spoke. Thus, valuable lessons about how to address contemporary Ghanaian socioeconomic issues can be gleaned from Amos message.

Since the country transitioned to multi-party democracy in 1992, Ghana has been regarded as one of the most politically stable countries in West Africa. Undeniably, Ghana has witnessed eight peaceful general elections since 1992, for a four-year tenure each.⁵⁴ In Ghanaian society, however, many of the issues that Amos encountered in 8th-century Israel are still prevalent today, albeit in a different form. In Ghana, there is corruption at all levels of government, and there is a general lack of accountability by the people in power. The luxurious lifestyles of some politicians, clerics, and state officials, as well as the impunity with which those in power mismanage state resources, amass wealth and confirm the societal rot in the country.⁵⁵ According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, for example, Ghana loses about \$3 billion to corruption each year at the expense of the poor who suffer without hope.⁵⁶ Apart from the judiciary and police system, which are widely regarded as the most corrupt institutions in the country, corrupt behavior is expressed in various forms by heads of departments, institutions, civil officials, and other security agencies.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Amos believed; Israel have gotten it all wrong about Yahweh blessing of prosperity because the foundation of prosperity is that which they have failed to observe—justice (Amos 6:12-14).

⁵⁰ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 284.

⁵¹ Mays, *Amos*, 3.

⁵² Paul, *Amos*, 2.

⁵³ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 284.

⁵⁴ Frederick Mawusi Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, "Theology of the Prophet Amos: A Paradigm for Addressing Ghana's Socio-Political and Religious Challenges," *Conspectus - The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* 29 (2020): 93-111.

⁵⁵ Amevenku and Boaheng, "Theology of the Prophet Amos: A Paradigm for Addressing Ghana's Socio-Political and Religious Challenges, 93-111.

⁵⁶ Zdravko Ljubas, "Ghana Loses US\$3 Billion to Corruption a Year," accessed. August 19, 2019, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/10498-ghana-loses-us-3-billion-to-corruption-a-year>.

⁵⁷ Kaunain Rahman, "Overview of Corruption and Anticorruption in Ghana." Edited by Roberto Martinez B. Kukutschka and Samuel Kaninda. Transparency International. December 11, 2018 <https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/helpdesk/overview-of-corruption-and-anti-corruption-in-ghana->

Poverty and social inequality are two of the most pressing issues affecting the country on a social and economic level. To illustrate, many hospitals lack beds, while thousands of children sit under trees to learn due to the lack of conducive classrooms. The country lacks good roads and a stable power supply. A non-profit agency reports that about 6 million Ghanaians do not have access to clean drinking water, 5% of children suffer from malnutrition, 66% of children and 42% of women of childbearing age suffer from anaemia.⁵⁸ Moreover, Ghana's justice system is inaccessible to the poor and the marginalized, who are oblivious of their constitutional rights and entitlements. The legal system is biased, favors the wealthy, and punishes the poor who cannot bribe their way out.⁵⁹ In 2013, it was reported that a court convicted a man to five years in prison for stealing a goat, which did not cost more than \$100. On the other hand, a high court judge and a court clerk, in 2013, were sentenced to nine and twelve months in prison, respectively, for conspiring to embezzle \$50,754.9 from the state.⁶⁰ Many citizens of Ghana have thus become victims of poverty, hunger, ignorance, malnutrition, disease, unemployment, low life expectancy, and hopelessness.⁶¹

Religiously, Ghana is a majority Christian country, with more than 70% of the populace identified as Christians. However, many religious leaders have come under constant attack recently for their exploitation and unjustified wealth accumulation. Some clergymen take advantage of the ignorance of the masses and their hardships to extract huge sums of money from them. As at 2015, many people pay as high as five hundred Ghana cedis (which was about \$100.00) before seeing their pastor for direction or deliverance.⁶² Direction in the Ghanaian context is the term used to describe the directives and counsel a pastor gives to a person who seeks healing, breakthrough, and spiritual freedom. Often, this is done with anointing oil, water, etc. with instruction on what should be done for the healing or breakthrough to be achieved. Deliverance is usually associated with the laying of hands to drive out demons or liberate a person from a possessed spirit. According to P. Obeng, in Ghanaian churches, deliverance services are marked by “the demand for monetary support from the vulnerable in exchange for blessings....”⁶³ Likewise, J.K. Asamoah-Gyadu argues that today's Church is devoted to carnality, manifested in silly jesting, clerical arrogance, and the exploitation of the Gospel for commercial gain, rather than to the primary mandate of salvation and the mission of the Cross.⁶⁴ Thus, many contemporary Christians prioritize material prosperity, opulence lifestyle, and earthly fulfillment over seeking Yahweh's kingdom and its righteousness.⁶⁵

Implications for Ghanaian Leaders and the Church

Nothing is clearer to the reader of Amos' oracles than the fact that God desires justice and righteousness for God's people rather than superficial spirituality demonstrated in building of altars, chapels, and giving religious offerings that have no impact on people's lives. This fact demands national leaders to set their priorities right. Applying the Prophet's message to contemporary Ghana, one may say that God wants to see that people have access to clean drinking water, employment, security, quality

2018.pdf; Amevenku and Boaheng, “Theology of the Prophet Amos: A Paradigm for Addressing Ghana's Socio-Political and Religious Challenges, 93-111.

⁵⁸ “Ghana: Landscape Analysis of Anemia and Anemia Programming ..,” <https://www.spring-nutrition.org/publications/reports/ghana-landscape-analysis-anemia-and-anemia-programming>

⁵⁹ Patrick Kofi Amissah, “Amos and ‘Ghana in the Eyes of Yahweh’: A Public Theological Response to Bribery and Corruption,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 13, no. 3 (2019): 282-300.

⁶⁰ Amissah, “Amos and ‘Ghana in the Eyes of Yahweh,” 294.

⁶¹ Amevenku and Boaheng, “Theology of the Prophet Amos: A Paradigm for Addressing Ghana's Socio-Political and Religious Challenges, 93-111.

⁶² Amevenku and Boaheng, “Theology of the Prophet Amos: A Paradigm for Addressing Ghana's Socio-Political and Religious Challenges, 93-111.

⁶³ P. Obeng, “Abibisom (Indigenous Religion) by Another Name: A Critical Look at Deliverance Ministry in Ghana.” *Trinity Journal of Church and Society* 18 (2) 2014: 27–40.

⁶⁴ J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, *Jesus Our Immanuel* (Accra: African Christian Press 2012), 140.

⁶⁵ Amevenku and Boaheng, “Theology of the Prophet Amos: A Paradigm for Addressing Ghana's Socio-Political and Religious Challenges, 93-111.

education, and health care and corruption abated rather than extravagant physical edifices. In times of global crisis: hunger, unemployment, poverty, malnutrition, lack of clean water, access to health care, and lack of basic human infrastructure, God expects government and state institutions to be faithful and accountable to the people they serve. Political leaders are called to address the needs of the vulnerable and advocate on their behalf. God expects the political leaders to be good stewards of scarce state resources by sharing the national cake evenly rather than amassing wealth for themselves.

Amos' message calls on God's people that prosperity and material wealth are for a purpose. In prosperous times, God's people are obligated to imitate God's character by providing compassion, care, kindness, and generosity to those in need. Accordingly, Amos reminds the church that while it prioritizes prayer, fasting, and worship with elaborated sacrifices and offerings, it must also utilize its prophetic voices to seek justice for the poor, widow, children, and weak people in society. The church's mission is not limited to its relationship with God but also its relationships with other creations. Contemporary prophets are expected to deliver messages that rebuke sin, proclaim God's wrath upon sinners and exhort people to love and care for one another. God's justice is universal; therefore, God will judge all God's people who fail to extend God's love, mercy, and compassion they have received to others

CONCLUSION

This study considered the background of the ministry of Amos. The prophet ministered in an economically prosperous and politically stable but morally declined society. The Ghanaian context was compared to Amos' context and points of similarities in the areas of economic inequality, religiosity, political stability and economic prosperity were explored. The similarity in context between 8th century Israel and contemporary Ghana underscores that Amos' message is suitable for Ghana. Therefore, contemporary prophets are expected to deliver messages that rebuke sin and proclaim God's wrath upon sinners. The study is a reminder to the church to use its prophetic voices in seeking justice for the poor, widow, children, and the weak in society. Political leaders are also expected to attend to the needs of the vulnerable and speak on their behalf. Rather than amassing wealth, God's expectation is that the wealthy share their resources with the needy. The church is also expected to use her prophetic voice to speak for the voiceless and advocate for the welfare of all manner of people.

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