

מִשְׁפָּט (MISHPAT) IN AMOS 5:24 AS A PANACEA FOR ECONOMIC STABILITY IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

This article examined מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) in Amos 5:24 as a panacea for the economic stability in Nigeria. Economic instability has become a major concern for well-meaning Nigerians since the return to democratic rule in 1999. Nigeria is blessed with both human and natural resources but her citizens are living in abject poverty as a result of the corruption of bad leaders and unfavourable policies of the government and has brought instability to the economy of the nation. The study explored the method of descriptive analysis and exegetical approach of the book of Prophet Amos and contextualization of the oracle of YHWH given to Prophet Amos in in Amos 5:24 with special attention given to the Hebrew word מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) meaning justice and presenting it as a panacea for economic stability in Nigeria. It is therefore recommended that the context of Prophet Amos be explored for a stable economic strength of Nigeria in order to have a better Nigeria devoid of indebtedness and mismanagement of the national funds.

Keywords: Mishpat, YHWH, Panacea, Economy stability, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria as a nation is richly blessed both on ground and under the ground. In fact, it is not an overstatement that the natural resources that our nation are endowed with, are enough to transform many underdeveloped countries combined together. Nevertheless, the situation of Nigeria as a nation has experienced a nosedive in almost every sector due to corruption, mismanagement of resources and the problem of leadership. Worst still, the economic strength of Nigeria, which was once the best in Africa has waned so badly that Nigeria, being Africa's pride at a time has had to settle for mediocrity in the economic hub of the nations of the world especially due to the lack of transparency, justice and accountability. On the international scene, Nigeria has incurred debts on various occasions due to the enactment of bad policies even to the detriment of generations to come and it seems as if no lessons have been learnt. The pertinent question to ask is how do we get out of this cankerworm that has eaten deep into our fabrics?

Background to the Prophecy of Amos

The prophecy of Amos on Justice is relevant to his generation and of great importance in our contemporary times, particularly in Nigeria at this stage of our nationhood. The message of Prophet Amos spoke of the impending judgment of God on the erring nation of Israel. Amos spoke much against the oppression of the poor and the less privileged and the injustice that has ravaged the nation of Israel.

Though, a man from the southern kingdom, his prophecy was against the northern kingdom of Israel. When speaking of Justice, (Berquist, 1993) opined that what comes to mind will be a number of concepts. The first one being ideal of the legal profession; one goes to court in order to obtain justice in which a judge is called a “justice” the essence of the judicial system is to see that Justice is done.

On the other hand, justice is an ethical concept, according to philosopher like Plato who propounded meaning of justice to mean a religious term, even in Judaism long before the advent of Christianity. Every segment of our nation has frequently demanded for justice as a result of the upheavals that have ravaged our society. Berquist (1993), also noted that Justice is a proponent of every social concern, from population control to the end of war to ecology, which is used as their rallying cry. Justice is what everyone wants, because when justice is established in the land there will be peace and stability in every facet of life including the economy.

A Brief Evaluation of the Book of Amos and the Concept of מִשְׁפָּט in Amos 5:24

The book of Amos has been seen to be a vital text for understanding the Old Testament’s prophetic religion and social injustice. Being the third of the Twelve Minor prophets, the book of Amos has been one of the most significant books of the Bible from the time it was written in the eighth century down to the twentieth century. The writer of the book of Amos has been unanimously agreed upon by scholars, to have been prophet Amos himself, who also was regarded as the earliest of the classical prophets to write his message (Bruce, 1996).

As touching the background of prophet Amos, William et al., (1996) noted that he was a simple shepherd and a gatherer of sycamore fruits, who was recorded to have lived among a group of shepherds in Tekoa, a small town that was approximately ten miles south of Jerusalem.

Johannes (2000) says geographically, Amos came from the Southern Kingdom of Judah and delivered his prophecy against the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the surrounding nations, leading to some resistance from the people of Israel who were proud to accept YHWH’s oracles through a foreigner. Like Cripps (1987) observes, when one critically examines the book of Amos, the prophecy he delivered to the Israelites is characterized by great boldness, coupled with great tact.

Historically, Amos prophesied two years before the earthquake (Amos 1:1) signifying it was delivered just halfway point of the eight century BC, during the reign of Uzziah, the king of Judah and Jeroboam, the king of Israel (Thomas Edward, 1992). There is also no doubt that the connection of Amos with the life of the people around or his background made its way into the center of his prophecies, as he showed a heart for the oppressed and the voiceless in the society.

The purpose of Amos’ prophecy was to correct the moral decay in the land which YHWH was uncomfortable with; YHWH then sends prophet Amos an oracle which was majorly directed against the privileged people of Israel. In buttressing this, (Cootes, 1981) submits that initially, YHWH had sent warnings to Israel in terms of hunger, plagues, thirst, military defeats and blights, but they refused to see the hand of YHWH in all these (Amos 4:6-11).

They are a people who showed no love for their neighbors and they were self-centered in their dispositions. Amos also constantly pointed out the failure of the people of Israel especially the higher class when it comes to embracing YHWH’s idea of justice; they were selling off the needy people for goods, taking advantage of the helpless, oppressing the poor and even the men were using the women immorally (cf. Amos 2:6-8, 3:6; Amos 4:1, 5:11-12 and Amos 8:4-6).

It was this oppressive economic success of the wealthy and their intent on strengthening their financial position at the detriment of “the vulnerable ones” of the society that prompted prophet Amos in rebuking them and categorically noting that there was a dearth of justice in the land, which showed that the people of Israel had forgotten YHWH.

Despite all these warnings and imminent judgments, the people of Israel rather than to repent and to seek out opportunities to do justice, to love mercy and also to walk humbly, they foolishly embraced their ignorance, self-righteousness, idolatry and materialism, all of which led to Amos’ rebuke in Amos chapter 5 verses 21-24, which forms the foundation of this paper.

An Overview of Amos Chapter 5 and The Concept of מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) in Amos 5:24

While it is not difficult for any critical scholar to agree that the dominant theme of the book of Amos is Social Justice like Keller (1972) stresses, the chapter 5 of the book of Amos is clearly engrossed in the subject matter of Amos’ proclamation of social justice. In this chapter, Prophet Amos admonished the people of Israel to hear his lamentation over them for their impending ruin (Amos 5:1). While doing this, he pointedly gave them a room for a re-assessment of their lives and actions, as he exhorted them to seek the Lord and all that was good; to forsake their idols and to repent of their sin in order for them to obtain the mercies of God and to live in peace. Knowing fully well how hardened the people of Israel could be, Amos went on further by saying that if they failed to do this, they must expect the wrath of God for their iniquities (especially for their subjugation of the poor (cf. Amos 5:4) and be ready to welcome a time of wailing and weeping, which would be combined with a season of darkness and distress (Gill, 2012).

Interestingly, it was very disturbing that while the people of Israel were carrying out several acts of injustice in the land, they were consistent in carrying out their religious duties. They were fervent in the display of religiosity but devoid of the practical demonstrations of what their religion stood for; this was what YHWH detested.

Knowing this, Amos through his prophecy, charged vehemently at their hypocritical nature and warned that they should not think that their religiosity, especially in form of the offering of sacrifices and the carrying out ceremonial worship would cover up for their immoral acts, for so long as they continued in their acts of injustice and idolatry, captivity was imminent for them (Amos 5:16, 21 and 27).

The Concept of מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) in Amos 5:24

Amos chapter 5 verse 24 when critically evaluated in context evinces how YHWH wanted His chosen people to obey Him, especially by ruling justly and behaving righteously (Verrett, 2022). In buttressing this, (Hayes, 1988) reveals that the fact that YHWH was so particular in His commands that the people of Israel should stop living as hypocrites and idolaters and should return wholeheartedly unto Him was because He wanted to establish order and give balance in the society.

The Hebrew word מִשְׁפָּט which is transliterated in English as “Mishpat” is a masculine noun which has a variety of meanings, especially as it revolves around legal implications. Looking at the various definitions given to it, some concordances note that it includes; an act of deciding a case, a seat of judgment (Bridge, 2012) or a case or cause presented for judgment or the execution of judgment or justice (Verrett, 2022). From the following, the synonyms normally given to represent “Mishpat” are judgment, rectitude or justice.

However, from all the synonyms given above, the common word used to designate “Mishpat” is Justice. It is noteworthy that, in arriving at picking “justice” as the closest meaning for “Mishpat”, arguments were raised that there are times when some pronounced judgments are

“not just” and that is why most translations chose to interpret “Mishpat” for justice, although this justice is the one that comes with the judgment that aligns with YHWH’s justice (Verrett, 2022).

It is also expedient to submit that even though מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) is commonly denoted to mean justice, particularly as it is seen to occur more than 200 times in the Old Testament, yet most times in the Bible, it is often used in the sense of a restorative justice i.e. going a step further, actually seeking out vulnerable people who are being taken advantage of and helping them (Tolliver, 2023). From this perspective, one could argue that Biblical justice basically emphasizes the need to foster communities, cultural and systems that all people particularly those that are poor, subjugated or marginalized are to enjoy the goodness and abundance of God’s creation (Deuteronomy 18).

However, considering the word מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) very carefully, it has also been said that the translation of מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) oversimplifies its meaning in the Old Testament, especially in Modern Western thinking. This is because מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat), which is etymologically derived from the Hebrew transliterated word “Shawfat” which mean “to judge” and it is because of this foundation that the Judeo-Christian tradition accepts “Mishpat” as emanating from God i.e. it is at the seat of divine throne that rights are determined.

However, when “Shawfat” is assessed in contemporary time, the understanding of “to judge” tends to focus only on proper judicial activities (Bridge, 2012) and this in a way limits the complete sense of מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) which implies the whole determination and consequences of the combination of both good and evil in its entirety. מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat), contains the establishment of law, the interpretation of ordinance, the pronouncement of verdict and the legal foundation of the authority to execute sentence (Bridge, 2012).

Using the above explanation about מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) as a spring board, the book of Amos chapter 5 verse 24 has been suggested to have two interpretations; the first denotes a justice which has reference to God’s judgment i.e. with this YHWH is calling urgently for judgment in line with His justice to roll like a flooding water over Israel. The second interpretation that has been suggested looks to be the likely interpretation especially when we look at other places like Amos 5:7, Amos 5:15 and Amos 6:12 where the use of the word “judgment or justice” is exclusively used for human beings. Therefore, from this suggestion, it has been inferred that the language of Amos 5:24 constitutes a call for the people to exercise justice and righteousness and they are to flood the community as it were with such noble acts like a stream that never stops flowing; (Thomas Edward, 1992). an action that (Verrett, 2012) describes as “an imagery of constant movement”.

From this, the message that Amos brought was to inform the people that God hated injustice and the show of religion that the people of Israel were making with their festival, feasts and sacrifices (Regol, 2023).

To put it more pointedly, (Hammershaimb, 1970) while delving into the linguistic strength of the imagery of “river” used by Amos to communicate his prophecy about justice in Amos 5:24, evinced that the value of the imagery of river is used by the prophet to vividly portray YHWH’s expectation of justice and righteousness which “must flourish” within the community of the people of Israel. This is why Amos 5:24 is considered by many scholars as the pivot around which the whole book revolves (Akintola, 2021).

Nigeria and the Challenges of Economic Instability

Nigeria is a nation with different diversities as a result of its multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature. It is also a multi-national state with culturally diverse federation of 36 autonomous states with the addition of the Federal Capital Territory (Asya, 2021). As at 2019, Nigeria's economy was reported by World Economics to be the largest in Africa, the 31st - largest in the world by nominal GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and 30th – largest by PPP (Purchasing Power Parity) (Friedman, 2014). This fact would be blatantly denied by anyone who is religiously immersed and is also grossly affected by the current state of Nigeria's economic strength.

Unfortunately, the economic landscape of the once named Giant of Africa (Nigeria) has been solely affected by corruption and several bad policies over the years. Macro-economic stability has been weakened in the face of the declining oil production. To make matter worse, the costly petrol subsidy which was formerly enacted consumed a large share of gross oil revenues, the monetization of the fiscal deficit and high inflation coupled with the exchange rate distortions have stunted the growth of Nigeria's economy (Worldbank, 2022).

From the above, it is visible that when there are bad economic policies and bad implementations, the economy of such nation will suffer and millions of its citizens will be sorely affected, leading to economic instability. Sadly, this is the true picture of the economy of Nigeria in recent time and it has not been helped by our population growth which seems to also outpace the nation's poverty reduction measures.

Moreover, while it is also true that the different governments that have come on board over the years have tried to proffer lasting solutions to these economic predicaments; particularly the current government led by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu; like using the aid of trade, service and manufacturing, yet the downside risks to this proffered solutions have intensified over the years, with most of the risks coming from domestic policies, continued low oil production, scarcity of both foreign exchange and local currency.

In addition, inequality in terms of income and opportunities remains high and this is coupled with calculated corruptive measures i.e. the naira demonetization process by Godwin Emefiele and terrible acts of injustice in almost all the sectors of our nation. All these has negatively affected several companies and businesses (both private and public), with many entrepreneurs and foreign investors closing down and flying out to other countries in search of greener pastures and comfortable economic environment.

Looking at all these, the questions that come to mind are; how do we get out of all these predicaments? Or is there no hope anymore for the economy of Nigeria to be saved? This is exactly what this paper sought to address, where the contextualization of the prophetic declarations of Amos in Amos 5:24 was carried out in proffering “Mishpat” (Justice) as a panacea for economic stability in Nigeria.

Proposing מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) in Amos 5:24 as a Panacea for Economic Stability in Nigeria

Having established that מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) signifies justice in Amos 5:24, it is pertinent to state that before delving fully into proposing מִשְׁפָּט (Mishpat) as a panacea for economic stability, the question we need to address first is what exactly is justice? Immanuel Kant defines justice as a virtue whereby we respect others' freedom, autonomy and dignity by not interfering with their voluntary actions, so long as those actions do not violate the right of others (Smith, 2013).

An early philosopher named Plato, in addressing the subject of justice saw it as a virtue establishing rational order, with each part performing its appropriate role and not interfering with the proper functioning of other part; this is what he called “a harmonious strength” or the effective

harmony of the whole”. To Aristotle, justice is that which consists in what is lawful and fair, with fairness involving equitable distributions and the correction of what is inequitable. These definitions portend that justice is simply given each one in the society what is due to him or her.

Unfortunately, from the foregoing, it is an aberration to even say that the nation is not dissatisfied with the “kind of justice” system that has been practiced in Nigeria for years. Recall that the kind of justice bequeathed to us by the colonialist is a justice system which was purely elitist in nature and it has been unable to cater for the needs of the masses. This is why the fulcrum of this paper hinges on *מִשְׁפָּט* (Mishpat), a justice that emanates from the nature and character of God (Doty, 2011).

In addressing the situation of Nigeria, often times, one is always carried away in looking at the challenges of economic instability in Nigeria from different angles i.e. like bad economic policies and lack of human resources etc., but what we normally fail to realize is that the foundation of the problem is always left untouched. A cursory look into the prevalent challenges that have been discovered as hindrances to our economic growth and stability in Nigeria evinced that we are a nation that is devoid of justice and until this is addressed, we are only scratching the surface of the problem and not confronting it.

Looking carefully into Amos 5:24, there is no doubt that the situation of the time of Amos and that of contemporary Nigeria is similar; there is oppression or subjugation all over the place, injustice, religious animosity, corruption, rejection of divine messages, hypocrisy in form of pretentious religiosity and immorality among several others. In buttressing this, (Oladotun, 2019) emphatically submits that Nigeria as a nation could be regarded as a direct recipient of the prophetic message of prophet Amos.

We are in a time when the righteous will be declared wanted and the guilty discharged and acquitted, just because the latter knows how “to grease the palms” of “the powers that be”. These have contributed sorely to the economic instability of our nation because where there is no transparency, accountability and justice, nothing works. Just like in the days of prophet Amos, the poor are becoming poorer in Nigeria and the rich are becoming richer (Timothy, 2008) to the extent that it is no longer difficult to know one’s “level or cadre” in terms of wealth and influence.

Just as YHWH commanded the people of Israel to allow *מִשְׁפָּט* (Mishpat) to run like a river in Amos 5:24, the same is also needed in our nation if the tide of adversity and economic instability will be a thing of the past. There is no better time to discuss about justice in Nigeria especially as regards Nigeria’s economy than now. This is because we are in a season where Nigeria as a nation is gasping for breath economically and this has crippled a lot of things in the nation even as we speak.

The judiciary who should evince the implementation of *מִשְׁפָּט* (Mishpat) and become oasis in the desert of Nigeria’s judicial system, have become a sad trickle where injustice is being fed to stupor. The judgments that are often pronounced from this arm of government have wounded many citizens to the extent that people are nursing physical and psychological wounds. It is because of this ineffectiveness that the security of the nation has gone haywire because even when culprits are apprehended it is not certain that justice would be meted out. Sadly, it is no longer news to hear that a pauper who stole in the market is declared guilty and sent straight into the prison and the wealthy ones or privileged class who are caught in the web of carting away public funds are freed and declared innocent.

Also, the Executive arm and the Legislative arm are not clean in this act of injustice, majority of the policies that are made are enacted to favor the elite even to the detriment of the poor masses. If justice is practiced, those who are caught in the web of embezzling the dividends

of fuel subsidy since its arrival, how many of them have been put to judgment? Over the years, people have witnessed the failure of anti-corruption initiatives by the Executive and Legislative arms with several billions of dollars disappearing as if they have wings.

Also, when contracts are to be given, who do they give it to? Can we really say the process is just and open for all qualified contractors? What happens with sanctioning of the allocations of funds for the Legislative arms even when the nation is bleeding economically?

Recently, the Central Bank of Nigeria, which epitomizes the weakness of Nigeria's institutions, gave a directive mandating Deposit Money Banks (DMB) to collect and verify customers' social media handles as "knowing Your Customer" procedure and a way of curbing crimes and corruption. This is after the same financial institution has subjected Nigerians into getting the Biometric Verification Number (BVN) some years ago and yet corruption has not even slowed down.

As a regulator of the financial system and protector of its integrity and of customers, its record is poor, even on the watch of its suspended and "detained" Governor of the Central Bank (Godwin Emefiele), the Deposit Money Banks have been ripping off customers, flouting regulations at will and facilitating money laundering and other abuses. Years after the law forbade the operation of any bank account in Nigeria without a BVN, it has been discovered that over 45 million accounts were still not linked to any BVN as at February 2022. Where then is justice to those particularly the elderly ones who braved the heat of the sun and left the comfort of their homes to register their BVN when it was mandated.

All these are pointers that we lack justice in Nigeria and if we desire a positive change from the sad narrative because justice is inevitable. When Nigeria as a nation allows *מִשְׁפָּט* (Mishpat) to run like a river as Amos declared in Amos 5:24, the judiciary should evince justice, credibility should be given to the decisions and judgment of the judiciary by both the Executive and Legislative arms. If this is carried out, defaulters will be put to judgment regardless of whether they are rich or poor, contracts will be awarded to the most qualified without being lobbied and business will thrive in a manner that investors will be attracted to come into the country. All these will help sanitize our economy which often time is the major recipient of these acts of injustice.

Conclusion

Just as prophet Amos exhorted and warned the people of Israel about their acts of injustice, this paper is also a clarion call to all and sundry especially those in governance to let "justice roll like a river...". When the practice of *מִשְׁפָּט* (Mishpat) is carried out in all sectors of our Nation, our economy will be revived as business will thrive, the citizens will be given opportunities to enjoy their fundamental human rights, and morality will be restored in all sectors of our nation which will invariably lead to economic stability. This paper has been able to give an appraisal of the book of Amos, the concept of *מִשְׁפָּט* (Mishpat) in Amos 5:24 and domesticating it as a panacea for economic stability in Nigeria.

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