

A Rereading of Amos 5:21-24 in Contemporary Nigerian Society

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Abstract

Nigeria is a religious country because of her multiplicity of religious institutions, expressions, religious symbols and places of worship. Places of worship are regularly filled to capacity and the leaders of these different religious institutions claim divine origin of their calling. From the foregoing, one could assert that Nigerians are a-God-fearing people, but on the contrary, the nation is bedevilled by unimaginable evils. Evils that have informed an increase in injustice and unrighteousness caused by the fake religiosity expressed in worships. Israel, in prophet Amos' time, had such fake religiosity displayed in worship, but equally devoid of justice and righteousness. The prophet condemned it. This study contends that the true worship of YHWH is not manifested in pleasurable acts of worships alone, but also in acts of justice and righteousness. Employing the historico-critical method on Amos 5:21-24, this article argues that without justice and righteousness, religious expressions are incomplete and they do not contribute to nation growth.

Key words: Hypocrisy, Righteousness, Justice, Common Humanity, and Religiosity

Introduction

Prophet Amos challenged the social injustice against the poor and weak in Israel. The gravity of these evils was on account of the unlimited wealth the kingdoms of Israel and Judah amassed in the 8th century BC. These riches were generated from the free trade and tolls on caravans plying the trade route controlled by Judah and Israel (John Bright, 2000, p. 258; Hans Walter Wolff, 1977, p. 89; p. Abraham J. Heschel, 2001, p. 32; T. L. Leclerc, 2007, p. 117). It was only common sense to have thought that the great wealth created should have brought relief to every citizen. Instead, the rich and powerful were consumed by greed and selfishness. As a result, the poor and the weaker members of the society did not benefit from the tremendous wealth made. Instead, there was a chasm between the rich and the poor. Sequel to that were prevailing social evils in the land (Bright 260; Heschel 33): the poor were sold (2:6), their belongings confiscated (2:8), they were oppressed (4:1), extorted (5:11) and denied justice at

the gate (5:12) (260). Yet in the midst of all these inhuman acts, religious activities were elaborate in the shrine at Bethel and other worship centres. Bethel being a royal temple, it must have been under the watch of King Jeroboam II and the priest Amaziah (7:10). The King on the one hand, who should have been the defender of the poor and guarantor of justice, was equally unjust (1Sam 8:14-15; 1 Kgs 4:7, 22-28). The priest Amaziah, on the other hand, who should teach the people the ways of the law of the Lord (Hos 4:1, 6; Jer 2:5-6; 1 Kgs 18:21-22), was caught in the web of these vices against the marginalized because he was a beneficiary of the oppression against the poor (261). However, among the 8th century prophets, it was Amos who condemned in strong terms, the worship at Bethel because of its religious hypocrisy that had destroyed the foundation of human community. It was the social disintegration and religious decay that attracted the rejection of their cultic activities in Amos 5:21-24 (Leclerc 134; G. E. Mendenhall, 2001, p. 70). A pericope which upheld justice and righteousness as the crux of true worship.

This article asserts that acts of worship should transform worshippers to respect and uphold the dignity of all people irrespective of their status or social leanings. This shall be achieved by the use of the historical-critical method exegesis on Amos 5:21-24.

Historical Background

The 8th century BC saw the reign of Uzziah of Judah (783-742 BC) and Jeroboam II of Israel ((Amos 1:1b; 786-746 BC). Their rules came shortly two years before the earthquake which marked the crimes (pride and apostasy) of Uzziah (Amos 1:1b; cf. 2 Chron 26:16-21; Zech 14:5). The prophesy of Amos came at the time when Jeroboam II was king of Israel (Wolff 89; B. E. Willoughby, 1992, p. 205; Leclerc 116; R. S. Hess, 2016, p. 620). Uzziah and Jeroboam II had had successful military expeditions against their neighbours. As a result of their successes, lost territories, including the major trade route, known as the 'King Highway', were recovered. Great wealth was accrued to Israel through tolls or taxes from caravans. With peace and security ensured, there was free trade of goods and services. Trading opportunities poured wealth into Judah and Israel. Prosperity from the economy boom made the 8th century period to be referred to as the 'golden age', equalled to the era of King Solomon (Bright 258; Leclerc 117).

However, the consequences of Israel's enormous economic prosperity gave rise to their religious apostasy and social evils that affected the lives of the poor. On the consequences of economic wealth, Bright writes:

It is certain, however, that the lot of the humbler citizen was unnecessarily hard, and that the state did little or nothing to alleviate it. Israelite society, as Amos lets us see it, was marked by egregious

injustices and shocking contrast between extremes of wealth and poverty. The small farmer, whose economic status was marginal at best, found himself at the mercy of the moneylender and, at the slightest calamity – a drought, a crop failure (cf. Amos 4:6-9) – liable to foreclosure and eviction, if not bond service. The system, which was itself harsh, was made harsher by the greed of the wealthy, who took unmerciful advantage of the plight of the poor in order to enlarge their holdings, often resorting to the sharpest practices, the falsification of weights and measures, and various legal dodges to achieve their ends (Amos 2:6f.; 5:11; 8:4-6) (259-260).

The riches also led to elaborate feasts (4:1; 6:4, 6), new music (6:5), and sexual immorality (2:7b). Places of worship were crowded with much sacrificial offerings (4:4-5; 5:21-22). Feasts were celebrated with ebullient singing and instrumental music (5:23). So, people felt that God was blessing them, even though the rich were richer and the poor were poorer. The poor could not find justice and so they were subjected to many forms of oppression and inhumanity from the hands of their own people (Bright 259, 260). It is on this gruesome situation that Heschel avers:

The prophet preoccupation with justice and righteousness has its roots in a powerful awareness of injustice. That justice is a good thing, a fine goal, even a supreme ideal, is commonly accepted. What is lacking is a sense of the monstrosity of injustice. Moralists of all ages have been eloquent in singing the praises of virtue. The distinction of the prophets was in their remorseless unveiling of injustice and oppression, in their comprehension of social, political, and religious evils. They were not concerned with the definition, but with the predicament of justice, with the fact that those called upon to apply it defied it (260).

Social ills, for prophet Amos, was an outright rejection of YHWH's love and the covenant tradition. It was because of the covenant that YHWH elected Israel to be His people, and Him, their God. According to the terms of the treaty, there should be total and undivided loyalty and obedience to their social coercion and to YHWH (Newsome 25; Mendenhall 66, 67).

Immediate Literary Context and Delineation of Amos 5:21-24

In Amos 5, the prophet relays YHWH's complains against the lips service in Israel. The lamentation of prophet Amos actually began over their sins with the pronouncement of the woes in chapter 3. Out of these woes, there are two in chapter 5. Chapter 5:1-6 captures the lament of YHWH over the house of Israel; then vv. 7-17 introduced the first woe with *hōy* הוי (woe, alas) that condemned the social injustice against the poor. From vv. 18-27, it is the second woe against

those seeking the day of the Lord. These verses, therefore, pronounced judgement and condemnation of YHWH upon the house of Israel over their sins. The text of delineation is vv. 21-24 which falls within the second woe in chapter 5:18-27.

Chapter 5:21-24 is treated as an independent unit because of the shift to a 1st person which ended with a conditional clause in v. 24. This unit brings out the message of justice and righteousness of prophet Amos more forcefully by its oracle of the approaching judgment and condemnation upon the house of Israel. In this text, YHWH rejected the cultic activities at Bethel because it lacked the ingredients of true worship in the kingdom of Israel: justice and righteousness. This unit is significant because it also served as the peak of the message of prophet Amos (Brueggemann 227; Hess 625; Newsome 26). What it captures more vividly is this, that true external worship must ensure interior change in the daily dealings of worshipper with their fellow brothers and sisters.

Structure and Exegesis of Amos 5:21-24

- i. Divine Hatred and Rejection (vv. 21-23)
- ii. The Pillars of true Worship (v. 24)

Divine Hatred and Rejection (vv. 21-23)

V. 21. The singular forms of *sānē'ti* (סָנְאָתִי) 'I hate' and *mā'asti* (מָאַסְתָּ) 'I reject' are placed side by side for the purpose of intensity. The *qal* form of the verb *sānē'* (סָנְאָ) comes from the root *śn'*. Its common meaning among the Semitic people, Akkadian and Arab, is "to hate." This verb in its root form appears 164 times in the Old Testament, including the form *sōnē'* (Ps 32x, Prov 23x, Deut 18x, Gen 7x and 2 Sam 7x), which is rendered as "hater" (E. Jenni, 2004, p. 1277, 1278).

The *qal* form of the verb *mā'as* (מָאַס) takes its root from *m's* with diverse translations in both secular and religious sense. This verb appears in its profane form 17 times, in its usage with God 29 times, or with a person 26 times, making a total of 72 times (H. Wildberger, 2004, p. 652). In these appearances, the verb is rendered as "to reject", "to despise", "to overlook", "disdain", "disregard", "cast away", "deny", and "consider worthless". Thus, it is the context that can determine what is suitable. This verb appears in Middle Hebrew, Jewish and Aramaic usage. The Akkadian *mašū* (Assyria, *mašā'u*) is "to forget". But because of its theological import in Amos, it would be better rendered as "rejection" (Wildberger 651, 652). The juxtaposition of these verbs together intensified the sternness or the force of the speaker's emotion (Newsome 27). Its usage in v. 21 is not different from its common meaning, but putting the two verbs, *sānē'ti* and *mā'asti* consecutively give the sense in which they were used; a deep repugnance over something or person. The person (s) referred to here could be

the aristocrats and the rich. However, it is not clear if the hatred here is on Jeroboam II and Amaziah the priest as well as their worship. The hatred in the text is used on persons not the cult, but since the cultic activities were performed by the people, this rejection could be for both the worshippers and their acts of religiosity.

The noun feminine *'šārāh* (שָׂרָה) occurs 11 times in the OT. In these occurrences, it is translated 9 times as “solemn assembly”. In Amos 5:21 it refers to the sacred assembly at Bethel which YHWH has rejected (Amos 5:21; Isa 1:13), the same noun is associated with the assembly of the worshippers of Baal (2 Kgs 10:20; Num 29:35) (W. Gesenius, 1909, p. 783). Then once it was each used for a solemn meeting or assembly. However, the general connotation is associated with “sacred or festive meeting” (Gesenius 783). This later meaning rhymes with the assembly in Amos 5:21 because of its cultic nature. Therefore, the noun *'šārāh* shall be used in this study as sacred assembly. Since YHWH rejects the people, same would have been extended to cultic activities.

Rāšāh (רָשָׁה) comes from the root *ršw/y*. First meaning “to be pleased with” and second “to pay, reimbursed” (G. Gerleman, 2004, p. 1259). According to Gerleman, the first instance of the meaning of the second root of *ršh* is easily subsumed into the semantic scope of the first root meaning “to accept”, because of its weak semasiological examination. This meaning appeared more on a negative than positive note with the basic meaning “to cause to come to one, to (have to) accept as one's lot” (1259). The verb *ršh* appears in its *qal* form 42 times in the OT and 13 times in the prophetic writings (1259). As a technical term in these contexts, YHWH's pleasure was the definitive function of *ršh* in the priestly cultic activities than its other secular usage. Thus, it is used to determine the acceptability of any sacrifice offered to YHWH (cf. Jer 14:10, 12; Hos 8:13; Amos 5:22; Mic 6:7; Mal 1:8, 10, 13) (1260-1261).

'ōlōt (עֹלֹת) 'burnt offering' or its Septuagint translation holocaust from the root to 'go up' (Roland De Vaux 415) *šēlēm* (שְׁלֵמָה) ('peace offering' is a hapax legomenon in Amos 5:22) (1348) and *minhāh* (מִנְחָה) 'grain-offering' are aspects or kinds of Israel's sacrifices that were offered to YHWH. In fact, at the earlier relationship with His people, YHWH demanded for burnt offering from His people for its sweet-smelling oblation (Lev 1:9, 13; 2:3, 9, 12; 3:5, 16; 6:15 AB). For YHWH to reject outrightly the 'sweet-smelling oblation' signalled a problem. The offerings had become empty with no significance (Wolff 259). This study takes note of how the MT's critical apparatus drops the word *'ōlōt* 'burnt offering' at the end of the stitch that suggests a colon. It shows that the second line of v. 22 is missing or removed (Newsome 27). The most probable reason could be its difficult interpretation, yet the more difficult the text the better its originality. But for Wolff, “the colon disturbs the strict parallelism of members

in 5:21-24; it also breaks the pattern through its change of subject (second-person plural instead of first-person singular in vv. 21, 22aβ) and the absence of a pronominal suffix on 'ōlôt...). Even if one assumes the loss of a colon after v. 22a ...one still cannot restore a parallelism suitable to the context" (259). The object of this exceptive or restrictive clause is עֲלֹתָ which represents the other forms of sacrifices which might have included that of human sacrifices (Norman K. Gottwald, 1987, p. 216). The MT interpretation is the most probable one. What was usually the accompaniment of the acts of sacrifices was music and dancing.

Some scholars seem to be less concerned with the question of those YHWH/Amos addressed. Much emphasis has been on the divine rejection of exterior worship without any resultant effect. But what made the ground fertile for such an empty worship at Bethel is not in public domain. It seems two categories of people are involved. Could the "you" in singular number be referring to either the king or the priest and the "you" in plural number be the wealthy aristocrats and oppressors of the poor? These are only conjectures since the text did not state so. What seems clearer in this study is the plausible setting affirmed by Wolff as the state sanctuary at Bethel. Going by what Leclerc infers, it is most probable that Jeroboam II and Amaziah (the priest) were among those that streamed to the shrines in northern Israel, especially at Bethel, for religious rites (Leclerc 133). The King in Israel supposed to be the protector of the poor and the needy, while the priest the teacher of the law. Unfortunately, Jeroboam did not protect the poor of YHWH and Amaziah did not teach the law to the people, thus, "there was no knowledge of God" (Hos 4:1, 6; Amos 7:10-13; see Jer 2:5, 8) (133).

In v. 23 the noun *nēbel* (נֶבֶל) means 'jug or harp' (M. Sæbø, 2004, p. 710). However, since it is a religious setting that involves music, interpreting *nēbel* as 'harp' fits the semantics of the passage. Usually, liturgical activities go hand in hand with music and this music requires musical accompaniment like the harp (cf. Amos 6:5; 1 kgs 10:12 and Ps 33:2). But instead of this stringed instrument, the harp, bringing out beautiful melody for worshippers, the verse ascribed *hāmōn širekā* (הַמְּוִן שִׁירֵיךָ) as the noise of your songs and *wəzimirat nābālekā* (וְזִמְרַת נְבִלֶיךָ) (your stringed instrument). Noise instead of a beautiful and harmonious melody coming from the use of these stringed instruments by the temple singers (von Rad 369; Newsome 28) was an outright rejection of the solemn or sacred assemblies. If what makes the music melodious has become noisy, it connotes displeasure or total withdrawal. YHWH completely rejected His people completely over their unfaithfulness to the covenant obligation. By rejecting the people, He did not only reject their gifts and melodies but has equally severed His relationship with them (369).

So also, the non-involvement of the senses of smell, hearing and seeing signified YHWH's non presence at their festivities. Their sweet-smelling oblation lost its aromatic odour because the covenant relationship has been broken. Israel is abandoned and left on her own. Now without divine protection, the people were prone to external aggression. Therefore, the verbs 'I hate' and 'I reject' governed all the aspects of the cultic activities YHWH has rejected in vv. 21-23. YHWH turned away from His people by hating and rejecting the rites of their religious ceremonies because they did not meet up with authentic worship that culminates in justice and righteousness (von Rad 370; Newsome 27).

The Pillars of true Worship (v. 24)

V. 24 contains two key nouns *mišpāt* (מִשְׁפָּט) 'justice, ordinance' and *šadāqāh* (שְׁדָאָה) 'justice, righteousness'. *Mišpāt* is from the root *špt* 'justice' often parallel *šadāqāh* in Amos 5:7, 24; 6:12 and also *hesed* (חֶסֶד) 'kindness, loving-kindness, mercy' (Jer 9:23; Hos 2:21; 4:1; 12:7; Mic 6:8). In the realm of the divine, YHWH is the subject of *špt*, because of His authority to judge. The *špt* at the city gate does not differ from the *špt* of God (G. Liedke 1397, 1398.). Therefore, YHWH's *mišpāt* refers to His verdict (Isa 3:14; 30:18; Ezek 39:21; Zeph 3:5, 8; Job 40:8, etc.). The root of *šadāqāh* is *šdq* with its basic mean 'to be straight' or 'norm'. The masculine form *šdq* (justice, rightness) appears 118 times while the feminine form *šadāqāh* appears 156 times in the OT. In most instances, when they appear together, they act complementarily. The root of *šdq* and *špt* essentially imply conformity to an ethical, moral standard, to measure right conduct in any human relationship. Another verb that depicts these characteristics of *špt* and *šdq* is *Tāmīm* which is the act of dealing with people with integrity (E. Gerstenberger, 2004, p.1426; Hess 625; von Rad 370, 371; Newsome 28; M. D. Coogan, 2006, p. 318).

Great caution is required here to avoid erroneous interpretation of the text. YHWH rejected only the solemn assembly that the worshippers failed to meet the standard of *mišpāt* and *šadāqāh* and not the worship itself. In other words, their external worship did not go hand in hand with their day to day living, especially with the poor and those at the lower ladder of the society. Hence, the worship the Israelites offered to YHWH was not genuine, it was empty, filled with nothing but treachery. YHWH desires mercy and not sacrifice (Matt 9:13; I Sam 15:22; Isa 1:10-16; 29:13-14; 58:1-6; Jer 6:20; Hos 6:6; Mic 6:5-8; Zech 7:4-6; Ps 40:6-8; 50:5-15; 51:16-17). Right ethical conduct should be seen to accompany reverence of God. YHWH rejected His own people for their evil disobedience, social injustice and oppression of the poor. The exceptive or restrictive clause *ki 'im* (כִּי אִם) (except, but) in v. 21 laid the condition for the worship that is proper to God in v. 24. What God wants is the worship born out of *mišpāt* (judgment, norm) and *šadāqāh* (and righteousness) a term that denoting true relationship between parties, to roll down like an overflowing stream (von Rad 371; Brueggemann 227; Coogan 318). Could the contemporary Nigerian worshippers be said to meet the judgment of *mišpāt* and *šadāqāh*?

Israel: The Chosen People and the Implication of their Position

According to Gerhard von Rad and many other scholars, the choice of Israel as a people was by a divine election and not by any merit (von Rad 178; Robert B. Chisholm 323, 324; James D. Newsome, 1987, pp. 24, 25). This choice began with the call of Abram, when YHWH asked that he should leave his people and the land of Ur of the Chaldeans to an unknown destination (Gen 11:31; 12:1, 7). To assure Abram of security and protection, YHWH said "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:2-3 NRSV). YHWH did not falter from the promise He made to Abram and his descendants (Chisholm 324). It is this promise, therefore, that established the basis of this relationship. The use of election or choice as the basis of this affinity with Israel is appropriate because YHWH was the initiator and guarantor of this bond. The history of Israel is a testimony to the fact that they are a chosen people. YHWH led the Israelites into Egypt and when they were being persecuted, He set them free through Moses and Aaron. The covenant with the children of Israel on Mount Sinai formed was the re-enactment of the relationship that begun with Abraham. The deliverance from Egypt, redemption from slavery and election of the people of Israel by YHWH was all an affirmation that they are His chosen people (Chisholm 323; von Rad 179).

But there was an 'if clause' which introduced the condition enshrined in the relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel. YHWH said "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5). The response of the people was obvious "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exod 19:8). The Decalogue, which was the norm for this contract, deals with the duties of man with man and with YHWH (von Rad 191, 370). YHWH initiated the covenant and Israel accepted and became committed as partakers. Thus, they pledged their loyalty and obedience to the covenant obligations. That obligation was going to affect their civic, social and economic relationship with one another (Eugene H. Merrill 74). Thus, loyalty to YHWH and love in human association is the focal point of this affiliation. To sustain this friendship YHWH called for total and unreserved obedience to Him. As such, He alone must be worshipped and none other (Deut 6:10-15) (Merrill 78; Miller 47; Newsome 24). Thus, the love of YHWH must be expressed in human relationship (Deut 10:12-22). The ground of sustaining this relationship among covenant associates was placed in cultic activities. It is in this light that Merrill writes: "The arena in which this takes place formally is worship, but because there was no ultimate distinction between sacred and profane in Israel, all actions of the community and its citizens had to be couched in terms of purity

and righteousness" (82). Similarly, the suzerainty-vassal could have influenced how those under the Mosaic Covenant should conduct themselves with one another (87). But did the people of Israel hearken to this guidance?

The theology of the 8th century prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah is anchored on the Covenant Tradition. Israel and Judah's identity as a people was based on the Sinaitic covenant which bonded them with YHWH and one another. During the period of the Judges and the Kings, many Israelites fell back into the worship of other gods. A deviation that would be the primary concern of the prophetic call and oracles to the people of Israel and Judah.

Having agreed to the terms and conditions of the covenant with YHWH, the Israelites had no option but to obey the stipulations binding in the treaty they have made. Instead, they chose to reject YHWH for the Canaanites' nature religions. Thus, YHWH on his part rejected them. It is this rejection that became the crux of the prophecy of Amos is 5:21-24. These verses depicted the pains and anger of YHWH over the people who worship Him only with their lips. Hosea equalled the syncretism of Israel to that of a prostitute oscillating from one suitor to the other because they have no knowledge of YHWH (1:2-9; 4:1-19; 5:1-7; 9:1, 10; 11:1, 10). There are many other texts that depict Israel's unfaithfulness by their outright disobedience to the Covenant Tradition with their cultic transgression (Newsome 37; A. A. Macintosh, 1997, p. 144).

In the same vein, prophet Micah was saddened with the excesses of the powerful in Judah who cheated and oppressed the common citizens. And based on the covenant stipulations, the poor citizens were their very responsibilities as they bonded themselves with YHWH. Micah 2:2, 9, explains the helplessness of the poor as their lands were confiscated from them and leaving them to suffer untold poverty for the lack of any means of livelihood (Newsome 51, 52; Hess 625). It was the lack of justice that inspired the core message of prophet Micah summed up in 6:6-8, as the condition for finding peace with the ruler of the universe: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God (Mic 6:8). This is a reminiscence of what King Ahab did to Naboth with regards to his vineyard and the response of prophet Elijah (1 Kgs 21). All these sins were perpetrated against the poor because the priests had compromised their teaching and the prophets gave favourable prophecies as complained by prophet Jeremiah (Jer 6:13; 8:10). YHWH, therefore, would serve as both plaintiff and judge against Israel for a breach of the covenant (Newsome 54, 55; Macintosh 114; Hess 625).

Amos, the prophet measured the moral life of the people in the context of justice and righteousness (5:24) and concluded that their worship was not acceptable before God. These denote moral integrity as one of the major prerequisites of

YHWH on his chosen people (Wolff 264; Newsome 24; Hess 625, 627). It was expected of the people who, having entered into a covenant with the Lord, to live by the terms of the covenant. A term which embodied the religious, political and social lives of the people. In other words, those who are bonded by the covenant, are not only committed to YHWH but to one another. Instead, they turned away from YHWH as a result of their repulsive evil that contradicted the covenant's stipulations. The wrath of YHWH was kindled against His people due to their repulsive acts against the poor and the consequence was the exile of the northern kingdom to Assyria in 722/1 BC and of Judah to Babylon in 587 BC (Bright 275, 327; Newsome 25).

Nigeria and Israel: A Contrast

It is evident in the Old Testament prophetic writings that what makes worship authentic is the interior disposition of the worshipper to act with justice and righteousness in their dealings with others in the society. This understanding cuts across the teaching of Jesus Christ and his Apostles in the New Testament (Mt 25:40, 45 see also 10:40-42; Jas 2:15-16).

Nigeria, as a country, has been reckoned as a religious nation due to its outward and flamboyant display in matters of religion. Yet, for some decades now, this nation has been found wanting in almost every face of her national life. As earlier mentioned, it would be an impossible task for a researcher to come up with the numbers of the places of worship of all faith groups in Nigeria. Under any normal circumstances, one should expect high moral standards, justice, equity, fairness, and respect for the dignity of persons and their rights, transparency, good governance, accountability, peaceful coexistence among others is the tragedy that has befallen this great nation. Despite the ongoing religious activities with its exuberant worship among all the various faith groups, the country is bedevilled with all kinds of unspeakable crimes due to a disconnect between worship and praxis. Organised crimes, killing, maiming, corruption, ethnicity, nepotism, religious bigotry, bad governance and unaccountability, poor health delivery, unemployment, poverty, hunger, poor transport system, brain drain, impunity and insecurity. The country has plummeted downward on account of the aforementioned with the resultant consequence of every kind of crime on daily basis. All these criminal activities are going side by side with ostentatious religious activities because of the combination of ritual with iniquity.

Due to all forms of intolerance either on the basis of religion, tribe, ethnicity, and social status have given birth to impunity, abuse of power and gross human rights violations of citizens. The rights which every civilized government is under obligation to protect and defend. These rights and equality of citizens are enshrined in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria [as

amended] (Nigeria Const. 1999 amend. IV, sec. 34-45). The danger of human rights violations and marginalization is that it brings about suspicion. Suspicion trigger conflicts in any society no matter how long it takes. Any sane person would have thought that with the death toll brought about by covid-19, most of our people would have been sorry for any wrong that have committed. But the killings in Kaduna, Katsina and Benue States stated otherwise. All we hear in Nigeria is: "Gunmen attack Kaduna villages, kill 38, gunmen shot at people, including women and children in two villages" (Premium Times, May 7th, 2020), "Kaduna: Bandits kill over 50 in fresh attack" (Vanguard, March 2nd, 2020), "At least 50 killed in northern Nigeria 'bandit' attacks" (Aljazeera: News/Africa, March 2nd, 2020), "15 feared slain in fresh attack on Kaduna community" (The Guardian, May 13th, 2020), "Gunmen kill over 20 in Katsina, Kaduna, Benue communities" (Daily Trust, May 14th, 2020), not to mention the number of people that have been kidnapped and impoverished due to payment of ransom. The list of all these atrocities is endless. The dehumanizing conditions of the people is not only abhorring but traumatising and despicable.

Today, Nigeria is known for nothing among the committee of nations other than being a lawless society where criminals walk on the streets with nobody accosting them. Kidnappers have dared the government who have appeared to be either powerless, helpless or complicit. Citizens have become commodities in the hands of terrorist/abductors for ransom. Nobody, as it stands today can give a detailed number of the abductees in the country. Not to talk about how citizens have been bled white from the payment of ransom. These heinous activities of bandits have impacted negatively on the social, economic, political and religious lives of the helpless and traumatized citizens. Nigeria, according to the World Bank, has overtaken India to become the poverty capital of the world since 2016. Without justice taking its course against the enemies of the state, this country heads for unmitigated disaster and chaos. Therefore, there is no anytime that Nigeria needs men and women of integrity than now. Therefore, any worship without justice and righteousness is worthless before YHWH.

Conclusion

This article has brought out more succinctly the correlation between the people of Israel and Nigeria. Their worship to YHWH were said to be ostentatious but without substance because their religious activities made no significant impact on the lives of the needy members of their societies. In fact, instead of lifting the burden on people, they have been left even with worst suffering because there was no connection between worship and praxis. The poor were oppressed and impoverished thus keeping them perpetually at the bottom of the social ladder of society. What makes worship acceptable to YHWH is when there is justice and righteousness. These two pillars bring order, discipline and stability to the

human family, by them is found the right dealings of individuals with their fellow citizens. YHWH, from the very beginning of the covenant with the people of Israel, as this study has shown, explicate the need for caution in the dealings of the rich with the poor. The 8th century prophets, Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah drummed this social and ethical responsibility in their prophetic messages. But this article has shown that the people of Israel stubbornly gave a deaf ear to the warnings of the prophet and the aftermath was the two exiles of 722/1 BC and 587 BC. According to this research, the situation in contemporary Nigeria is not different from that of Israel. By analogy, therefore, we must embrace the call by the prophets of our contemporary times to turn away from any act that can destroy the nucleus of the human society. As a matter of great urgency, we must embrace justice, righteousness, equity and fair play in our dealings with one another, especially in matters that directly affect the poor and the weak. Anything short of that, like the people 8th century Israelites, we worship YHWH in futility. For ritual cannot and should not go hand in hand with iniquity.

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