

Social injustice and its Corollary in Amos 8:1-14 **Lessons for Nigerian Christians**

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Introduction

Injustice against the less privileged – the poor, the needy, the widows, the orphans, etc. – is one of the notable sins of the Israelites. God accuses Samaria of this sin of injustice times without number and warns them through the prophets. Though the warning is normally directed to the leading classes, both in the socio-political and religious spheres, every individual has a share. In Amos 8:1-14, God is poised to teach the Northern Israelites a grave lesson, since they did not heed the voice of the prophets who successively warned them of the dangers of injustice (an offshoot of idolatry) and called them to repentance. God inspires Prophet Amos to use various metaphors to convey the message of the imminent Assyrian invasion and destruction of Israel. Israelites' solemn but empty religious ceremonies are abhorrent to God. Since Amos uses interchangeably the terms 'Israel' or 'Samaria' to refer to the Northern Israel, to whom he prophesies, the same is applied in this paper. The text under study has great lessons for Christians in Nigeria, among whom exist all kinds of social injustice; yet they are wont of all kinds of lofty and grandiose religious ceremonies. In this study, the verse numbers of biblical quotations are kept intact for easy reference.

1. A Cry for Justice – the Bedrock of Amos' Prophecy

Interpreting Amos, injustice, brutality (mercilessness) and oppression of the weak seem to be the main reason God had to punish different nations. In order to justify God's judgment and punishment of Samaria, Amos gives a preamble of how God punished or will punish various nations for the sin of injustice and lack of mercy (1:2-2:5). For instance: Syria "threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron" (1:4); Philistine carried a whole people into exile in Edom (1:6); Tyre did not remember the covenant of brotherhood (1:9); Edom pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all pity; "his anger tore perpetually; and he kept his wrath forever" (1:11); Ammonites "ripped up women with child in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border" (1:13); and Moab "burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom" (2:1). Judah was punished for not keeping the Torah and following the lies of the fathers (2:4). At this juncture, Amos reaches his target – the judgment of the Northern Israel (capital, Samaria).

The very first oracle of Amos against Israelites that calls for punishment is that "they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes – ⁷ they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted" (2:6-7). He condemns idolatry (2:8-9), the denunciation of the prophets and the desecration of the Nazarites (2:12). Israel's punishment is greater because, being the elect and knowing the truth, she has no excuse (3:1-2). She knows the principle of cause and effect (3:3-8), for instance, a lion does not roar in the forest when there is no prey. So, the instruments of God's anger (Assyria and Egypt) are invited: "Assemble yourselves upon the mountains of Samaria, and see the great tumults within her, and the oppressions in her midst". The inhabitants do not do right and they "store up violence and robbery in their

strongholds” (3:9-10). The rich oppressed the poor, crushed the needy and indulged in revelry (4:1).

In spite of Israel’s injustice, oppression and cruelty, she makes a cover-up with false piety or religiosity, observing scrupulously feasts, laws and ordinances (4:4-5). God punished Israel for deterrent purposes both naturally (drought, famine, pestilence, etc.) and even politically (routs in war); but for umpteenth time, God says of her, “yet you did not return to me” and so the final sentence is inevitable, “Prepare to meet your God, O Israel” (4:6-12).

In chapter 5, though Amos makes a clear and elaborate expression of the injustice and oppression in Israel, covered up with the guise of sacrificial rituals, solemn assemblies and ostentatious and melodious liturgies that even smack of idolatry, the punishment he expresses is not absolutely final (5:2-3, 16-20). Israelites turn justice to wormwood and forget righteousness. They hate the truth and trample on the poor and the needy. They build costly houses and plant vast vineyards with fruits of extortion and bribery (Amos 5:6-7, 10-14). God warns, “¹⁵ Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph...”²⁴ Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5:15, 24).

In chapter 6 also, Amos denounces the attitude of the rich who lie on ivory beds and relax on their couches, feeding on the flocks and calves from the stall and enjoy hilarious music with instruments and songs. They anoint themselves and indulge in carousal and revelry, while forgetting the ruins of Joseph, the poor (6:4-7). They turn “justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood” (6:12).

2. The Background of Amos 8:1-14

Through Amos, God began something new in Israelite religious life. Unlike the earlier seers and prophets, like Samuel and Elijah, who expressed only orally the word of God to the people, Amos began the era of classical prophecy – both oral and written expressions. Amos brought also a clear demarcation between the professional brotherhood of the prophets, who prophesied for money and other material gains, and the prophets whom God called solely to proclaim his words gratuitously to the people. This demarcation was not there in the early days during the time of Samuel (1 Sam 10:9-12). Samuel, the man of God, was even considered and treated as a professional seer and prophet, who necessarily earned money for his art (1 Sam 9:6-10). This is the reason Amos protested and rejected the title ‘prophet’ (Amos 7:12). Zechariah later did the same (Zech 13:5). For Nicoll, “It is the protest of a new order of prophecy, the charter of a spiritual religion”; and it is “one of the greatest and most indispensable in the history of religion”.¹

The people of Northern Israel, having failed to listen to the voices of the prophets from their folk, God decided to send to them Amos, a stranger from the South, who was a farmer and a shepherd by profession (Amos 7:14). “It was during the reign of Uzziah, king of Judah and of Jeroboam II, king of Israel, and was outwardly a very prosperous time in Northern Israel. But social evils were everywhere manifest, especially the sins that grew out of a separation between the rich and the

¹ William R. Nicoll, “Commentary on Amos 8” in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, available online, www.studydrive.org/commentaries/teb/amos-8.html [accessed on 12/10/16].

poor, 2:6-8, etc. Religion was of a low and formal kind, very much of the heathen worship having been adopted”.²

The prophecy of Amos is in the form of oracles and visions. The first six chapters are basically oracles. The five visions reports of Amos are found within chapters 7-9 – three in chapter 7 (vv. 1-3; 4-6 & 7-9); one in chapter 8:1-3; and the other in 9:1-4. The vision reports in the other prophetic books are more picturesque than the ones in Amos, which are more verbal. Though the visions are similar, there is a remarkable progression in each. After Amos had delivered his first three visions in 7:1-9, Amaziah, the priest of Bethel reported him to King Jeroboam II for predicting the murder of the king and the exile of Israel. Consequently, Amaziah threatened Amos and asked him to flee back to Judah (Amos 7:10-13). Smith is right in his opinion that Amos withstood the threat of Amaziah, for he remained in the territory, continuing his prophecy (Amos 7:14-17).³ Among other attributes, Amos demonstrates that though God is full of mercy, he is also God of justice. A society which does not promote justice among her people crumbles, no matter the height of prosperity it reaches. True prosperity is justice and righteousness. On this the Lord will judge every person and allot reward or punishment. False religion that overlooks justice is odious to God.

3. The Unity and Coherency of Amos 8:1-14

Amos 8:1-14 is the account of the fourth vision and its adjunct oracle that brings out its meaning. The vision (vv. 1-3) is about the utter destruction and end of Israel, given in a metaphoric expression. The reasons for the impending judgment and the consequential catastrophe are given in verses 4-7, namely, Israel has abandoned the way of righteousness and justice; and in addition, verse 14 specifies idolatry. Verses 8-10 and 13 give a glimpse of the horrible natural and political onslaught which God would unleash on Israel. There will be a famine of the word of God (vv. 11-12). We can therefore see in chapter 8 a perfect unity, where an oracle explains the vision that precedes it. So, Thorogood’s opinion that 8:1-3 is a later insertion is not credible.⁴

4. The Analysis of the Text

a. The Vision of Summer Fruit – Symbol of an End (vv. 1-3)

In verse 1, the interjection particle, *hinnēh* (behold), introduces the vision reports (cf. also 7:1, 4, 7). God calls Amos to see *kēlūb qāyīš* (a basket of summer fruit). The word *qāyīš* can also mean ‘summer’ as in Jeremiah 8:20: “The harvest is past, the summer (*qāyīš*) is ended, and we are not saved”. Normally, the harvest of summer fruit heralds the end of the harvest time. A fruit is not harvested until it is ripe, when it completes its cycle. Motyer opines, “The harvest metaphor is well suited to the passage. The crop comes to harvest as the climax of its own inner development”.⁵ When a fruit is harvested, it is often for consumption. This is an analogy for the Israelite destruction. She is ripe for punishment. Verse 2 confirms this interpretation: “The end (*qēš*) has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them”. In his use of the words *qāyīš*

² J. B. Tidell, *The Book of Prophet Amos*, King James Version Bible (KJVB) Series, Vol. 27 (J. M. Packham, 2015), 13.

³ Raph L. Smith, *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 130.

⁴ Benard Thorogood, *A Guide to the Book of Amos* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1971), 85.

⁵ J.A. Motyer, *The New Bible Commentary*, Revised (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 738.

(summer fruit) and *qēs* (end), the prophet may be consciously making a pun in the form of onomatopoeia or paronomasia.⁶ The two Hebrew words, which have the same root consonants and also sound alike, are used in the text to convey one reality – the end has come.

This fourth vision report is a continuation of the third vision report which Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, interrupts with his denunciation of Amos (7:12). In the first-two vision reports (7:1-6), God is still dilly-dallying so that Israel would repent; and so, he heeds Amos' intercession and withdraws his threat. But in the third vision report of the plumb line, God sees Israel as a building that is completely crooked and twisted, which needs to be destroyed. God says, "Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass by them" (7:8). The use of this expression "I will never again pass by them" again here in 8:2 shows that these two visions of different metaphors are connected and have the same goal. Here, the Exodus term, *'ābar* (Exo 12:13, pass over), alludes to the night of the Exodus, when the angel of the destruction passed over the houses of Israelites, while destroying the Egyptians. Now, Israel has lost that privilege.

Verse 3 expresses the enormity of the disaster that is coming: "The songs of the *hēkāl* shall become wailings on that day" and "the dead bodies shall be many; in every place they shall be cast out in silence". The word, *hēkāl*, means 'temple' or 'palace'. The best translation here is 'palace', to avoid mistaking it for the Jerusalem temple, since the attention is on Samaria, not on Judah.⁷ If *hēkāl* were to mean a place of worship, the plural *hēkālīm* should have been used in order to include all the Northern shrines at Bethel, Dan, Gigal, etc. Therefore, it is the songs of merriment in the palace of the king that would turn into dirges when the onslaught of the inhabitants is reported.

b. Reasons for the Impending Catastrophe

Israel is guilty of the sin of injustice, mercilessness and false religiosity. All these spring from idolatry.

i. Injustice against the Poor and the Needy (vv. 4, 5b-7)

It has been demonstrated above that the sin of injustice is the underlying matrix of Amos' prophecy. Amos brings up again this issue which he has already expressed in various forms in the oracles in chapters 1-6. It is only in this text that injustice is given as the direct cause of the destruction in a vision report. This is why Amos 8 is preferred for this study instead of the elaborate text on injustice in chapter 5. The Lord has always a soft spot for the *'ebyôn* (needy) and the *'anwē-hā'āret* (poor, afflicted);⁸ but some of the rich trample upon and exploit them.

⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Minor Prophets*, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 10 (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1891, 2nd Print 2006), 210.

⁷ Henry McKeating, *Amos, Hosea and Micah*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 1971), 59.

⁸ In all God's decrees, there is a notable consideration for the poor. The Deuteronomic code commands the elimination of poverty if possible (Deut 15:4, 11). It is obligatory to give to the poor heartily and open-handedly (Deut 15:7-10). None should exploit them (Deut 24:6, 13-10, 17). During harvest, farms should not be gleaned twice so that the needy may find something to eat (Deut 24:19-22). The poor could appeal against those who neglect or oppress them, and the culprits will incur punishment (Deut 15:9; 24:15). The Priestly code warns against the practice of usury with the poor (Exod 22:25). The psalmists and the prophets emphasise the duty to the poor (Ps 41:1; 112:9; Isa 58:7; Ezek 18:17). The sages see the poor and the rich as equals, and even have more respect for the poor (Eccl 4:13; Prov 19:1). Cf. Cletus Obijiaku, "Giving to the Poor (2 Corinthians 8:1-9): An Expression of Faith for New Evangelisation", in *The*

In verses 5b-7, the rich falsify the measuring scale (*'ēpāh*) but increased the money (*šeqel*) for each measure, selling even chaff for wheat to the poor. They could buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandal. Yahweh's decision, "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds" (v.7), connects this segment to the visions, "I will never again pass by them" (7:8; 8:2).

ii. Idolatry and Empty Religiosity (vv. 5a, 14)

Verse 5a shows that what Israelites normally do in the places of worship on Sabbaths and feast days, like the new moon, was a bastardization of religion. They go through the ceremonies without any concentration. Their religious activities are simply an interruption of their business schedules. Verse 14 shows that the religion of Samaria is essentially depraved because it is an affront on Yahweh who has chosen Jerusalem as a place of worship. The shrines at Dan and Bethel came as a result of the rebellion of Jeroboam I (1 Kgs 12:26-33). The idolatry of Samaria widened when Assyria conquered and settled in it people from other nations, who brought along their gods. Ashima(h) was the god of Hamath in Samaria (2 Kgs 17:30).⁹ Northern Israel, made up of the ten tribes, extended from Beersheba to Mount Ephraim (2 Ch 19:4); and Amos 5:5 and 8:14 indicate that they had places of worship in Beersheba, Gilgal, Dan and Bethel.¹⁰ All these were condemned to destruction. Arguing with Deuteronomy 30:17-20, Coffman declares that idolatry was "pre-eminently the sin which Israel had committed".¹¹

5. Some Details of the Impending Danger (vv. 8-13)

Amos mentions successively in 4:6-12 the natural and political punishments which Yahweh have used to caution Samaria, "yet you [Samaria] did not return to me". These include: famine, drought, war, pestilence, plague of locust and earthquake. Natural plagues occurred in Palestine about every six or seven years.¹² In 8:8, Amos uses the metaphors of earthquake and the inundation of the Nile to describe the impending final destruction. He is probably alluding to the earthquake that ravaged Palestine in ca. 760 BC,¹³ which he and the other prophets mention (Amos 1:1; Zech 14:5). It must have been very memorable (Amos 3:14-15; 4:1; 6:9-11; 8:8; 9:1, 5). The annual 20-foot overflow of the Nile also caused tremendous and enduring destruction,¹⁴ and so Amos uses it as an analogy. In 8:9, he uses also the analogy of an eclipse for the catastrophe. Nicoll states that the total eclipse

Bible on Faith and Evangelisation, Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN), vol. 6, edited by Anthony Ewherido et al. (Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2015), 251-267, 262.

⁹ The mention of Ashimah of Hamath suggests that some part of the prophecy was written after the Assyrian conquest itself. In this case, the prophecy is an explanation of the horror that has taken place.

¹⁰ It is ironical that they have turned some former holy places associated with the patriarchs (Beersheba – Abraham, Gen 21:33; Bethel – Jacob, Gen 31:13; and Gilgal – Joshua, Josh 4:20) into places of idolatry.

¹¹ James Burton Coffman, *Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament* (Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 1983-1999), available online, www.studydrive.org/commentaries/bcc/amos-8.html [accessed on 31/08/16].

¹² William R. Nicoll, "Commentary on Amos 8:4" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, available online, www.studydrive.org/commentaries/teb/amos-8.html, accessed on 12/10/16.

¹³ Michael L. Barré, "Amos," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (NJBC)*, Raymond E. Brown et al., eds (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 209-216, 210.

¹⁴ James Burton Coffman, *Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 1983-1999), available online, <https://www.studydrive.org/commentary/.../8-8.html> [accessed 27/08/16].

of the sun which took place in the neighbourhood of Damascus in 763 BC is implied here.¹⁵ The elegies and dirges in verse 10 for the victims of war are similar to the ones in the vision report in verse 3. In addition, the bitterness will be *kē'ēbel yāhîd* (like the mourning of the only son). Verse 13 adds drought as a part of the tragedy. Young people who are supposed to be the strongest will perish of thirst. "Their deaths would also mean the cutting back of the nation, since they could not provide children".¹⁶

In verses 11-12, Amos identifies the future dearth of prophets' voices as the direct consequence of the denunciation of the prophets, as Amaziah does in 7:10-13 (cf. 2:11-12). My earlier work states, "With the exit of the last prophet, Zechariah, prophetism ceased; and for nearly two centuries, no voice of a prophet was heard".¹⁷ This happened actually between 5th and 3rd century BC. When prophets are rejected, cast out and killed, a time comes when people will long to hear their prophecy but will not find them. A psalmist laments, "We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long" (Ps 74:9). Azariah also lamented during the exile, "And at this time there is no prince, or prophet, or leader, no burnt offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense, no place to make an offering before thee or to find mercy".¹⁸

God destroyed Samaria because of social injustice, a part of idolatry. God does not look away from the sufferings of the poor and the needy. He longs to destroy from the root the causes of oppression or injustice everywhere.

6. The State of Social Justice in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the present state of social justice is not far from what Amos describes in the text. The rich oppress the poor who are denied of their rights. Many writers, commentators and scholars have written much about the state of social justice in Nigeria. All agree that injustice reigns in the land. This opinion cuts across both Christians and Moslems who form the majority of the population. Naturally, social justice and human rights are inalienably bound together. Though the 1999 Constitution enumerates some of the human rights in Section 33-43 (rights to life, human dignity, liberty, fair hearing, private and family life, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, expression, association and property),¹⁹ these are often violated without any legal consequences. The violators include the state, socio-religious groups and individuals. Many corruptible personnel are active in the different arms of the government (the executive, the legislature and the judiciary), thereby obstructing social justice. Many groups and individual are only after their interests. Although Nigerian constitution spells out the basis for social order and justice,²⁰ there is a major lacuna in the application or implementation. Unlike the United States that operates social security programme since 1935, Nigeria has none. Consequently, there is no economic security for people

¹⁵ William R. Nicoll, "Commentary on Amos 8:4" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, available online, www.studydrive.org/commentaries/teb/amos-8.html [accessed 28/08/16].

¹⁶ Thomas Constable, "Commentary on Amos 8:4" in *Expository Notes of Dr. Thomas Constable*, 2012, available online, www.studydrive.org/commentaries/dcc/amos-8.html [accessed on 03/10/16].

¹⁷ Cletus Obijaku, *The Bible at a Glance: An Introduction* (Abuja: Gaudium et Spes, 2005), 153.

¹⁸ *Prayer of Azariah* 1:15, available online, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/rsv/rsv-idx?type=DIV1&byte=4193363> [accessed on 12/10/16].

¹⁹ Federal Republic of Nigeria, *The 1999 Constitution* (Lagos: Federal Government Press, 1999), Sections 33-43.

²⁰ Federal Republic of Nigeria, *The 1999 Constitution*, Section 17-18.

who are undesirably unemployed or unable to work. Some of these sleep on the streets and go hungry while the rich waste food and shelter.

Dorothy Ucheaga argues that in Nigeria justice is for a privileged few who are in the echelons of political and economic powers.²¹ Some of them manipulate the system and siphon the resources that should be equitably distributed. Aniche and Ukaegbu, using a qualitative method of study, x-ray the fundamental reason for the lack of human development in Nigeria. From their analysis, the violation of human rights and social injustice are the root causes of lack of development because there is a nexus or an interface that links these facts.²² Lamenting on injustice in Nigeria, Obanubi states that social justice is in force only when people are “not to be discriminated against, nor their welfare and well-being constrained or prejudiced on the basis of gender, sexuality, religion, political affiliations, age, race, belief, disability, location, social class, socio-economic circumstances, or other characteristic of background or group membership”.²³ In most cases, it is quite on the contrary in Nigeria.

Abdussalam states that Islam’s concept of social justice is based on what is called *Tawhid* – that Allah’s will in creation is that all living beings may live in unity and harmony with one another and the Creator.²⁴ Evaluating the state of social justice in Nigeria, he regrets that many do not consider fairness in what concerns the poor, the needy, the sick, the weak and even the orphans. “Social justice and solidarity is absent on the part of many”.²⁵ Az-Zubair seems to be prejudiced in his treatment of social justice in Nigeria, especially as regards the neglect of the Niger-Delta area, degraded as a result of oil exploration. His argument is that every part of the country is environmentally degraded and should be equally cared for. For him, the wealth from this exploited region belongs to Nigeria and should be equally shared; and the issue of derivation fund for this region is an act of illegality and theft.²⁶ On the issue of the gross disparity in education between the North and South, instead of addressing the social injustice which some Northern state governments, elites and religious leaders have perennially perpetuated against their people and consequently kept the majority illiterate and economically handicapped, he blames it on the federal government which a southerner shortly led. Meanwhile, northerners have all along ruled the country for decades.

7. A Theological Christian Response to the Situation

²¹ Dorothy N. Ucheaga, “Social Justice in Nigeria: The Dialectics of Ideas and Reality,” in *Humanities Review Journal*, volume 1, No. 2 (2001), 31-40, 31.

²² Ernest Tooichi Aniche and Victor E. Ukaegbu, “Crisis of Human Rights and Social Justice in Nigeria: Implications for Human Development,” in *Journal of Development and Contemporary Studies (JODACS)*, Volume 1, No, 1 (2014), 32-41, 32.

²³ Felix Obanubi, “Social Justice, leadership and civil society: the Nigerian example,” available in International NGO Training and Research Centre website, <http://www.intrac.org/blog.php/84/social-justice-leadership-and-civil-society-the-nigerian-example> [accessed 27/09/16].

²⁴ Ibrahim Khaleel Abdussalam, “Social Justice in Nigeria: An Appraisal of the Role of the Muslim *Ummah*”, department of history (Bayero University, Kano), available online http://www.academia.edu/1151836/social_justice_in_nigeria_an_appraisal_of_the_role_of_the_muslim_ummah [accessed 14/08/16].

²⁵ Ibid, 2.

²⁶ Banu az-Zubair, M. K, “Social Justice and Resource Control in Nigeria: A Crisis of Legitimacy”, available online <http://www.gamji.com/article4000/NEWS4802.htm> [accessed 27/09/16].

Social justice is very well expressed in the OT with the word *mišpāt*, which refers more to giving and establishing the right of others in business (Deut 25:13-16), in courts (Isa 28:6) and in all social dealings (Ezk 45:9). In Isaiah 1:17, *mišpāt* carries the additional idea of being merciful and righteous (cf. Isa 11:4; Deut 24:13). The NT clearly goes beyond social justice, for it talks more of righteousness, which connotes perfection or sinlessness, imitating the character of God (1 John 3:7; Matt 5:48).²⁷ In the NT, *dikaioσunē* mostly means ‘righteousness’ (Rom 3:5); but in a few texts it connotes ‘social justice’ (Heb 11:33). Likewise, *krisis* mostly means ‘judgment’, but hints at social justice in a few texts (Matt 12:18, 20; 23:23; Acts 8:33). So, the broad term, ‘justice’ includes having the inner disposition for righteousness and having a sense of good judgment. Social justice is concerned with praxis, but presupposes the interior disposition to do good, which enables one to make the right decisions, and then put them into action.

Social justice has its root in the nature of God’s creation. Human beings, created in God’s image, have rational souls, and are equal before God; and so, humans have transcendent dignity and rights that must be respected and defended. God has charged individuals and societies with this duty. In the words of John XXIII,

It is generally accepted today that the common good is best safeguarded when personal rights and duties are guaranteed. The chief concern of civil authorities must therefore be to ensure that these rights are recognized, respected, co-ordinated, defended and promoted, and that each individual is enabled to perform his duties more easily.²⁸

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: “Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God’s design”.²⁹ One should regard the other as another self and another Christ, bearing in mind, that what one does to the least of one’s neighbours, he does it to Christ (Matt 25:40). Justice to the poor, the needy or the marginalized is the main concern of Jesus. He came to preach the good news to the poor and ensure that justice reigns (Luke 4:18; cf. Isa 61:1-2). The beatitude is mainly for the poor and the oppressed (Luke 6:20-22; cf. Matt 5:3; Jam 2:5-6). The seven deacons were appointed to distribute food to the poor (Acts 6:1-6). Expression of faith is shown in the service to the poor (Jam 2:14-17).

The principle of the universal destination of world’s goods implies that there is no one to whom God gave the entire wherewithal to fulfil oneself, because it is impossible for a limited being to have everything. The principle of solidarity shows that in the divine plan, God has ordained that humans support one another individually and communally.³⁰ Paul expresses this with the image of the members of a body (1 Cor 12). The Catechism states, “Excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the one human race is a source of scandal and militates against

²⁷ See “Justice” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised Edition, 1939, available in BibleWorks 7, available from CD-Rom, Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks, 2006.

²⁸ John XXXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, Encyclical Letter, On Establishing Universal Peace In Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty (April 11, 1963), no. 60.

²⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, CCC (Vaticana: Veritas-Libreria Editrice, 1994), no.1935.

³⁰ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2004), nos 192-195.

social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace”.³¹ This relates the principle of the common good. A just society is established through the promotion of social values, which include truth, freedom, justice and love.³² So, social justice alone is not enough for establishing a just society that fosters integrally genuine human development.

8. The Way Forward

The effect of injustice is already telling on Nigerians. God has given Nigerians signs and opportunities for repentance. Shall Nigerians persevere in injustice until God takes the last measure of destruction? At present, the country is on the worst recession ever known in her history. Without overlooking the negative influences of the excessively capitalist ideology that governs the global economy, through which the powerfully rich nations impoverish further the miserably poor ones, 95% of the root causes of social injustice in Nigeria is within. Only when the country gets her house in order can she fight meaningfully the external forces. God is still dilly-dallying with us in Nigeria so that we call ourselves to order and return to him by working for justice and truth. If we do not heed God’s voice or warning, and allow injustice to devastate the land, a time may come when God will swear as he did in the case of Samaria, “I will never again pass by them” (cf. Amos 7:8; 8:2). Various militants have emerged – the Boko Haram, Niger Delta Avengers, Biafra Movements, Odua Peoples’ Congress, etc. Just like the cautionary catastrophes Amos 8:1-14 reports, these rebels have caused devastations in the past and present. They can lead to war and disintegration, if Nigerians refuse to walk in the part of justice. The corollary of the injustice expressed in the text should be a lesson to Nigerians, especially Christians. Christians should lead the way in promoting justice in all aspects of life in the land. The vocation of a Christian is to be another Christ, who is the chief agent of justice, as he proclaimed at his mission inauguration (Luke 4:18).

Every Christian group and individual should take the challenge of Amos 8:1-14 very seriously. Individuals have been in many occasions promoters of social injustice through heinous lifestyles. Sometimes, individuals have not spoken out in their groups or associations that violate social justice. The situation gets worse when Christians, through bribery and corruption, foster this cancer that erodes the fabrics of our society.

More Christian lay faithful should join in politics in order to be in the position to contribute in the governing of the country. If politics is up till today “a dirty game”, Christians have the onus of becoming massively involved in order to sanitize it. This would help in making just laws, promoting social justice, enforcing the laws and avoiding impunity. Even though the clergy are not to play party politics, they should be very much involved in the socio-political affairs of the country, so as to give the right direction to the lay faithful. Christians should form activist and advocacy groups that could become forces to reckon with in the country.

Christians in the government ought to be light shining in darkness. If every Christian who is in the position of contributing to the government of our land is true to his/her vocation, there would be a significant improvement in social justice. Their concern should always be: How could the life of the common people in the land be improved? Unfortunately, judging from their lifestyles, many

³¹ CCC, no, 938.

³² *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 197-208.

of them seem to be asking only a selfish question: How can we appropriate more money to ourselves to the detriment of the poor, the needy and the marginalized? If the workers are not paid their piled-up salaries, but their governors buy bullet-proofed cars for selves and wives, what else could display their utter disregard for social justice?

Curbing the discriminatorily stereotyped ethno-religious prejudices and sentiments, in which many of us are socialised, could help improve social justice. To achieve this, promotion of interreligious and –cultural education is expedient. It is every human being that deserves justice, not only the people of one's religion, tribe or region. So, Christians should avoid statements that foster hatred, religious bigotry, violence and war. All humans are brothers and sisters.

Christian communities should strengthen their agents that work for justice and peace, for example, "Justice and Peace Commission". Related commissions should also be formed. These agents should be funded adequately so that they could carry out their objectives without let or hindrance. While "Justice and Peace Commission" is functional in some dioceses, it is almost moribund in some others. Empowering this commission on the diocesan levels and forming its branches in parishes will boost the fight for social justice.

Many people do not know their rights; and as a result, they ignorantly take many aspects of social injustice as the normal way of life. Christian leaders in various communities should not create a boundary between spiritual life and socio-economic life. All aspects of life are interwoven. Consequently, it is also the duty of Christian leaders to equip their members with every tool necessary for every good work. This is why the Church has social documents for her social teachings. Enlightenment programmes on human rights should be done in form of seminars, symposia and conferences. Lectures on issues of this nature should be included in the Christian schools' programmes.

Conclusion

This paper has studied the state of injustice in Northern Israel and the ultimate disaster it brought upon the people as expressed in Amos 8:1-14. God warned Israel with various punishments but Israel would not listen. Other nations were also punished to serve as deterrent to Israel, but she could not read the signs of time. Social injustice in Nigeria has caused the nation many untold hardships. True equality, liberty and fraternity, virtues on which justice is based, are lacking in the land. God wishes that all humans enjoy the divine love, human dignity and the earthly resources. It is through other humans that this is fully realized. To thwart this divine intention is a great sin, which God may not allow to last too long. Unless there is a conversion and conscious option to become champions of justice, Nigerians' fate will not be different from that of the Northern Israelites.