

JUSTICE IN THE BOOK OF AMOS

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But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
(Amos 5:24, ESV)

Perhaps the most famous words of Amos, these words are the cry of the poor and impoverished, the oppressed and the marginalized. They are the plea of the helpless and hopeless to anyone with a heart soft enough to hear and act, anyone willing to take up their cause and carry their banner. Yet when Amos wrote them, they were not the lament of man but the exhortation of God. God was urging his rebellious children to change their ways and to live in such a manner as befitting of Him, the Lord of Hosts, the thrice holy God.

To further understand God's desire for justice to prevail among His people, this paper will first examine the Hebrew word which Amos uses to speak of justice. Then it will explore what Amos 5 says about justice in Israel. Lastly it will briefly consider the ramifications for God's people today.

Defining Terms

Amos uses the Hebrew word **מִשְׁפָּט** four times in his writing. Transliterated *mishpat*, the word comes from a more primitive word, **שָׁפַט**, *shaphat*. The root word literally means *to judge, to govern*.¹ The word conveyed the entirety of governing—not simply executive, legislative, or judicial functions.² To judge meant to act as sovereignly, creating the law, deciding legal cases, and implementing the law.³ Appropriately, Yahweh is portrayed as judge both now in

¹ Robert D. Culver, “2443 שָׁפַט,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 947.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 947-948.

the present and ultimately at the end of time (Ps 94:2; 96:13).⁴ Subsequently, *mishpat* conveys “the function of government in any realm and in any form.”⁵ In other words, if government is to curb lawlessness among man, then *mishpat* is the curbing of lawlessness wherever humanity violates the order that God established, whether that be legally, morally, or socially.

Amos 5

Of the four instances of *mishpat* in Amos, three are found in chapter 5. Chapter 5 is a lament, “a funerary lament, albeit adapted to the judgment purpose.”⁶ Amos is grieved by Israel, by her abandonment of God (Amos 5:1). Amos says Israel is without help in the coming judgment that God is bringing (Amos 5:2). According what God told Amos, the armies of Israel will be decimated (Amos 5:3).⁷ Yet God also pleads for His children to return to Him (Amos 5:4), for salvation and deliverance will not be found in the economic, political, and religious centers of Bethel and Gilgal. Those cities are destined for destruction, and their people for deportation (Amos 5:5).

Again, Yahweh urges the Amos’ audience to seek after Him to survive the coming tragedy (Amos 5:6a). If they fail to, God will destroy Bethel, the center of Israel’s apostasy, and nothing will be able to stop His judgment (Amos 5:6b). Verse 7 explains who God has issued this plea to with the first usage of *mishpat*: “O you who turn *justice* to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth!” (Amos 5:7, emphasis added) Verse 4 says that this lament is addressed to the entire house of Israel; however the referent may be “directed at a more limited group within the nation – those with social and economic power.”⁸ More likely, though, is that

⁴ Ibid., 948.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary 31 (Dallas: Word Books, 2002), 344.

⁷ Ibid., 346.

⁸ *NET Bible*, note on Amos 5:7 (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Logos Bible Software.

whole nation had adopted this attitude towards justice, echoing the values and attitudes of the rich and famous.

Just what was their attitude towards justice and righteousness? It was bitterness. It was disdain. It was spite. *Wormwood* comes from a root word meaning *curse* and is used metaphorically to mean *bitterness*.⁹ They had converted “the sweet words and deeds of justice (cf. Ps. 119:103) into the bitterest substance nameable.”¹⁰ The idea behind *casting down* is one of shameless, vehement disregard, “as though it were trash.”¹¹ By shunning justice and righteousness, the Israelites had utterly abandoned their end of the covenant with Yahweh.¹²

Amos proceeds to describe the God whose covenant Israel had abandoned. He is the One sovereign over heavenly deities (Amos 5:8a).¹³ He is the One mighty enough to convert night into day and vice versa. “Just as Israel had the power to change (or overturn) some things in their society, so God had the power to change (overturn) things in his universe. To that powerful God Israel was accountable.”¹⁴ Their God could, in an instant, bring ruin to those seemingly untouchable, those with money and power (Amos 5:9).

Then Amos returns to Yahweh’s accusation against Israel. “They hate him who reproves in the gate” (Amos 5:10a). The city gates were the ancient equivalent to a modern courthouse merging with a town hall. Men went there to formalize contracts and to seek legal

⁹ James Strong, *The New Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), H3939.

¹⁰ David A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 25 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 178.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 177.

¹³ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Amos 5:8, Logos Bible Software.

¹⁴ Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, The New American Commentary 19B, electronic ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 101.

action (cf. Ruth 4:1-11, Deut 21:19).¹⁵ The person who reproves is the person who brings rebuke, who convicts people, who mediates a conflict, who “administers a reprimand.”¹⁶ The Israelites can’t stand the person who is trying to make wrongs right.

Verse 10’s parallelism further illuminates their heart condition. Not only do they not want the wrongs righted, they despise the one who has the guts to tell them the truth, to tell them that what they are doing is wrong. They loathe the person who has the integrity to call a spade a spade and who works to rectify the situation, to bring the people back into alignment with God, His covenant, and His order.

How does such a blackened heart manifest itself outwardly? Amos provides some insight: “Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him and you exact taxes of grain from him...” (Amos 5:11a, ESV) They are treating the poor with the same disdain they showed for righteousness in verse 7. (In fact, it appears as though God is equating *the poor* with *the righteous*.) Commentators believe that this accusation against Israel is not a two-fold charge, but rather a single indictment: “The way some people in Israel trampled on the poor was by taking from them the fruit of their labor.”¹⁷ The landowners were absconding with the lion’s share of what the sharecroppers had meagerly produced. The owners were fueled by a desire for more and greater, showing no compassion to those who had little.

In the face of such greed, God promised poetic justice—the technical term is a “futility curse.”¹⁸ Everything the money wrenched from the hands of the poor would buy would be of no benefit, pleasure, or joy to those who took the money. Nice houses would not be dwelt

¹⁵ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, “Amos,” in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin (1866; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 10:190.

¹⁶ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. M.E.J. Richardson, electronic ed. (New York: E.J. Brill, 1999), 410.

¹⁷ Smith, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, 103.

¹⁸ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 348.

in. Fine wine would not be drunk. Essentially, God claims that He is the ultimate ‘reprover’ (Amos 5:12a). He knows the extent of the wrongdoings, and He will do what Israel refused to do: justice. He will bring about alignment.

According to verse 12, Israel’s courts were corrupt. They were punishing the wrong people, the innocent instead of the guilty. They were making judgments and rulings not based on right and wrong, but on the party which proffers the most money. Moreover, the poor, who could not afford such an offer, were failing to even have an audience for their grievances. All of this provoked the wrath of God, and Israel’s only hope was to “hate evil, and love good, and establish [*mishpat*] in the gate” (Amos 5:15, ESV). In other words, Israel needed to conform to the right ways which God had established: do justice in their courts, curb lawlessness, and protect the marginalized.

After a graphic discourse on the judgment God had in store for Israel (Amos 5:18-20), God uses the word *mishpat* one more time. He rejects their worship, their sacrifices, their solemn assemblies, and their songs of praise (Amos 5:21-23), but in verse 24, he pleads one more time. “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24, ESV). In contrast to the seasonal streams of the land, God wants justice and righteousness to permeate the entire land and to prevail.¹⁹

Sadly, Israel’s abandonment of justice and righteousness ultimately concluded with their exile. God promised such a judgment (Amos 5:27), and it came to pass with Assyrian conquest in 722 BC.

Contemporary Ramifications

The days when Amos spoke these words were prosperous times in Israel.²⁰ “A confident nation (6:8) took comfort in its military prowess (6:13) and ignored its exploitation of

¹⁹ Smith, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, 113.

²⁰ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 283-84.

the needy and the growing disparity between privilege and poverty.”²¹ The same could be said for the United States of America, especially beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century. The people of God in America worship Him on Sundays but forget Him Monday through Saturday as they pursue and amass great quantities of wealth.

One commentator said this of Israel: “The missing ingredient in their worship was authenticity manifested in a lifestyle of obedience.”²² The expectation was “for justice and righteousness to prevail in Israel’s social order as an outward sign of their religious devotion.”²³ Another theologian and scholar said, “For the rich to accumulate property in complete disregard of the rights and needs of their covenant brothers was a blatant practical denial of the Lord’s ownership of the land”²⁴—a breach of Israel’s covenant with Yahweh.

It is not a stretch to say the same to the church in America, particularly in its attitude towards the poor, marginalized, and defenseless. Off the backs of migrant farmers and minimum-wage workers, billions and billions and billions of dollars have filled the coffers of a few. Even more so if one weighs the West against the rest of the world. “The Lord would judge Israel for its socio-economic injustice, materialism and religious hypocrisy ([Amos] 3:9–4:5),”²⁵ and I think the church should beware and not think itself exempt from the same examination.

Conclusion

Justice: the curbing of lawlessness wherever humanity violates the order that God established. Israel, in her fortunes, broke that law, especially “Thou shall not covet.” “The

²¹ Ibid., 284.

²² Smith, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, 112.

²³ Ibid., 113.

²⁴ Robert B. Chisholm, “A Theology of the Minor Prophets,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 402.

²⁵ R. B. Chisholm, “Amos,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), under sec., “The Lord and Israel,” Logos Bible Software.

clearest manifestation of covetousness came in the form of social injustice, which involved dishonest economic and legal practices.”²⁶ They abandoned righteousness and concern for the poor and oppressed and, as a result, faced judgment and exile. The church in America today should pay special attention to warnings of Amos and heed his admonition: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

²⁶ Chisholm, “A Theology of the Minor Prophets,” 401.

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