

The prophetic critique against injustice

The prophets are concerned with injustices that are hidden behind the mask of apparent religious duty and political responsibility. The impartiality required by law is being used to grind the poor into the ground. The powerful appear to be obeying divine law, but they are doing so against Yahweh's intention. They try to silence the prophets rather than listen to God's word.

The religious hypocrisy of those who pretend to do God's will but are responsible for injustice is brought out powerfully by the earliest of the writing prophets: the prophet Amos¹:

1. Amos 2:6-16

“Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke my punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy² for a pair of *sandals*”³[Amos 2:6]⁴.

Amos seems to be speaking of a situation in which money is loaned and the borrower defaults on repayment. The law protects the lender and allows him to take the borrower's property if necessary. This could reduce the borrower to slavery. Amos is objecting to the use of this law in circumstances that have made it impossible for the debt to be repaid as promised, or when the legal action is disproportionate to the fault. The lender might be acting legally, and so “in God's name”. He is, however, acting unjustly.

“They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth⁵
and turn aside the way of the afflicted⁶.”[Amos 2:7]

This seems to envisage a situation in which a judge is acting according to the strict impartiality demanded by God's law. But in so doing, and in not taking into consideration the circumstances of the ordinary person (ignorance, perhaps, or inability to organise finance etc), he is acting unjustly.

“A man and his father go in to the same maiden,
so that my holy name is profaned;
they lay themselves down beside every altar
upon garments taken in pledge;
and in the house of their God they drink
the wine of those who have been fined”[Amos 2:7b-8].

People are carrying out proper religious observances, but the cloak they prostrate themselves on and the wine they offer have been taken from the poor. Their lying down is likened to the rape of a slave-girl, for, indeed, their religious cult is founded on rapacious injustice to the poor.

“Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them,
whose height was like the height of the cedars,
and who was as strong as the oaks;
I destroyed his fruit above and his root beneath.
Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt,
and led you forty years in the wilderness,
to possess the land of the Amorite.
And I raised up some of your sons for prophets,

¹His prophecies date from c.750BC and were addressed to the people of the newly established capital of the Northern kingdom, Samaria.

²Hebrew *ebyôn* includes the following: the beggar, powerless, needy, hungry, thirsty, paralysed, blind, deaf, lonely, last-in-the-line, without-a-voice, redundant.

³That is, to make a religious pilgrimage!

⁴See also Hosea 4:1-3 and 12:8-9.

⁵The Hebrew word translated “trample” may mean “desire”, in which case an alternative translation is possible whereby the rich are being accused of desiring the possessions of the poor even the very dust which they heap on their heads when they mourn!.

⁶The Hebrew *anaw* includes the following: stooped, oppressed, trodden down, deserted, deprived, outcast, despised, cast-aside, humiliated, roughly-treated, burdened, yoked, trapped, caught, crushed by the blows of chronic misery.

and some of your young men for Nazarites.
Is it not indeed so?" says the Lord.
"But you made the Nazarites drink wine,
and commanded the prophets,
saying 'You shall not prophesy'"[Amos 2:9-12]

God granted victory to the poor (Israel), a victory realised in possession of the land. The rich, in the name of justice, and so in God's name, are taking away from the poor the power to possess the land, and are silencing or seducing those sent by God to proclaim his word. A literal observance of the written code is only just when people are listening to the word as the word of Yahweh!

"Behold, I will press you down in your place,
as a cart full of sheaves presses down.
Flight shall perish from the swift,
and the strong shall not retain his strength,
nor shall the mighty save his life;
he who handles the bow shall not stand,
and he who is swift of foot shall not save himself,
nor shall he who rides the horse save his life;
and he who is stout of heart among the mighty
shall flee away naked in that day,
says the Lord"[Amos 2:13-16]

2. Isaiah 5:1-24¹

"I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.
² He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and hewed out of the rock a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only wild, sour grapes.
³ Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.
⁴ What more could have been done for my vineyard
than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?
⁵ Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its thorn-hedge, and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.
⁶ I will let it go to waste, neither pruned nor cleared,
and briars and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds not to rain on it.
⁷ The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight.
And he looked for justice, but saw a cover up²;
for righteousness but heard cries of distress³.

a) Economic Injustice

¹Isaiah was prophesying in the second half of the eighth century in the southern kingdom of Judah.

²This word occurs only here. A related verb means "to make scabby"; hence the translation "cover up"[?]

³There is an interesting play on words in the Hebrew:
And he looked for justice [*mishpât*], but saw a cover up [*mispâh*];
for righteousness [*ts^edâqâh*], but heard cries of distress [*ts^e'âqâh*].

⁸ Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field
till no space is left and you live alone in the land.

⁹ The Lord Almighty has declared in my hearing:

Surely the great houses will become desolate,
the fine mansions left without occupants.

¹⁰ A ten-acre¹ vineyard will produce only a bath² of wine,
a homer of seed only an ephah of grain³.

¹¹ Woe to those who rise early in the morning⁴
to run after their drinks⁵, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine.

¹² They have harps and lyres at their banquets,
tambourines and flutes and wine,
but they have no regard for the deeds of the Lord,
no respect for the work of his hands.

¹³ Therefore my people will go into exile for lack of understanding;
their men of rank will die of hunger
and their masses will be parched with thirst.

¹⁴ Therefore the grave enlarges its appetite
and opens its mouth without limit;
into it will descend their nobles and masses
with all their brawlers and revelers.

¹⁵ So man will be brought low and mankind humbled,
the eyes of the arrogant humbled.

¹⁶ But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice,
and the holy God will show himself holy
by his righteousness.

¹⁷ Then sheep will graze as in their own pasture;
lambs will feed among the ruins of the rich.

b) “Religious” injustice⁶

¹⁸ Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit,
and wickedness as with cart ropes,

¹⁹ to those who say, "Let God hurry,
let him hasten his work so we may see it.

Let it approach, let the plan of the Holy One of Israel come,
so we may know it⁷."

c) Judicial Injustice⁸

²⁰ Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,
who put darkness for light and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

²¹ Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes
and clever in their own sight.

²² Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine
and champions at mixing drinks,

²³ who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
but deny justice to the innocent.

²⁴ Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw

¹Literally an area which two animals working as a team can plough in a day.

²45 litres.

³12.5 bushels of seed will produce only 1.25 bushels of grain.

⁴This is the time, before work begins in the fields, when court cases are heard in the town square.

⁵Instead of pursuing justice, they pursue luxury and at the expense of the poor who are judged unjustly.

⁶See Isaiah 1:10-20.

⁷The problem of delay in God's justice being apparent.

⁸See also Isaiah 5:20-24; Micah 2:1.

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and as dry grass sinks down in the flames,
so their roots will decay
and their flowers blow away like dust;
for they have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty
and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel”.

Isaiah could also have mentioned explicitly political injustice exercised by the one who should have been God’s anointed king¹.

3. Amos 4:1-3

“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria,
you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy
and say to your husbands, «Bring us some drinks!»
[Amos 4:1]

This is probably an attack on the rulers, who buy protection from foreign princes by paying tribute. This tribute, in turn, is acquired by taxing the poor. The rich are living in luxury at the poor’s expense. Rather than drink the fruit of God’s blessing, they consume beyond their needs just to consume! The sanction is: they are being fattened up like cows for slaughter.

“The Sovereign Lord has sworn by his holiness:
The time will surely come
when you will be taken away with hooks,
the last of you with barbed hooks.
³ You will each go straight out through breaks in the wall,
and you will be cast out toward Harmon, declares the Lord”[Amos 4:2-3].

4. Amos 6:1-7

“Woe to you who are complacent in Zion,
and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria,
you notable men of the foremost nation,
to whom the people of Israel come!
² Go to Calneh and look at it; go from there to great Hamath,
and then go down to Gath in Philistia.
Are they better off than your two kingdoms?
Is their land larger than yours?
³ You seek to put off the evil day,
and you bring near a reign of terror.
⁴ You lie on beds inlaid with ivory
and are sprawled out on your couches.
You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves.
⁵ You strum away on your harps like David
and improvise on musical instruments.
⁶ You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions,
but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.
⁷ Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile;
your feasting and lounging is over.”

The rich in Samaria are vying with foreign cities, living in luxury, unaware of the suffering all around them. They are trying to find security against an evil day, but their behaviour is bringing it on!. They want to be first - they will be first, leading the captives into exile!.

5. Amos 8:4-8

“Hear this, you who crush the needy

¹See Deuteronomy 17:14-20; 1 Samuel 8:10-22; Micah 3:1-4, 9-12; Zephaniah 3:1-8; 1 Kings 12:1-19.

and wipe out the poor of the land¹,
⁵ saying, "When will the New Moon be over
that we may sell grain,
and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"
-- skimping the measure, boosting the price
and cheating with dishonest scales,
⁶ buying the ordinary people with silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
selling even the sweepings with the wheat.
⁷ The Lord has sworn by the Pride of Jacob:
I will never forget anything they have done.
⁸ Will not the land tremble for this,
and all who live in it mourn?
The whole land will rise like the Nile;
it will be stirred up and then sink like the river of Egypt".

Part of this acquisition of wealth is the greed for property² and for palatial homes at the expense of unjust treatment of the poor.

6. Amos 3:9-12³:

"Proclaim to the fortresses of Ashdod and to the fortresses of Egypt:
Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria;
see the great panic within her
and the oppression among her people"[Amos 3:9]

Things are worse in Samaria than even among the Philistines and Egyptians. The luxury stored up in the strong-rooms of the palaces in Samaria has been secured by oppression. Rather than bringing security, it has brought panic and chaos.

"They do not know how to do right, declares the Lord,
who hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses.
¹¹ Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says:
An enemy will overrun the land;
he will pull down your strongholds
and plunder your fortresses"[Amos 3:10-11].

What has been accumulated unjustly will be dispensed as spoils of war.

"This is what the Lord says:
As a shepherd saves from the lion's mouth
only two leg bones or a piece of an ear,
so will the Israelites be saved,
those who sit in Samaria on the edge of their beds
and in Damascus on their couches."[Amos 3:12]

7. Amos 5:7-15

⁷ You who turn justice into bitterness
and cast righteousness to the ground
⁸ (he who made the Pleiades and Orion,
who turns blackness into dawn and darkens day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea

¹Another possible translation of the Hebrew is: "You who out of desire to grant rest to the poor, say "When etc". According to this understanding, Amos is claiming that the justification for the behaviour of the merchant class is to help the poor, but in fact what they are doing does not help the poor but enriches themselves!.

²On greed for property, see Isaiah 5:8-10; Micah 2:1-5; Nehemiah 5:1-13.

³Compare Habakkuk 2:9-14 and Jeremiah 22:13-19.

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and pours them out over the face of the land
--the Lord is his name--

⁹ he flashes destruction on the stronghold
and brings the fortified city to ruin),

¹⁰ you hate the one who reproves in court
and despise him who tells the truth.

¹¹ You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain.

Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them;

though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine.

¹² For I know how many are your offenses
and how great your sins.

You oppress the righteous and take bribes
and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

¹³ Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times,
for the times are evil.

¹⁴ Seek good, not evil, that you may live.

Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you,
just as you say he is.

¹⁵ Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts.

Perhaps the Lord God Almighty
will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph”.

8. Amos 5:18-27 : Injustice which corrupts religious cult.

“Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord!

Why do you long for the day of the Lord?

That day will be darkness, not light.

¹⁹ It will be as though a man fled from a lion
only to meet a bear,

as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall
only to have a snake bite him.

²⁰ Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light,
pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?

²¹ I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
I cannot stand your assemblies.

²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings
and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.

²³ Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

²⁵ Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings
forty years in the desert, O house of Israel?

²⁶ You have lifted up the shrine of your king,
the pedestal of your idols,

the star of your god-- which you made for yourselves.

²⁷ Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,
says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty”.

Cities whose luxury has been acquired by oppression/injustice

1) Isaiah re Tyre, the dominant mercantile power in the Mediterranean

“Yahweh will visit Tyre. Once again she will begin to receive the pay for her whoring.
She will play the whore with all the kingdoms on the surface of the earth.
But her profits and wages will be dedicated to Yahweh and not stored or hoarded.
Her profits will go to buy abundant food and splendid clothes
for those who live in the presence of Yahweh”(23:17-18)

2) Isaiah re Assyria, the dominant land-Empire in the east.

“My anger will destroy them...His burden will fall from your shoulder,
his yoke will cease to weigh on your neck”(10:25-27)

3) Nahum re Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire[3:1-7]

“Woe to the city soaked in blood, full of lies, stuffed with booty,
whose **plunderings** know no end!”(3:1)

4) Isaiah on Babylon, which took over from Assyria

“I will punish the whole world for its evil
and those with no concern for the sacred for their sins
and I will bring to nothing the **wanton insolence** (**hybris**) of the **lawless**
and I will bring low the wanton insolence of those who fancy themselves superior”(13:11)

5) Jeremiah re Babylon [Chapters 50-51]

“Have your triumph, you **plunderers** of my heritage!”(50:11)

“Escape out of Babylon (save your lives, each one of you;:
do not perish yourselves in her punishment, for this is the time of Yahweh’s vengeance:
he is paying her her reward! Babylon was a golden cup in Yahweh’s hand,
she made the whole world drunk, the nations drank her wine and then went mad.
Babylon is suddenly fallen, is broken”(51:6-7)

“Enthroned beside abundant waters, rich in treasures,
you are now meeting your end, the finish of your **pillaging**”(51:13)

“He has devoured, consumed me, that king of Babylon;
he has left me like an empty dish, like a dragon he has swallowed me whole,
he has filled his belly with my delicacies”...say the people of Zion.
Therefore Yahweh says this: See, I myself am taking up your cause”(51:34-36)

“Babylon in her turn must fall because of those who were slaughtered in Israel,
just as through Babylon there fell people slaughtered all over the world”(51:49)

6) John[author of Apocalypse] re Rome[

“clothed in purple[pomp] and scarlet[luxury]
and bedecked with gold[attempting to take God’s place] and jewels and pearls,
holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations[cult of luxury and power]
and the impurities of her fornication[dominant in injustice]” (Apocalypse 17:4)

“Fallen is Babylon the great [Rome]...
for all nations have drunk the wine of her impure passion,
and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her[shared in unjust wealth]
and the merchants of the earth have grown rich with her wanton wealth...

Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins...
for God has remembered her injustices”(Apoc.18:2-5)

“Babylon, the great city [Rome] shall be found no more,
and the sound of [music] shall be heard in you no more,
and crafts shall be found in you no more,
and the sound of the millstone shall be heard in you no more,
and the light of the lamp shall shine in you no more,
and the voice of the bridegroom and the bride shall be heard in you no more,
For your merchants were the great men of the earth
and all nations were deceived by your drug (deadening spell)” (Apoc.18:21-24).

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