
THE WATCHDOG ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN CONTEMPORARY KENYA: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF AMOS 5:21-24

Winfred N. Kanyi

St Paul's University-Limuru

Email Address: Kenya-mthlmr244123@spu.ac.ke

Publication Date: June 2025

ABSTRACT

Statement of the Problem: In contemporary Kenya, the Church is confronted with the challenge of maintaining its prophetic role amid rising corruption, ethnic tensions, poor governance, and widespread socio-economic inequality. Despite being historically viewed as the moral conscience of society, the Church's increasing silence or alignment with political power has raised concerns about its effectiveness as a watchdog institution. This crisis mirrors the spiritual emptiness denounced in Amos 5:21–24, where God rejects ritualistic worship that is unaccompanied by justice and righteousness.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to conduct an exegetical analysis of Amos 5:21–24 in order to derive theological insights that can inform and revitalize the Church's watchdog role in Kenya. The study seeks to bridge biblical prophecy and modern social realities to guide the Church's response to injustice and moral decay.

Research Methodology: This is a qualitative theological study that employs biblical exegesis, historical-literary analysis, and contextual theological reflection. The methodology integrates close reading of Amos 5:21–24 with a critical examination of Kenya's socio-political landscape, using theological texts, biblical commentaries, and qualitative data on the Church's engagement in national affairs.

Results and Discussion: The findings reveal that God, through Amos, expresses strong disapproval of worship devoid of ethical behavior, emphasizing that justice and righteousness are non-negotiable elements of authentic faith. The text draws a compelling parallel between Israel's hollow religiosity and the Kenyan Church's current tendencies toward performative worship and political compromise.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the Kenyan Church must realign its worship and public presence with biblical standards of justice and righteousness. Like Amos, the Church is called to speak truth to power and to confront societal injustices with theological conviction and moral clarity.

Recommendation: To reclaim its prophetic mandate, the Church should reform its theological education to include public theology and social ethics, ensure transparency and accountability within its institutions, and actively engage in civic and policy advocacy.

Keywords: *Watchdog Role, Church, Contemporary, Kenya, Exegetical Amos 5:21-24*

INTRODUCTION

The Church historically known as the moral conscience of the society bears the responsibility of holding power to account, advocating for justice and fostering righteousness. In contemporary Kenya, this role would appropriately and commonly be referred to as the Church's "watchdog" function which has become more critical than ever. With persistent challenges such as corruption, electoral malpractice, economic inequality and ethnic divisions, the Church is uniquely positioned to speak truth to power. However, questions remain as to whether the Church in Kenya has been effective or complicit in the face of justice. This paper examines the watchdog role of the Church in Kenya through the lens of Biblical Prophecy, specifically focusing on Amos 5:21-24. The passage offers a compelling critique of religious hypocrisy, where God rejects Israel's ritualistic worship due to the absence of justice and righteousness. Amos' message serves as a poignant reminder that authentic worship must be accompanied by moral and social integrity.

The study aims to accomplish three main objectives: First, to provide an exegetical analysis of Amos 5:21-24; second, to evaluate the theological implications of the passage in light of the Church's prophetic calling; and third, to assess the Church's current role in Kenya as a moral watchdog, drawing lessons from Amos Prophetic witness. Through its interdisciplinary approach, the article contributes to both Biblical scholarship and practical theology in the African context. The study will use qualitative theological method, integrating Biblical exegesis with contextual analysis of Kenya's socio-political landscape. By drawing connections between ancient Israel and present-day Kenya, the study challenges the church to rise to its prophetic duty with renewed courage and clarity.

CONTEXTUAL AND LITERARY ANALYSIS OF AMOS 5:21-24

Amos 5:21-24 is a powerful prophetic passage that combines strong contextual relevance with rich literary elements. Below is a breakdown of both:

Historical background of the book of Amos

The Book of Amos is one of the earliest Prophetic books in the Old Testament, is set in the 8th century BCE during the reigns of Uzziah in Judah and Jeroboam II in Israel (cf Amos 1:1). This period was marked by relative political stability and economic prosperity in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. However, beneath this facade lay deep social crisis. Wealth was concentrated among

elites, while the poor suffered exploitation, legal injustice, and displacement (Amos 2:6-8; 5:11-12). It is in this socio-economic context that Amos, a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees from Tekoa, was called by God to deliver a prophetic indictment against Israel's systemic injustices.

LITERARY STRUCTURE AND PLACEMENT

Amos 5:21-24 is situated in the heart of a lament (Amos 5:1-27), which is structured as a funeral dirge over the moral and spiritual decay of Israel. The lament uses powerful, harsh and confrontational poetic language to declare God's dissatisfaction with Israel's worship practices. The verses are arranged to contrast false religious performance with the divine demand for ethical living. Amos uses parallelism, e.g. "But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (RSV), vivid imagery and symbolism of nature e.g. "Noise of your songs" and "melody of your harps" which represent hollow worship; water imagery (v 24) conveys life, cleansing and continuity, suggesting justice and righteousness which must be persistent and life giving, and rhetoric devices to make a stark declaration: God detests ritualistic worship divorced from justice.

EXEGESIS OF AMOS 5:21-24

Below is an exegesis of Amos 5:21-24 focusing on the original context, language and theological implications:

Verse 21

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies (RSV).

The use of strong Hebrew verbs- *sane* (hate) and *ma-as* (despise) expresses God's total rejection of Israel's religious observances. The festivals, though prescribed in Mosaic Law, are rendered meaningless because they have become hollow rituals.

On three occasions, Amos spoke of hatred (5:10; 5:15; 5:21). In the first instance of 5:10, Amos highlights that the elders under trial hated (שנא) anyone who would render a just decision by reproving the one who was guilty (v10). This is another way of saying that the elders hated justice. Adeyemo strongly attacks this tendency by saying that "Justice is not optional extra in the Christian life, it is at the heart of the Gospel (Adeyemo: 28). In verse 15, Amos declared the commandment of YHWH, "Hate evil and love good" (שנאו-רע ואהבו טוב), a commandment that indicated the

displeasure of YHWH of the misplaced justice by the judiciary. Verse 21 is about YHWH's own hatred, "I hate....your festivals," (שנאת הגכום). Finley argues that the connection between the three references to hatred is clearly obvious in that, since the Israelites chose to hate justice instead of hating evil, YHWH shunned their efforts to please Him through their ceremony. (Finley:1990,249). Carroll puts this same statement as, "The people hate truth and integrity(5:10) when they should hate evil and embrace the good(5:15); YHWH hates their religion." (Carroll R: 1992, 246).

This verse starts with two very strong, but forceful verbs juxtaposed asyndetically in a first-person address שנאת מאסת, (I hate, I reject,) with a direct object "הגכום" (your festivals). The use of the strong verbs in ("I hate") which is a Qal perfect, first person, common singular of the root word (BDB 2010:971) and ("I reject"), a Qal perfect, first person, common singular of the root word, (BDB 2010:588), indicates a shift into a "first person speech." The first person-address form, opening this unit of verse 21-27, indicates that YHWH was the speaker in this passage, although the concluding speech formula in verse 27b demonstrates that the prophet conveyed YHWH's speech (Sweeney, 2000:240). The direct object of YHWH's vexation and extreme rejection was the people's meaningless festivals (your festivals). Paul (Paul:1991:189) notes that the substantive. Is the technical term originally employed as the name for the three pilgrimage festivals (Exod 23:14-16; 34:22, 25; see also Sweeney 2000:240).

However, the juxtaposition of the two verbs ("I hate, I reject") in the first part of the statement indicates how unambiguously YHWH detested and abhorred the basic elements of the Israelite cult. Garret (Garret: 2008, 168) also confirms that, the anarthria's seconding of the first verb with another, near synonymous verb eloquently expresses the disgust of someone who is weary of something tedious and irksome." Hence, YHWH's dissatisfaction and outright renunciation of Northern Israel's feast days was expressed unequivocally in the first part of the text. The second part of Verse 21 begins with conjunctive waw plus a negative participle, the combination of which serves to "continue the train of thought begun by the preceding verbs that express negative emotions and serves to intensify the phrase that follows" (Lafferty: 2010, 61). The words וְלֹא אֶרִיחַ is the Hiphil yiqtol, first person common singular of ריח, the verb which means "to smell" (Garret: 2008, 169). It is used in the negative to indicate YHWH's outright disgust in this text.

Verse 22

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fattened beasts, I will not look upon (RSV). Adeyemo argues that, "God is not interested in empty rituals that do not lead to righteous living. True worship is inseparable from just living." (Adeyemo: 55) Here God rejects the most costly offerings. The divine displeasure is not with sacrifice itself, but with the hypocrisy of offering gifts to God while oppressing fellow humans. The opening sentence of the verse has been the subject of much speculation among scholars. Carroll explains that, "the breaking of the neat parallel structure of the strophe by the initial colon of verse 22 has been the source of much speculation (Carroll R: 1992, 246). He explains that some have chosen to understand the word concussively and interpret it as "even if." on the other hand, others prefer to understand it as emphatically "surely if" stated that the interruption by its length serves to underline the contrast between Israel's intent and YHWH's repulsion.

He concluded that the disrupted patterns do not necessarily entail redaction or scribal error, but maybe purposeful literary effect. May argues that there is a line missing after the first line. (May: 1969, 105). When one looks at the preceding verses, it is clear that the verse connects well to the evolving narrative. This presents doubts that there is a scribal error. The above explanation allows for the acceptance that the text should be interpreted as "for if" or "even though" and this therefore makes it a conditional sentence. Though the people are doing what they thought was pleasing to YHWH, the sentence shows that YHWH completely sees their action differently from they believe. He rejects their offering completely because their actions are not pleasing to Him. Three terms from sacrifices were given; 'the burnt offering, the grain offering and the peace offerings'. (Smith 1989:186).

Verse 23

"Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen (RSV). Religious music, meant to be a joyful expression of worship, is now considered offensive noise. This verse critiques performance-based worship that lacks ethical substance. The only imperative verb in this Pericope, **הִסֵּר** is addressed to the musicians and singers who are not only instructed to cease their worthless activities, but are also told to remove all instruments of sound from YHWH's

presence (May, Amos,106). This verse represents the third time YHWH invokes human senses in rebuffing temple activities: he will not smell (v 21) see v 22, or hear (v 23). By the end of v 23, YHWH has categorically refused to participate in worship at Bethel.

YHWH had not only rejected Israel's feast days and solemn assemblies (v21), burnt offerings, grain offerings, and meat offerings (v22); but also rejected their songs and the lyrics of their music. The first part of 23 reads, *הסך מעלי המון שרך* - Take away from me the noise of your songs. The statement starts with *הסך* which is a Hiphil imperative masculine singular of the primitive root *סור* translated literally as "to turn off" or "take away" (Strongs:1996); (Garret 2008:171). The next word *מעלי* is a prepositional phrase with *על* in a first person common singular suffix (Garret 2008:171) could be translated "from upon me". The text reveals YHWH's continuous denunciation of, not only people cultic practice but also their music and songs, which had become a heavy burden on Him (Garret 2008:171) argues that the preposition *על* gives an impression that the peoples music had become an unbearable burden in the ears of YHWH. Lafferty affirms that YHWH commands the people to remove their music and singing, *מעלי* from upon me, 'thus suggesting the weight of songs and music are heavy objects that are a burden to Him.

It is quite disturbing to note that YHWH regards the sound of their songs as "noisy" (*המון*), which according to Paul is a word also used to describe the din of battle (see 1 Kings 20:13). Besides, it is used in the text as a singular masculine construct noun modifier to indicate a noisy sound. (Paul 1991:263). In its very simple form, the meaning of the term *המון* ranges from "murmur" to 'tumult' hence Paul has suggested that the use of *המון* here most likely implies the sheer, ecstatic tumult of the singers at the harvest festivals. Whereas both Weiss (Weis: 1995) and Lafferty (Lafferty, 2012:65) suggest that given its association with singing, the allusion to *המון* would be to the volume of the songs, whichever way it is viewed.

Verse 24

"But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (RSV). This climatic verse encapsulates the core prophetic message: God values justice (*mishpat* and righteousness (*tsedaqah*) above all ritual. The imagery of flowing water suggests a continuous, life-giving movement-unlike the intermittent and performative acts of religion. The conjunctive *waw* that begins the clause when it precedes a jussive verb expresses contract, 'but' because the

following positive clause reverses the tone set by the negative clauses of v21-23(Weiss "Cult" 209). This contrast, combined with the jussive verb to which **י** is attached generates a command by YHWH for the people to take a specific action.(Driggers, "Israel"31). The jussive form of the verb emphasizes the contrast with the message of the three preceding verses(Driggers, "Israel"31)the objects of this verb, justice and righteousness are inanimate. This combination (jussive and non-animate objects)places a greater emphasis on the task at hand than on those who are to accomplish it(Waltke and O'Connor,Syntax,570).the verb **יגל** "let roll" anticipates the water-based similes that follow. The root **גלל** is the root of other Hebrew "water" words such as **גל**,wave(Isaiah 51:15;Jer 5:22;Ezek 26:3;Job 38:11;Jonah 2:4;Zech 10:11; and Psalm42:8): **נל** "fountain"(Song 4:12);and **נלה** "spring"(Josh 15:19;Eccl12:6.the use of this verb also looks forward to the action in v 27,where YHWH **חלתי** "will lead to exile" a form of the homonymous root **נלח** (Driggers "Israel":33).The familiar collocation that follows the verb is presented as a pair of similes: "justice like water "and righteousness like a perennial 'wadi'.Although Amos is the first to use this simile, second Isaiah uses a similar one. All of Israel's feast, assemblies, offerings and music are negative, the verse is saying justice and righteousness should flow out of the consistent practice only in this one is a positive command involved. Both Amos 5:7and 6:12, by contrast, voice similar critiques of lack of the right judgment in community affairs, but have in view the exact opposite meaning of the message in 5:24 because the people perverted justice and rejected righteousness. (Anderson and Freedman, Amos: 528).

The notion that justice and righteousness are required of the people is reflected in the people constant request for YHWH that He judged between them and whichever foreign nation happens to be threatening them at the moment. If the people expect YHWH to act in their favor, they too are required to act justly towards each other. The two kinds of water mentioned in Amos 5:24 evoke different images. The first water is a generic term that is used to describe and portray both the sea and fresh water (Ronald E Clement: 269).Such water could be inside or outside of Israel (Ronald E Clement: 269).The image is of a major body of water that does not dry up or evaporate. Jeremiah uses the term in opposite sense in 15:18 when he speaks of a **אכזב מים** , deceptive stream whose water is unreliable.

The second term **נחל** 'wadi' when used without any geographical site name, refers to the water that appears during next rainy season and dries up during the summer, leaving only the deep crevice

cut by the flow of water until the next rainy season (L.A Snijders, 336-337). The wadi contrasts with the נהר a river which never dries up (L.A Snijders, H Ringgeren, and H-J Fabry: 264). נהר is never used to designate any waterway in Israel itself. The only place the phrase נהר איתן is used in the O.T is in Deut 21:4, when it seems to refer to regularly running water, as in a stream or river.

Amos the former farmer and shepherd uses an image in v.24 that would be familiar to those living in arid areas. Whether the people were engaged in tending their fields or flocks, water is a basic necessity to them. In very many texts, YHWH'S action of providing rain at the proper time is associated with good behavior (Wolff, Joel, and Amos 1977:112). In other passages, water, rain, dew is used as a metaphor for justice (Psalm 72; Hos 6:3; 14:5-7). The association of bountiful, everlasting water with the practice of righteousness and justice provides a clear illustration of the kind of worship that YHWH demands. In its use of both terms מים and נהל the text presents an image that suggests life and fertility rather than the death and violence involved in sacrifice (Wolff, Joel and Amos, 112,264).

The image of a permanent body of water, followed by a reference to a wadi that never dries up, reflects the Israelites understanding of justice and righteousness throughout the O.T. Justice and righteousness, when practiced, create good for the community (Exod 23:6; Lev 24:22; Num 35:29; Deut 16:18; 2 Sam 8:15; 1 Kings 3:6). In the O.T, there is no concept of being only partly righteous or achieving certain levels of justice (Jeremia, Amos:104). The community and the individuals within it, lived righteousness and justice, or they did not. Therefore verse 24 informs the audience of the purpose of YHWH's foregoing criticism of Israel worship. Amos had built up to this point (vv21-23) by spelling out YHWH's reasons for the message that he presents in this verse. The missing element in the Israelite community is the reason for YHWH's anger. Both physically, in the form of plenty of fresh flowing water, and figuratively, in the form of justice and righteousness by the way they mistreat the less fortunate in their community. YHWH rejects the performance of public displays of worship and festive assemblies that the people perceive as fulfilling their devotional obligation to God. (WeissP:213).

THEOLOGICAL THEMES IN AMOS 5:21-24

The message of Amos 5:21-24 is not merely a rebuke of religious practices, it is a profound theological statement about the nature of a true worship and the character of God. Several

interwoven themes emerge from the text that bear relevance to the Church's role in society, especially in contexts marked by systemic injustice like contemporary Kenya.

Worship and Ethical Living

One of the most striking themes in Amos 5:21-24 is the inseparability of worship and ethics. The people of Israel continued to observe religious festivals and offer sacrifices, believing they were pleasing to God. However, Amos reveals that religious rite devoid of justice and righteousness are not only inadequate—they are offensive to God. This underscores a theological truth: worship that does not manifest in ethical behavior is invalid in God's eyes. The passage affirms that authentic faith must be both vertical (toward God) and horizontal (toward neighbor).

Justice and Righteousness as Divine Imperatives

Verse 24 encapsulates the heart of Prophetic Theology: “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” These two terms, *mishpat* (justice) and *tsedaqah* (righteousness), appear throughout the Old Testament as key markers of Covenant faithfulness. Justice refers to fair treatment and equity in communal relationships, while righteousness involves living in right relationship with God and others. For Amos, these are not optional virtues—they are the very essence of what God requires from His people (cf Micah 6:8).

God's rejection of Hypocrisy

Another theological thread is God's intolerance of hypocrisy. The people of Israel believed their worship was sufficient to secure divine favor, yet they neglected the poor, exploited the vulnerable, and corrupted the judicial system. Amos reveals a God who sees through religious facades and demands integrity. This theme resonates deeply with contemporary challenges where religious institutions may uphold elaborate rituals while ignoring social injustices.

Prophetic Accountability

Amos exemplifies the Prophetic voice that dares to confront religious and political structures. His fearless proclamation serves as a model for how the Church today should function: not as an ally

of power, but as a voice of accountability. The theological model here places the prophet-and by extension, the Church-as Gods mouthpiece for truth, even when it is unpopular or dangerous.

Continuity in Biblical Theology

Amos 5:21-24 finds resonance in other Biblical texts, affirming a consistent theological narrative. Isaiah 1:11-17, Micah 6:6-8 and Jesus Himself (cf Matthew 23:23), echo similar sentiments-that justice and mercy outweigh ritual and sacrifice. This continuity reinforces the message that God's concern for justice is not merely historical or cultural, but a timeless divine priority.

THE CHURCHES PROPHETIC MANDATE: HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Prophetic mandate of the Church is rooted in scripture and historically evidenced in its role as a moral compass in society. From the Old Testament Prophets to the ministry of Jesus and the Early Church, the calling to speak truth to power and defend the oppressed has always been central to the mission of Gods people. This section explores the Biblical foundations and historical expressions of the Church's Prophetic function.

Prophetic Tradition in the Old Testament

The Old Testament Prophets were divinely appointed to challenge societal sins and call for covenantal faithfulness. Figures like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah stood against Kings, Priests and the people when justice was perverted. The prophets' role was not merely to predict future events, but to interpret current realities from a divine perspective. Prophets functioned as watchdogs over both religious and political spheres, demanding reform and repentance (cf Ezekiel 33:1-9). Amos exemplifies this as he critiques the Northern Kingdom not just for idolatry, but for economic oppression, judicial corruption and moral decay. His message sets a template for the prophetic role: denounce injustice, call for righteousness and warn of divine judgement.

Jesus and the Prophetic Role of the Church

In the New Testament, Jesus affirms the prophetic tradition and expands it. His ministry is marked by compassion for the marginalized and confrontation with unjust systems (cf Luke 4:18-19). He denounces religious hypocrisy (Matthew 23) and champions the cause of the oppressed, echoing the concerns of the Hebrew prophets. The early Church, though often persecuted, inherited this

prophetic mandate. In Acts 2 Peter interprets the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as a fulfilment of Joel's Prophecy: that God's people-men and women, young and old, would prophesy. Thus, the Prophetic voice is democratized, becoming a shared responsibility within the body of Christ.

Historical role of the Church in Social Transformation

Throughout history, the Church has played a transformative role in societies. In the abolition of slave trade, the civil rights movement and anti-colonial struggles, Christians have often led calls for justice and reform. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr, Desmond Tutu, and Oscar Romero demonstrate what it means for the Church to stand in the Prophetic tradition. In Africa, the Church has been both a liberator and a compromiser. During the colonial rule, sections of the Church allied with oppressive regimes, while others nurtured resistance and advocated for independence. Post-independence, this Prophetic voice has been inconsistently upheld, with some Churches co-opted by political interests and others maintaining the voice of truth.

The Ecclesiological Basis for Prophetic Engagement

Theologically, the Church is called to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16)-preserving moral order and illuminating truth in a dark world. This mandate includes confronting injustice, advocating for the voiceless and shaping public conscience as the "pillar and ground of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). The Church is not to retreat from the public square but to engage it prophetically.

CONTEMPORARY KENYA: SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL CONTEXT

Understanding the Church's watchdog role in Kenya requires a clear grasp of the country's socio-political dynamics and the evolution of the ecclesiastical landscape. Kenya is a religiously vibrant nation with a strong Christian majority, but one that continues to grapple with deep rooted issues of governance, corruption, ethnic polarization, and economic disparity. Adeyemo correctly puts it that, "The Church cannot remain silent in the face of injustice; it must be a voice for the voiceless and a defender of the oppressed" (Adeyemo: 78).

Kenya's Socio-Political Landscape

Kenya's political history since independence in 1963, has been marked by both progress and turmoil. The struggle for multi-party democracy in the 1990's, post-election violence in 2007-2008, and persistent corruption scandals have tested the country's democratic institutions. Though

the 2010 constitution introduced reforms aimed at promoting devolution, accountability and human rights, implementation remains uneven. Corruption continues to pervade all levels of government, weakening public trust. Ethnic based politics often dominate elections leading to divisions that hinder national cohesion. Furthermore, the socio-economic inequality is pronounced with a significant portion of the population living below the poverty line despite Kenya's middle-income status. These realities present both a challenge and an opportunity for the church to serve as a moral compass.

The State of the Kenyan Church

The Church in Kenya is diverse, encompassing Mainline Protestant denominations (e.g. Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian) Roman Catholic, Evangelicals, Pentecostal and African Instituted Churches. This diversity brings richness but also fragmentation. While some Church leaders have maintained Prophetic witness, others have aligned too closely with political elites. In recent years, concerns have arisen about the commercialization of faith, the rise of prosperity Gospel teachings, and Clergy entangled in political patronage. These trends have eroded the Church's credibility in some sectors. However, organizations such as the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) and evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK), have at various times taken bold stands on national issues.

The Church's Political Role in National Affairs

Historically, the Church in Kenya played a significant role in advocating for human rights and democratic reforms. During the Moi era, Church leaders such as Bishop David Gitari, Rev Timothy Njoya, and Arch Bishop Ndingi Mwana a 'Nzeki courageously spoke against tyranny and injustice. The Church was instrumental in the push for multi-party democracy and constitutional reform. However, in the post 2000 eras, this Prophetic voice has been inconsistent. In some cases, the Church has been co-opted into political agendas, while in others, it has remained a strong advocate for moral integrity, peace-building, and anti-corruption efforts. The challenge remains to consistently embody its role as a prophetic institution grounded in Biblical justice.

Public Perception and Expectations

Despite its shortcomings, the Church still enjoys considerable moral authority in Kenya. Many citizens look to religious leaders for guidance, especially during elections, crises and national

debates. This expectation underscores the need for the church to act with integrity, courage and clarity-to be a voice not of political convenience but of spiritual conviction.

EXEGETICAL INSIGHTS AND THE CHURCH'S WATCHDOG ROLE IN KENYA

The message of Amos 5:21-24 speaks directly into Kenya's socio-political context, offering critical insights for the Church as it seeks to reclaim its prophetic calling. By interpreting the text through a contextual lens, we can identify practical implications for the Church' watchdog role in a society plagued by injustice, and ethical decay.

False Worship and the Kenyan Context

Just as Amos condemned Israel's religious formalism disconnected from moral living, the Kenyan Church must examine the authenticity of its worship. Lavish services, high profile conferences, and popular religious events are not enough. Where Churches remain silent in the face of land grabs, political violence, economic injustice, or bribery, they fall into the same trap as ancient Israel-offering rituals without righteousness. Churches that flourish financially while neglecting prophetic engagement risk turning worship into noise (Amos 5:23) rather than a vehicle for transformation. The Kenyan Church must ask: Do our songs, offerings, and sermons align with Gods demand for justice? Is the Church challenging power or catering to it?

Prophetic Confrontation of Corruption and Injustice

Amos 5:24 provides a vision of what God desires: "justice rolling like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." The Church must be the voice demanding that this vision be realized in Kenya. This includes: firstly, speaking against systemic corruption in both government and co-operate sectors; secondly is demanding accountability during electoral processes and governance transitions; thirdly is protecting the marginalized-including slum dwellers, refugees, women, youth and the unemployed from exploitation and neglect; and fourthly is challenging tribalism and ethnically driven politics that fuel division. This kind of engagement requires not only courage but theological clarity: that justice is not a political option, but a spiritual obligation rooted in the very character of God.

Institutional Reform within the Church

For the Church to serve effectively as a watchdog, it must also address its own internal weaknesses. Transparency in Church finances, ethical leadership, and accountability in decision making are essential. Hypocrisy-where Church leaders criticize corruption but engage in it-undermines the very prophetic message they are meant to embody. Church leadership training, discipleship programs and seminaries must prioritize theology that connects worship with justice. The next generation of Kenyan Clergy must be equipped not only to preach but to prophetically lead.

Collaboration and Collective Action

Amos did not work within a religious institution, but modern day to day prophetic action can be enhanced through ecumenical and interfaith collaboration. Kenyan Churches when united across denominational lines, can speak with greater authority and impact Networks such as the NCCK, KCCB and EAK must continue fostering unity in addressing national issues, providing moral guidance to the state and society.

Public Theology and Civic Engagement

Prophetic witness in Kenya must move beyond the pulpit into public discourse. Christian leaders should contribute to civic education, policy advocacy, and legal reforms. Biblical justice must be translated into practical action-campaigns for clean water, fair housing, equitable healthcare, and a just economy.as public theologians, pastors and theologians can shape national conscience through media, academic forums and community organizing.

CHALLENGES FACING THE CHURCH IN FULFILLING ITS PROPHETIC ROLE

While the Church in Kenya holds a significant potential to be a transformative force, numerous internal and external challenges hinder its effectiveness in fulfilling the prophetic role modelled in Amos 5:21-24. These obstacles must be understood and addressed to revitalize the Church's capacity as a moral watchdog.

Political Co-optation and Compromise

One of the most pervasive challenge is the Church's entanglement with political power. Some clergy openly support political candidates, attend partisan events, or benefit from political patronage. This undermines the Church's neutrality and credibility. As seen in ancient Israel, when

religious institutions become too close to political elites, they lose their capacity to critique and correct systemic injustice.

Commercialization of Religion

The rise of prosperity gospel and consumer driven Christianity has redirected focus from justice and righteousness to wealth accumulation and personal blessing. Churches that emphasize material success often neglect their social responsibility. This trend promotes a transactional view of God and erodes the theological depth required for prophetic witness.

Ethnic Divisions within the Church

Kenya's ethnically polarized politics have seeped into church structures. Many congregations are largely ethnically homogeneous and, in some cases, Church leaders have fueled tribal tensions instead of promoting reconciliation. This undermines the Church's witness as a unifying body and reduces its capacity to speak against ethnic based injustices credibly.

Fear and Intimidation

Prophetic engagement often invites backlash. Some religious leaders fear political retribution, legal consequences, or public smear campaigns. In a context where whistleblower and critics of the state have faced violence or intimidation, fear can silence even the most convicted voices. David Gitari in his book "Let the Bishop Speak" advocated for social justice, human rights, and the Church's role in advocating for the marginalized. (Gitari D:47). He often emphasized the importance of the Church speaking out against oppression and injustice, challenging both the government and society to uphold the dignity and rights of all individuals.

Theological Illiteracy and Clergy Formation

Inadequate theological training and superficial biblical literacy among some pastors diminish the Church's ability to engage critically with national issues. Without a sound grasp of Biblical Justice and the prophetic tradition, many preachers default to simplistic spiritual messages that avoid social critique. Seminaries and Bible schools often lack courses in public theology, ethics or social justice.

Institutional Fragmentation and Denominational Rivalry

The lack of unity among Christian denominations weakens collective action. When Churches are divided by doctrine, competition, or leadership struggles, they struggle to present a united prophetic voice. This fragmentation is exacerbated when some denominations are co-opted by power while others remain critical.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE KENYAN CHURCH

To effectively reclaim its prophetic voice and fulfill its watchdog role, the Church in Kenya must take intentional strategic steps rooted in scripture and contextual wisdom. Drawing from the message of Amos 5:21-24 and the realities of modern Kenya, the following recommendations are proposed.

Re-Center Worship around Justice and Righteousness

Kenyan Churches must renew their theological vision for worship-not as ritual performance, but as a holistic devotion expressed through social action. Sermons, prayers and liturgy should integrate themes of justice, equity and public accountability. Worship that does not speak to the pain of the oppressed or the corruption of the powerful remains disconnected from God's heart. Churches should also commemorate national events-such as elections, public holidays, and tragedies-with prayers and reflections that include a prophetic call to justice and healing.

Strengthen Theological Education and Prophetic Formation

Seminaries, Bible colleges and ministerial training programs must reintroduce and emphasize Prophetic Theology, Ethics, Public Theology and Social Justice. Church leaders should be equipped not only as spiritual shepherds but also as informed, courageous advocates for justice. Workshops, retreats, and Clergy forums should provide ongoing formation in areas like civic education, human rights, and biblical advocacy.

Promote Institutional Integrity and Transparency

The Church must lead by example in matters of governance, accountability, and resource management. Transparency in Church finances, ethical leadership, and impartial decision-making will-build credibility and give moral weight to its public pronouncements. Denominations should

establish independent oversight mechanisms for addressing misconduct among clergy and misuse of resources.

Build Interdenominational and Interfaith Coalitions

Prophetic effectiveness can be amplified through unity. Churches must collaborate across denominational lines to issue joint statements, organize peaceful advocacy and provide moral guidance on national matters. Likewise, strategic partnerships with Muslim, Hindu, and traditional faith communities can create a broader moral movement for justice and national cohesion. Examples include interfaith peace building during election cycles or joint campaigns against corruption and gender-based violence. Walter Brueggemann emphasizes that the Old Testament portrays justice not as merely as a legal concept but as a relational dynamic that reflects God's character and covenantal expectations. (Brueggemann: 37).

Engage Actively in Civic Education and Policy Advocacy

Churches should invest in civic education, equipping congregations with knowledge about their rights, electoral processes, and public participation. Hosting voter education forums, offering guidance on political ethics, and speaking against electoral malpractices are key avenues for prophetic engagement. At the same time, Church leaders should participate in policy-making forums, parliamentary hearings and media discussions-bringing a biblical perspective to public discourse.

Nurture Grassroots Justice Ministries

Justice work should not be left to a few elite institutions or urban Churches. Local congregations-especially in marginalized rural and informal settlements-can start community justice initiatives: legal aid, economic empowerment programs, youth mentorship, and peace building projects. Such ministries embody the call of Amos 5:24: allowing justice and righteousness to flow “like a never-failing stream” into every corner of society.

CONCLUSION

The message of Amos 5:21-24 rings with piercing relevance in contemporary Kenya.it offers a divine indictment against empty religiosity and a summons to authentic, justice-driven worship.in a society where political corruption, economic inequality and social fragmentation persist, the

Kenyan Church stands at a critical crossroads: either retreat into ritualistic comfort or rise to prophetic engagement. This article has explored the theological depth of Amos critique, drawing parallels to the Kenyan context and examining the church's calling as a moral watchdog. It has identified the obstacle-ranging from political compromise to theological shallowness-that weaken the Church's influence, while also proposing actionable strategic for restoring its prophetic witness. The Church must courageously declare, like Amos, that no act of worship pleases God if justice is absent. It must confront power without fear, defend the voiceless without hesitation, and embody righteousness in its internal and public life. This requires a reformation of theology, leadership and institutional culture. Only then can the Church serve not as an echo of political agendas, but as a river of truth flowing through the heart of the nation. As Amos declared, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-failing stream." May the Kenyan Church become that stream constant, clear and life-giving in a land thirsty for hope.

REFERENCES

- Adeyemo, Tokunboh (Ed) 2006. *Africa Bible Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan
- Anderson Francis and David Noel Freedman. 1980. *Hosea*. Freedman. 1980. *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 24, New York, and Doubleday. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261387>
- Brueggemann, Walter, 1997. *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute Advocacy*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press
- Carroll Rodas. 1992. *Mark Daniel. Contexts for Amos: Prophetic Poetics in Latin America perspective*. JSOTSup 132. Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press.
- Driggers, I Brent. 1997. "Israel in God's Country: Amos 5:21-24 in Context." Koinonia 9:1-2
- Finley TJ 1990. "Amos," in K Baker (Ed). *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, WEC. Chicago, IL: Moody.
- Garret, Duanne A. 2008. *Amos: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Gitari David M 1996. *Let the Bishop Speak*: Uzima Publishing
- Hayes J.H and H Olladay c.r, 2007. *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginners Handbook* (3rd Ed)
- Kassam A and Oloo, A 2008. *The Challenges of Governance Leadership and Accountability in Kenya*. Friedrich-Erbert-Stiftung
- Kinyanjui K 2016. *Ethnicity, Governance and the Church in Kenya*. Acton Publishers
- Lafferty, Alice L. 1988. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective*. Philadelphia, Fortress.
- LaSor W.S., Hubbard, D.A., and Bush F.W. 1996. *Old Testament Survey: The Message Form and Background*
- Snijders L.A. נהל איתן etan TDOT 9.335-40

- Sweeney, MA 2000. "Amos," in DW Cotter(ed). The twelve Prophets, vol.1: *Hosea, Joel, Amos,,Obadiah,Jonah.Berit Olam*.Collegeville,MN:Liturgical Press,235-254.
- Weiss, Meir.1995. 'Concerning Amos Repudiation of the cult,' in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical Jewish and Near Eastern Ritual Law, and Literature in honor of Jacob Milgram, David P Wright, David Noel Freedman and Avi Hurvitz, eds.,*
- Wilmot-Smith Frederick1996, *Equal justice: Fair Legal Systems in an Unfair World*: Harvard University Press.
- Wolff, Hans Walter.1973. *Amos the Prophet: The man and His background*. Foster R McCauley, Trans.Philadelphia, Fortress.