

## **PURSUANCE OF JUSTICE (AMOS 5:21-24; JAMES 2:1-7) AND DEMOCRATIZATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN NIGERIAN CONTEXT**

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### **Abstract**

*Tensions exist when economic or political power is concentrated in a minority and a majority is forced to sell its labour. Nigeria as a democratic country is evolving. Some scholars have argued that the much-advocated equality and fairness for all men is realizable with the establishment of democracy. Therefore, this article attempts an assessment of the relationship between democracy and justice as well as the advantages that can be reaped by Nigerian society if justice is given a chance. Employing historico-critical method, this paper explores biblical guidelines to discuss the challenge of injustice, with special reference to Amos 5:21-24 and the epistle of James 2:1-7, in the context of democratization in the contemporary Nigeria. This paper also investigates the potential benefits of democracy and justice for Nigeria's socio-political stability and progress. Justice, is a crucial virtue that is celebrated in all disciplines and practices. In fact, it is a quest inherent in every human being. It is an intrinsic moral value which every human society desire for mutual co-existence. Justice is a cardinal pillar in a judicial and legal system of any society as it is practiced in land matters, inheritance issues, socio-communal development strategies, interpersonal relationships and other sundry matters. Integrating and practising justice for social change in Nigeria would give a better definition of the practice of democracy in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Justice, Amos 5:21-24, James 2:1-7, democracy, social change, Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Biblical usage reveals five types of justice as shown in the works of scholars: commercial, vindictive, retributive, punitive and remedial (Dowding, Goodin & Pateman, 2004). Over time there have been postulations of the concept of Justice with biblical references such as social justice and democratic justice which is the focus of this paper.

Liberal political morality places a strong emphasis on the values of justice and democracy. Despite the fact that each has been the subject of enormous volumes of writing, nothing is known about how they relate to one another. While modern liberals concur that only democratic systems can be right, they differ as to why democracy is important; some see it as just instrumental, while others think it is fundamental (Dowding, Goodin & Pateman, 2004). According to the former perspective, democratic engagement is a way of identifying or carrying out justice's demands rather than a prerequisite for it. Regarding the latter, democracy is inherently just since it is a component of any tenable definition of justice (Waldron, 1987).

It is pertinent to note that class struggle is a universal fact. Every community globally, both in the past and present has a taste of a measure of class struggle. The fact that man is a political animal who protects his interest and since economic interests play a major role in the way a society is structured; a sense of conflict is posed in the society. From history, it is revealed that the development of human society takes place in the dynamic of class struggle where the rich becomes richer and the poor poorer (as is also revealed in biblical history- Ecclesiastes 4:1) and at one time or the other there has been revolutions.

Theology has been used as an instrument to cover up class interest and as such injustice is given a religious sanction. On the other hand, from all indications, theology has been used to justify economic exploitation on the part of the rich and is also used to encourage the poor to be passive in their behaviour against the rich. The two classes have found a basis for protecting their interest in theology and each class sees its division as an expression of "God's will". Theology in this context can be said to be an ideology. Class struggle, a social dysfunction cannot be ameliorated by creating another class. It must be noted that behind it lies sin. Sin in this context is going against the Christian law as described by Jesus "...love the Lord your God...and love your neighbour..."

### **Concept of Justice**

Justice, means a system of values that divide rights to important resources-such as freedoms, opportunities, income, and wealth-amongst several agents vying for them. Hence, principles of justice provide an answer to the question, "Who is entitled to what?" with regard to a specific group of agents (in this example, fellow citizens) who are vying for the resources necessary to achieve their objectives (Tillich, 1967). May we state here that a just distribution has to adhere to the principle of equal respect from a liberal standpoint.

The concept of Justice, generally considered as the maintenance and administration of what is just, is a crucial virtue that is celebrated in all disciplines and practices. In fact, it is a quest inherent in every human being who claims to be religious or irreligious. Amanze (2017) describes it as an intrinsic moral value. Every human society desire that this subject is put into play in all ramifications for mutual co-existence. It is a cardinal pillar in a judicial and legal system of any society as it is practiced in land matters, inheritance issues, socio-communal development strategies, interpersonal relationships and sundry avenues. From religious perspective, it appears in the doctrine of man, in psychology and sociology. It is very crucial and central in ethics to determine theories in relation to politics, education, health, religion and so on.

Justice is a subject that has been discussed for hundreds of years by many scholars from different disciplines (Tillich, 1967, Weithman and Wolterstorffs, 2009). The study of justice by Plato and Aristotle actually pre-existed modern ideas of law and crime. Rewards for people's efforts in working, farming, creating and inventing and who profits from these activities such as corporations, retail stores and governments are also a concern of justice. Justice to the positivists is conformity to the law. It is to the social right theorists as doing what promotes the social good. But for the natural law theorists, justice is tied to the idea of natural rights where right is regarded as the ultimate basis of justice (Bird, 1967). It can be said that it is universally significant.

### **Concept of Democracy**

Democracy is a system of group decision-making procedures where members of a specific group are given equal voice in deciding what laws should be made for them. Respecting this principle always entails granting all adult citizens the equal right to vote, preserving their freedoms of speech, expression, and association, and allowing majoritarian elections to decide who will hold public office and what laws will be passed in the community. In this respect, there exist theorems that would need to be mentioned (Weale, 1999).

**Epistemic Democracy:** Political theory has placed significant emphasis on the importance of knowledge in group decision-making ever since Plato suggested in *The Republic* that philosopher kings lead governments. Discussions of "epistemic democracy," or the notion that democracy can be defended in terms of both the quality of outcomes and fair procedures for decision-making, have recently brought the subject back to the forefront of the discipline (Valentini, 2010).

**Implementation Democracy:** Ruling of government by the people, through the recognition of the people as the source of legitimate political power, provision of equal rights and liberties for citizens and people participating in the resolution of state affairs (Valentini, 2010).

**Intrinsic Democracy:** This is where democracy is valued intrinsically (as an end in itself) or instrumentally (as a means to improving material living standards). This democracy is supported in Africa but with less satisfaction on the performance of the elected government (Valentini, 2010). In all of the above theorems, it is pertinent to note that a society which did not protect its citizens' freedom of movement, life, bodily integrity or minimal subsistence would certainly be unjust and it would fail to respect them.

### **Social Justice in Amos 5:21-24**

During the time of Amos, Israel expanded and had great political and economic stability but behind her prosperity were levels of injustice, avarice, human trafficking, sexual immorality, and corruption (Allen, 1969, pp. 42-43). True worship was supplanted by hypocritical religion because religious activities increased, yet they showed little real consideration for the divine standards. It was in the light of this that the LORD summoned Amos to proclaim His judgment and condemn their sham religious practices (Akintola, 2021).

It is crucial to note that the LORD's awareness of the persecution of the poor does not merely mean that He is aware of it; it also means that He intends to act to address the injustice against His people (Bohaeng & Appiah, 2022). That the LORD will bring justice to those who have been denied it and to those who have denied others their rights is thus made abundantly evident to the people by the words. In addition to having direct knowledge of the persecution of the poor, Amos also loathed it and knew that such a mind-set did not satisfy God. He stood to speak out against this immoral attitude among God's covenant people without apologies, disregarding the repercussions of his actions (Anderson & Freedman, 1989).

The comparison between the verbs "you built" and "you will not live" should be noted because the former occurs in a perfect case, while the latter occurs in an imperfect case. This suggests that the wealthy among them have succeeded in building large and beautiful mansions for themselves, but will never enjoy whatever they believe they have accomplished (Chapman, 2023). Amos also denounces the false worship and oppression of the poor among the covenant people of Israel (Waterman, 1945). Some of these consequences are expressed in verse 11: "...you have built houses of stones, but will not live in them, you have planted lush vineyards, but will not drink their wine."

Amos message revealed that seeking justice and righteousness in the presence of the LORD is far more valuable than offering numerous offerings and feasts. Justice for the impoverished and the disadvantaged is what the LORD ultimately demands the wealthy, the powerful and the poor, and those who do not feast or offer sacrifices (Carroll & Daniel, 2020).

### **Challenge of Christian Faith and Class Struggle**

Christians are usually tempted to assume that solution to class struggle in the society lies with the civil government. This idea of constantinianism is strange to the biblical truth in relation to the subject matter. For world transformation, God made a nation (church) whose task was to leave-out the mind of God for others to emulate. This does not nullify the fact that Christians could be involved in partisan politics for the purpose of promoting what is good and repressing what is wrong. As a patriotic citizen, civil government is in principle open to any Christian and when a Christian gets to power, his first responsibility in relation to class struggle is to "Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and destitute; rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:2-4). For radical remedy, Christian politicians must go beyond legislation approach; the poor and the rich actually need a change of heart through the Gospel of Jesus calling

the rich to set aside greed and covetousness (Luke 12:15), and calls the poor not to be anxious about his life (Luke 10:22).

### Epistle of James

The epistle of James has been studied by Biblicist focusing on certain themes that characterize the letter in relation to the events of war and injustice that form the background of the Apostle’s exhortations. Traditionally, the epistle is attributed to James the brother of Jesus (James the Just), and the audience is considered generally to be Jewish Christians, who were dispersed outside Israel (Davids, 2014). The background of the epistle gives a picture of violence, suffering, corruption, partiality, murder and so on. James accuses his immediate audience, the Jewish Christians in suffering, of participating in these vices. These were the people who were forced to flee their homes as a result of persecutions and dangers, now wanting to take revenge and take justice into their own hands through the medium by which they were treated in the first place. Take for example, the case of murder in Chapter 2:10-13 & Chapter 4:2. (Johnson, 2024; Davids, 2014).

### Theological Orientation of προσωποληψια (Favouritism/Partiality) in James

James is a chiasmus with a number of 8 chiasms, but if broken down into fragments may have subsections. This paper will at this level consider chiasms within chapters 1 and 2. James’s parallel thought structure of three reoccurring themes which began in chapter 1 - trials [1:2–4]- A, wisdom [1:5–8]- B, wealth [1:9–11]- C; trials [1:12–18]- A, wisdom [1:19–21]- B, and this is now completed in chapter 2 with a discussion of wealth (2:1–17)- C.

Chiastic structure on warning against partiality	
A (2:1)	2:1 show no partiality (2:1) (προσωποληψίας)
B (2:2-4)	2:4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs? (2:4) (κροται)
C (2:5-7)	2:6 Are not the rich oppressing you? And do they themselves not haul you off to court? (2:6)
A (2:8-10)	2:9 if you show partiality, you commit sin (2:9)" (προσωπολημπετετε)
B (2:11-12)	2:12 as people who will be judged by the law of freedom. (2:12) (κρίνεσθαι)
C (2:13)	2:13 For the judgment is merciless to one who has not shown mercy (2:13)

The fourth uniting theme (doer of the word) is covered at the conclusion of chapter 2, as the doer of the word speaks and acts (2:14–26). The synonymous terms “doer” (ποιητής) and “action” (ἔργον) occur in 1:22–25 & 2:14–26. The negative aspect of the thesis sentence (1:21) (having laid aside all evil deeds) is covered in this chapter’s discussion against partiality to the wealthy. The reason behind the command (show no partiality to the rich), presented in the first half of the chapter, is developed in the second half of the chapter (verbal faith without actions is dead) (Walmaran, n.d). The process of receiving the implanted word in humility includes becoming a doer of the word by becoming impartial to wealth and the wealthy. Thus, the theme of partiality versus impartiality underlies the first set of illustrations (2:1–16) in the chapter, while courageous actions underlie the second set of illustrations (2:21–25), but all the illustrations point out what genuine faith looks like. Partiality should certainly not be part of faith in Jesus Christ (2:1). The first illustration (2:2–7) is set in a synagogue. The attractive “face” of a flower (1:11) is now developed, as a man with “splendid” attire entering a place of worship is treated in a different way from the unattractive poor. James then defends the place of the poor as special to those with faith and disparages the rich as oppressive (2:5–7). Why is that? When the rich oppress the poor, they slander the good name that was given to the heirs of God’s reign. Being partial also breaks the Old Testament law to love one’s neighbour. To disobey even one Old Testament commandment is to become guilty of violating the whole law. People who are not merciful, acting like the oppressing rich and the prejudiced greeter, will be treated themselves without mercy by God.

### **Discrimination in the Community is Wrong (2:1-7)**

The space that James devotes to this matter in his letter suggests that discrimination was a problem among his readers. Yet James leaves us a bit uncertain about just what the problem was and how true to life the situation he describes might have been. The first issue arises because the account of the specific problem in vv. 2-3 could fit at least two different situations. With most commentators in the past, we could assume that he is depicting a typical weekly worship gathering of the Christian community. The “ushers,” perhaps with tacit approval from the leaders of the assembly, conduct the splendidly dressed person to a fine seat, while contemptuously ordering a poorly dressed person to sit on the floor. But an alternative suggestion about the scenario James describes has been gaining ground: that the situation is a meeting of the Christian assembly to sit in judgment over a dispute between two of its members (Ward, 1969; Scot, Choick & Gupta, 2023). Advocates of this alternative note that James does not describe the situation with the typical language applied to early Christian worship gatherings (“church,” *ἐκκλησία*) and that James specifically accuses his readers of being “judges with evil thoughts” (v. 4). The details of the situation in vv. 2-3 are similar to community judicial settings that the rabbis describe. The lack of specifics in this text decides between these alternatives difficult; and, fortunately, James’s main point is not affected by our decision. On the whole, however, the possessive “your meeting” in v. 2 seems to point to a definite, well-known gathering that better fits worship service than a judicial assembly.

Whether James suggests that the scenario he describes had actually occurred or whether it is simply an illustration of the kind of problem he is addressing is also unclear. He does use language suggesting a hypothetical situation in vv. 2-3; but v. 6 “You have insulted the poor” - implies that something like what James describes here had actually taken place (Hartin, 1991; Vanhoozer, 2024). James now explains why such favouritism is wrong.

First, favouritism toward the rich is wrong because it contradicts God’s own attitude, as revealed in his gracious election to salvation. A full discussion of NT election is quite unnecessary in order to understand this text. Suffice it to say that James joins other NT writers in attributing the Christian’s status to God’s choice (the verb James employs here is used in this sense also in 1 Cor. 1:27, 28; Eph. 1:4). James assumes that his readers are well aware of the many poor people who have embraced Jesus as their Messiah. Their conversion is powerful evidence of God’s deep regard for poor people. In a stark reversal of status, poor people have become rich in faith. “In” here designates the sphere in which the Wealth of these believers now is to be found. Expanding on the meaning of this spiritual wealth, James adds that they will also inherit the kingdom that he promised to those who love him (Hartin, 1991). The one who has promised the kingdom, he is probably God, the subject of the sentence. But it is possible that James also has in mind Jesus’ beatitude: “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20; cf. Matt. 5:3). The kingdom, or reign, of God is central to the preaching of Jesus. He presented himself as the one through whom God’s reign was even then being realized (Matt. 12:28; Mark 1:15; Luke 17:21). But the fullness of its power and the riches of its blessings are still future: it is “when the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him,” that faithful servants receive their “inheritance, the kingdom prepared . . . from the foundation of the World” (Matt. 25:31, 34). NT writers followed Jesus’ lead, often using the language of “inheriting the kingdom” to describe this final establishment of God’s kingly power in the lives of his people (1 Cor. 6:9, 10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). Christians, however poor in material possessions they may be, possess spiritual wealth presently and anticipate greater blessings in the future. It is from this spiritual vantage-point, not the material, that Christians should judge others. Whether believers or unbelievers, people should not be evaluated by Christians according to the standards of the world.

James’s general point in this verse, then, is clear enough: God’s choice of poor people to inherit his kingdom is evidence of his regard for them and shows how wrong Christians are to discriminate against these very poor people. But this argument raises a serious question. Is James condemning one form of discrimination by replacing it with another? That is, does James picture God here as one who discriminates in his election in favour of the poor and, therefore, implicitly, against the rich? This

question introduces one of the most controversial aspects of the theology of James. Two matters are especially important: the connotation of the word “poor” and the breadth of James’s assertion.

The Greek word *ptochos* has a range of meaning in biblical Greek. Clearly, it often designates simply people who are poor in a strict material sense: those who do not have much money. But its use in the OT to translate the Hebrew word *'anaw* (and esp. its plural, *'anawim*) introduces a second nuance. For the Hebrew words refer to people who are “poor” in a spiritual sense: humble and meek, recognizing their utter dependence on the Lord and trusting him for deliverance (see esp. Ps. 69:32; Isa. 29:19; 61:1; Amos 2:7, all of which use *ptochos* in the LXX). The word *ptochos*, in other words, has both a material and a spiritual meaning. In the former sense, its antonym is “wealthy”; in the latter sense, its antonym is “wicked.” Jesus’ teaching exhibits this duality of meaning, as is seen most clearly in the two forms of the beatitude: “Blessed are the poor” (Luke 6:20); “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3). In many NT texts, it is very difficult to decide which of these meanings -or, more of ten, which combination of these meanings we should give the term. The illustration of vv.2-3 makes clear that the word in v. 5 must have some degree of material significance. But the qualification James adds to the word raises the possibility of other nuances. Just what this qualification is must first be established, because the text is uncertain. Many good manuscripts have the genitive of the word *κοσμος*, “world,” leading to the translation “of the world,” or “of this world” (see KJV; NASB; TEV). But other, probably slightly superior, manuscripts have a dative form of the same word, which gives rise to two possible renderings: “in the world” (NRSV; NLT); (Moo, 2021, p. 145; Tamez, 1990, p. 67) or “in the eyes of the world” (NIV; see also REB) (Hort, 1902). This latter text, translated in the way the NIV does, should probably be accepted. It is according to the evaluation of the world, non-Christian people hostile to God, that these people are accounted “poor.” While certainly not eliminating the material sense from the word “poor,” this interpretation does suggest that the word also has a spiritual sense (Johnson, 1921).

Second, how broadly should one take James’s claim that God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith? Some interpreters, particularly advocates of liberation theology, suggest a very broad interpretation: God chooses only poor people for salvation, while wealthy people are excluded (Dibelius, n.d.). But this interpretation is possible only if we ignore the many NT passages including one, it has been argued, in James itself (1:10-11) that include wealthy people in the church. It also reads into the text a word “only” that James simply does not use. James writes to a Christian community that is made up largely of poor people; and for them it was evident on every side that God was choosing poor people to be saved. But to infer from James’s positive assertion about poor people a negative verdict on rich people God does not choose rich people to have faith is unwarranted (Huntington, 1991). Balance is perilously difficult to maintain on this issue. For James’s claim that God chooses the poor to receive his kingdom echoes a rather persistent New Testament theme.

### **Democratization for Social Change in Nigeria**

The most important political development in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been without doubt the global movement toward democratic rule. Samuel Huntington describes it as “third wave” of democratization. This transition started in the early 1970s in the Southern Europe and moved to Latin America and East Asia in the 1980s. The 1970s saw the start of a global democratization movement. While some nations have succeeded in enacting democratic reforms, others have not. The transition to democracy is influenced by political, economic, and cultural forces or factors.

Fundamental Human Rights forms part of the characteristics of democracy. Fundamental freedom and Rights are dividends of democracy. Strictly speaking, these are rights that are inalienable to each person's uniqueness and safes the State's intentions to harm them. A Nigerian is born with these rights, and the State is not allowed to take them away from them. Whether at the local, national, international,

or familial level, they serve as the cornerstones of the human relations that govern daily life in Nigerian society.

The fundamental rights of individuals, such as the freedom to develop one's personality and the right to life, are together referred to as the Individual Personality Rights. A human being can, for example, be shielded from assaults and acts of violence directed at them and have their integrity and human dignity preserved because of these rights.

The purpose of political and civil rights is to ensure that every individual is free to take part in the political life of their community. This implies that he or she should not be afraid of any unwarranted consequences. The most significant rights here include the ability to organize associations and organize meetings in addition to the freedom of expression and the press.

According to social and economic rights, every human being must be provided a basic living income in order to survive. This covers amongst other things, the right to education since it is imperative to begin with the idea that everyone must gain from education in order to avoid starvation and resource deprivation in the future. The major issue is by what means can Nigerian citizens acquire the knowledge of these rights for their benefits? In Nigerian secondary school education curriculum, it is only students in the Arts that are made to do Government as a course. Others such as science, commercial, etc are deprived to acquire this knowledge. Theological Institutions in Nigeria lay little or no emphasis on the subject matter in their curricula.

### **Conclusion**

It should be noted that Amos' message/prophecy was directed to the covenant people and the admonition of James was also directed to the Jewish Christians. While Amos approach to pursuance of justice addresses the attitude of the rich against the poor and using religious rites as cover-up which to God is sin, James's approach addresses the mind-set of the Church and the poor about the kind of regards they had for the rich demeaning their own dignity. They more or less empowered the rich to abuse and oppress them which he describes as sin. Both Amos and James balance up in their approach by exhorting that good conduct and works should be done in the meekness of wisdom of God. They discourage bitter envy, self-seeking, unnecessary boast and lie against the truth because they set in confusion and all forms of evil. They encourage wisdom from God which Amos considers as "seeking God" in a lifestyle that is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Integrating these in the democratization for social change in Nigeria would give a better definition of the practice of democracy in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

This paper therefore recommends the following:

1. Engaging right procedures for interpreting the scripture should be encouraged in all theological institutions and Religious studies departments of tertiary institutions.
2. Since theological education is the queen of all studies, philosophy, logic and critical thinking should be revitalized in theological colleges, colleges of education and universities to engage minds to critically navigate and proffer solutions from Christian perspective to humanitarian challenges.
3. Christianity and Human Rights should be better integrated in the curriculum of all theological institutions.
4. Theological educators should possess deliberate interest in knowing, discussing and educating people on matters that bother on governance – politics,
5. The Church should influence a change in people's mind-set on the ideology that they are perpetually poor and are meant to be cheated by encouraging expertise among her members.

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