

**RIGHTEOUSNESS AND JUSTICE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: THE MODEL
FOR AN IDEAL SOCIAL ORDER IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

There is no doubt that social injustice is prevalent in Nigeria. This paper therefore discussed righteousness and justice in the Old Testament as a model for an ideal social order in Nigeria. This was done with a focus on the meanings and deployment of righteousness and justice from the Old Testament perspective; Nigeria as it was meant to be in the dreams of her founding fathers; the contemporary situation in Nigeria; and the recommendations were discussed under righteousness and justice as the model for an ideal social order in Nigeria.

Keywords: Righteousness and Justice, Old Testament, Typology, Ideal Social Order, Social Justice. Social Injustice, Founding Father, Nigeria

Introduction

Righteousness and justice are common words deployed in the Old Testament to bring about fairness and equal treatment between the rich and the poor, the vulnerable and the invulnerable, the citizens and the strangers, the leaders (kings) and their subjects, and to maintain social order. These two words are found nearly in all the books of the Old Testament, and commonly used by the Old Testament prophets and authors to speak about God's righteousness and justice, and the need for the Israelites to be righteous and just in their dealings towards their neighbours. The purpose of this is to bring about an ideal social order devoid of corruption, exploitation, oppression, among other social injustices among the people.

Meanwhile, the deployment of righteousness and justice in the Old Testament and their meanings in relation to God and man mirror an ideal social order for every human society where there is social disorder occasioned by corruption, exploitation, and oppression of the poor and the weak. Also, the deployment reflects God's plan for His

creatures (human beings) the need for them to be righteous and just as He is, so that they can act in fairness towards one another and live together in peace and harmony necessary for the growth and development of the society, all for the benefit of every individual.

Nigeria, like some other nations of the world, is plagued with hunger, suffering, poverty and unemployment caused by corruption, exploitation, and oppression of the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, and the physically impaired by the rich few, and the leaders in positions of authority. This situation is a portrayal of a social disorder which the Old Testament prophets and authors vehemently decried, and called for righteousness and justice to be enthroned and practiced in all spheres of their social and religious life in order to ensure equal and fair treatment of one another and subsequently eliminate all forms of social injustice among the people. Therefore, the need to restore an ideal social order in the Nigerian society through righteousness and justice is imperative to the

elimination of social injustice in all its spheres.

Righteousness in the Old Testament

From its linguistic meaning, righteousness is defined as "taking a stand and doing the right thing" (Vocabulary.Com, 2013). To take a stand and do the right thing is acting within the moral and ethical demands of the society. It is therefore ethically and morally acceptable, for example, to help the poor, the oppressed, and tell the truth to vindicate the innocent and uphold the cause of justice. In this case, righteousness can be seen as the actions and positive results of a sound relationship within a local community (Holman Bible Dictionary, 1991).

Righteousness from the biblical point of view is etymologically derived from the Hebrew word "Tzadik" which means "straightness or firmness." It is employed for justice, right, equity, uprightness; a concept of relationship that he who is righteous has fulfilled in the demands laid upon him by it. David was righteous because he refused to slay Saul with whom he stood in covenant relationship (1 Sam. 24:17; 26:23) (Art Katz Ministries, n. d.). According to Holman Bible Dictionary (1991), righteousness means "uprightness" in the sense of "adherence or conformity to an established norm." In biblical usage righteousness is rooted in covenants and relationship. For biblical author, righteousness is the fulfillment of the terms of a covenant between God and humanity or between humans in the full range of human relationships. In any case, the whole essence of righteousness in the Old Testament is to ensure the harmonious and meaningful state of society.

Meanwhile, the concept of righteousness in the Old Testament is often discussed in relation to God's righteousness. In this the nature and character of God are revealed. Thus, the righteousness of God is evident in the way He consistently acts in accord

with His own character. God always acts righteously; His every action is consistent with His character (Robert, 2009). All these offer explanation about the sovereignty of God. This is evident from Psalms 45:6 and 89:14 where it is affirmed that, "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Thy kingdom." "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Thy throne; Loving kindness and truth go before Thee." The point is that righteous judgement is inherent in all God's decisions and judgements. In this wise, the righteousness of God is to be the guiding principle for the people of God. When the Old Testament prophets sought to sum up the essence of the Old Testament teaching regarding man's conduct, it was that men practice righteousness (Amos 5:21-24) (Robert, 2009).

The desire of God for His people (the Israelites) to practice righteousness is to bring about a just and peaceful society. According to Philip (2000), righteousness, thus, becomes the best expression of the underlying societal principle of solidarity that ensures stability and meaningful existence. The protection of society against all detrimental conduct, individual and collective, likely to bring about its collapse, is also a constituent of righteousness. In this regard, righteousness is the fulfillment of community demands, and righteous judgements are those which restore community (Psalms 82:3; 17:15). Thus the constant plea of the prophets is for righteousness within the gate, for a restoration of the foundations of community life (Jer. 22:3, 15; Psalms 72:2) (Art Katz Ministries, n. d.). On this note, individuals, the kings and the judiciary are expected to be righteous. Thus a king's rule should, therefore, be in righteousness and should pursue justice (Isaiah 32:1; Prov. 8:15&16; 16:12; 25:5; 31:9; Dn. 4:24), and any judge who acquits the guilty will be cursed by all nations, but he who judges with impartiality will prosper (Prov. 24:24&25) (Philip,

2000). So, the righteous man is the one who fulfills the demands of the communal relationship as revealed in the ethical teachings of God's law.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that God loves those who pursue righteousness, but hates those who forsake the ways of righteousness. Two categories of individuals are involved here: the righteous and the wicked. These two individuals represent two different ways of life that either enhances life or leads to death and perdition (Prov.11:19; 12:28; 16:31; 21:21; 11:5; 13:6). For the contrast between the righteous and the wicked, Philip (2000) enumerates the qualities and rewards for each of them: the righteous is a pleasure to his father (Prov. 23:24); his trust in the lord is immaculate (Prov. 18:10); his speech and teachings are great assets to other (Prov. 10:20&21); he is recipient of blessing (Prov. 10:6); he is protected from trouble (Prov. 11:8), whereas the wicked treats them with cruelty (Prov. 12:10); he fails to understand what righteousness means, deliberately violates that which is just and fair, and in so doing hastens his own downfall and death (Prov. 4:19; 10:7&8,27&28; 11:19). From the foregoing, however, righteousness is an expression of the principle in terms of which the structure of the ideal society is realized, as well as the state or order of what the world and human society should be (Philip, 2000).

Justice in the Old Testament

Justice as a legal and moral virtue, linguistically, means just behaviour or treatment of others. By implication, it means giving others their due, or be rewarded according to what they deserve. In this wise, justice can be described as a legal concept used in the court. Meanwhile, the primary word for justice in the Old Testament is "*mishpat*." This word primarily means a judgement (Calvin, 2011), as in a court sentence. So when "*mishpat*" is used in the Old Testament, it is concerned the character of God in executing

judgement upon the evil doers, and the character of an individual in dealing with his fellow individual (Swagbucks, 2015). At this point, justice becomes a moral virtue for individuals as the total observance of God's commandments is expected in the treatment of others.

The Old Testament prophets who are crusaders of social justice often speak of justice in relation to rewards for acting justly, and punishment for wrongdoing. In this case, God is portrayed as a judge of a model of integrity. Thus, Jean (2004) writes that God demonstrates His justice in that He is a model of integrity; first of all, in His judicial function of guiding the people and each individual person; and then as the God of retribution, either punishing or rewarding according to one's works. Perversion of justice through bribery and other forms of social injustice were not alien to the Old Testament people (Psalms 84:3; Prov. 17:23). But according to Harvey (2013), God's rewards come to those who practice justice and righteousness in all their dealings with others (Psalms 119:121,149; Prov.10:3; Isaiah 32:16-20). In the words of the prophet Amos, "But let justice run down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream" (Amos 5:24) means only those who are practicing justice and righteousness will get attention from God and their prayers will be heard and blessed (Harvey, 2013).

The Old Testament authors often depict God as a lover of justice, and He does not want the vulnerable to be oppressed. Thus, in Isaiah 61:8, God Himself says, "I, the Lord, love justice", and in Psalm 37:23 it is reported that "The Lord loves justice." As a result of this, the Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed (Psalms 103:6); and ... the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy (Psalms 140:12), but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin (Psalms 146:9b). God is Israel's patron and source of justice, and so He requires

His people to care for the orphans, the widows, the strangers, and the poor who are the integral part of the community of God's people. So, the whole essence of justice in the Old Testament is about keeping God's law in order to promote social justice. This is the vocal point of Amos's teaching when he says: "Hate the evil (social injustice), and establish judgement in the gate: ... (Amos 5:15).

Nigeria as It was Meant to be in the Dreams of Her Founding Fathers

The history of Nigeria as a nation will not be complete without the mention of her founding fathers who have contributed immensely to the eventual realization of her independence and nationhood. Such great nationalists include but not limited to the following: Herbert Macaulay (1864-1946), Prof. Eyo Ita (1904-1980s), Alvan Ikoku (1900-1971), Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1996), Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987), Al-Haji Sir Ahmadu Bello (1910-1966), Al-Haji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (1912-1966), and Chief Anthony Enahoro (1923-2010). These great patriotic Nigerians did have lofty dreams and aspirations for their country as captured in the first Nigeria's national anthem (1960-1978). The whole essence of their dreams and aspirations then was for Nigeria to attain great lofty heights where peace and justice reign. To achieve this, certain clauses relating to good governance, peace and security, and social justice were included in the first national anthem to serve as guiding principles for the incoming generations in the running of the affairs of the country in order to bring about socio-economic growth and development, and political stability in the country.

1. Good Governance: According to Tamayao (2014), governance is commonly defined as the exercise of power or authority by political leaders for the well-being of their country's citizens or subjects. It is the complex process whereby some sectors of the society wield power, and enact and promulgate

public policies which directly affect human and institutional interactions, and economic and social development. The founding fathers of Nigeria envisaged this kind of governance characterized by transparency, accountability, political stability, law and order, strong public institutions, sound public policies, good leadership structure devoid of corruption, and sound quality and adequate provision of public services. With all these in proper perspectives, the founding fathers believed that Nigeria would become a country with peace and plenty for both the citizens and foreigners, while bearing in mind that the country has what it takes to achieve this in terms of human and natural resources. Thus, the inclusion of the clause: "And so with peace and plenty" in the first Nigeria's anthem.

2. Peace and Security: These are inseparable. Combined together, it is a condition where individuals, institutions, regions, nations and the world move ahead without any threat. In this condition regions or nations are generally more stable domestically, likely to be democratically governed and respectful to human rights. Conflict not only generates threat and fear, but also hampers economic, social, or political advancement (Contemporary India: Issues and Goals, 2014). With this meaning and the implications of the absence of peace and security in a country, the founding fathers dreamt of a Nigeria where peace and security will be democratically domesticated; where there is no threat to life and property; and where the principles of human rights are upheld. Hence, the founding fathers at independence dreamt of "A banner without stain" symbolizing peace and security by which the incoming generations should live. This is for them to guide against all forms of social injustice that can serve as a threat to peace and security in Nigeria.

3. Truth and Justice: According to Gonzales (2011), truth means conformity to fact or reality; that which is true concerning any matter or

subject, while justice is generally defined as giving one what he or she deserves. This meaning is accomplished when the order of things is fair. Justice happens when people play their respective roles in society and when those who are in authority do not abuse their power. In essence, the role of truth and justice in society is to protect and preserve human dignity or rights. It should be noted that corruption, oppression, exploitation, and other forms of social injustice constitute a threat to human dignity and rights. It is in the recognition of this fact that the founding fathers of Nigeria dreamt of a Nigeria where "[That] truth and justice reign", and "Where no man is oppressed."

The Contemporary Situation in Nigeria

Nigeria as it is today is different from what her founding fathers had dreamt and planned it to be at independence, most especially in the area of social justice central to socio-economic development, and political stability. The inclusion of clauses that emphasize social justice such as, "That truth and justice reign", and "Where no man is oppressed" in the first national anthem were meant to turn the country to a land of great opportunities for every individual in Nigeria. But contrary to this lofty idea of the founding fathers, all forms of social injustice prevail in the country. This has led to poverty and suffering resulting from economic hardship, unhealthy political rivalry, and ethnic and religious unrest.

Romanus (2012) depicts a graphic picture of Nigeria as it is today when he likens the level of social injustice in Nigeria to the ancient Israel: "The situation in Nigeria has become a semblance of the eight century period of Amos in Israel (5;6), where sheer hatred, avarice, bribery and corruption, covetousness, insecurity, kidnapping for ransom, rape, human and child trafficking and all sorts of social injustice have

taken the center stage, even as the number of religious centers maintain its parallel dimension without corresponding synergy." Meanwhile, the following forms of social injustice are discussed to depict Nigeria as it is today:

1. **Corruption:** It is defined as a dishonest or illegal behaviour especially by powerful people such as government officials or police officers (Merriam-Webster, 2017). In its wider application, Ejike (2015) describes corruption as an hydra-headed phenomenon that does not begin and end in financial misappropriation only, but also involves subverting any provision of the constitution; ... abuse of power for self-benefit; using superior mental or manual powers to subdue those less endowed in order to do one's wish; deviating from established societal norms, customs and ways of life-making others to accept it (them) through supine, covert, or high-handedness; bad and negative influence on others, etc. From these definitions, it can be inferred that corruption is a dishonest and illegal behaviour contrary to the acceptable ways of life, and which impacts negatively on both humans and society at large.

As a social phenomenon, corruption is widely practiced in Nigeria in all sectors and institutions of the government (including the judiciary and law enforcement agents such as the police, army, custom, immigration, etc.), private institutions, and non-governmental organizations. Apart from the fact that corruption is endemic in Nigeria, it has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigeria socio-economic and political life, such that corruption has become institutionalized. Odey (2001) and Badejo (2009) observe that corruption is as old as the country itself. This is to say, according to Ojameruaye (2011), that Nigeria has earned a reputation for corruption on a grand scale since independence. He further observes that one of the reasons

advanced for the military coups in January 1966 was alleged corruption by the elected civilian leaders. Since then every successive government has been alleged of corrupt practices at one time or the other. Meanwhile, Ayida (1990) and Egbunu (2009) observe that the menace (of corruption) has its tap root on the powerful (leaders), but does not in any way concentrate there, rather degenerates to the common men on the streets and cities. This is to affirm that corruption is practiced in Nigeria by both the leaders and the governed.

However, the surveys carried out by Transparency International on the corruption levels of some countries (Nigeria inclusive) of the world for sixteen consecutive years (2000–2016) reveal that Nigeria has always been ranked high as one of the most corrupt nations every year (Uzochukw, 2017). The findings from these surveys confirm all the stories on the prevalence of corruption in the socio-economic and political life of the country. Meanwhile, Uzochukw further highlights the faces of corruption in Nigeria to include the following:

a. Political Corruption: This takes many shapes, starting with embezzlement, bribery, rituals rigging in elections and so on. In fact, corruption is highest in the political system. In both the Senate and the House of Representative, corruption is seen as normal. It is because of the “wicked level” of corruption that makes both the youths and the old struggle to find themselves in one political party or the other. They believe that once they occupy any position in politics, even the smallest, they will use corrupt tricks to fill their pockets with public funds. On many occasions, politicians have bribed some top officials to do wrong things to their favour. Some political leaders, including governors and presidents, have been sued by opponents, but the sued followed the back door, bribing barristers and judges. At the end of the judgement, the leader who bribed won in the case.

b. Corruption in Universities and Colleges: It is not new to any real Nigerian to hear that corruption parades itself in universities, polytechnics, and colleges. There are certain things that some lecturers do that deserve serious punishment. Many lecturers use the opportunity they have to take advantage of others. Harassment of women by lecturers and pressure to sleep with them is common. After some of the female undergraduates submit to the lecturer’s request, they are rewarded with good grades. Oftentimes students get admission to institutions of higher learning not by merit, but through a kind of bribery called “sorting”. Some rich men in the country bribe vice-chancellors and heads of departments to secure admission for their children. When this kind of dirty practice is conducted, those who would have made it on merit are cheated, as no admission will be offered to them. Every university in Nigeria has a quota (maximum number of students) they can admit each year.

c. Corruption in the Police Force: Some of the police officers who work in some checkpoints on the expressways cannot do so without collecting of bribes from car owners and drivers. Their interest is to collect money from road users and not to secure the road. Bribes become compulsory even when your particulars are in order. Bus drivers must offer money before they continue with their transportation business.

d. Corruption in Churches: Some pastors have on many occasions been caught for their involvement in adultery and fornication. Through newspapers, televisions, and other channels, the immoral acts committed by Nigerian pastors have been observed. This category of pastors go to the extent of using magical and devilish powers in running their church “business” in the name of God’s power.

e. Internet Fraud: Some Nigerians, who are mainly youths, have been scamming their fellow citizens using illegal

means. Some host websites online and claim to be giving jobs to job seekers and scam any who fall prey to their tricks. They tell job seekers to make certain payments for processing documents without them knowing that they will not be issued any job. Some Nigerians have been defrauded by cyber criminals.

f. Corruption in the Customs Service:

The customs service of Nigeria is the organization that is authorized to clear goods that are imported in to the country. This group is not free from the menace of corruption. In most occasions, you must pay bribes to customs before your goods are cleared. Many containers that are being held captive by customs because the owners are not willing to pay a large amount of money being demanded as bribe.

2. Oppression: Ashley (2017) defines oppression as the systematic mistreatment, exploitation, and lowering in status of a group (or groups) of people by another group (or groups). He further explains that, it occurs when a group holds power over others in society by maintaining control over social institutions, and society's laws, rules, and norms. In Nigeria, oppression of people occurs at various levels of government institutions, public institutions and places (such as banks, markets, churches, schools, etc.), homes, and among the ethnic groups and political parties. The people at disadvantage here are always the subordinate, the vulnerable, the weak, the poor, the physically impaired, the aged, and women. These categories of people form the largest population of people oppressed in Nigeria. However, Ugiagbe and Eweka (2014) discuss the oppression of women, the aged, the physically impaired, and the minority in Nigeria under the following sub-headings:

a. Economic Dimension: Oppression in the economic dimension in Nigeria manifests in economic arena such as employment, human capital indicators, access to fund and economic participation and empowerment. There is no gainsaying the fact that women,

the aged, physically impaired and minority suffer economic hardship in forms of unemployment, exclusion and lack of access to economic power-enhancing facilities in the country. The impaired are hardly employed in Nigeria and the aged are treated with levity by the young generation power wielders.

b. Socio-Political: The oppression of the women, the aged, and physically impaired including children and minority is perhaps most evident in social and political circles in Nigeria. Socially, women are marginalized and oppressed in all ramifications-family, household, community and society. The social exclusion and oppression are evident in indicators like education, right violation and political participation and leadership roles. In the social arena, women are not given opportunity to lead or even to participate in the societal processes rather they are regarded and are actually passive observers and receivers of crumbs from the masters' (male) tables.

c. Ethnic Oppression in Nigeria:

Ethnicity has been used as an instrument of oppression of the minority in Nigeria. The federal civil service of Nigeria is dominated by the three major ethnic groups-Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo, eight of every ten federal senior civil servant come from the three groups. The principal officers in the armed forces, police and other Federal parastatals are mainly occupied by the "major" ethnic groups.

Righteousness and Justice: The Model for an Ideal Social Order in Nigeria

Righteousness and justice as deployed by the Old Testament prophets and authors reflect an ideal social order for any human society. The deployment of these two words, according to the Old Testament thought and teaching, was meant to restore social justice in the Israelite community where social injustice of all kinds prevailed at one time or the other. Also, righteousness and justice were deployed by the Old Testament prophets

and authors to remind the Israelites that God demands that they are righteous and just in their dealings towards one another because God Himself is righteous and just. As a result He does not want injustice of any form to prevail among the Israelites.

Having realized the need for righteousness and justice to prevail among the Israelites, one of the Old Testament authors affirms that: "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34, KJV). This is to infer that where righteousness and justice prevail there will be peace and harmonious relationship in the society that will bring about socio-economic development, and abundant opportunities for individuals to maximize their potentials. This inference encapsulates the dreams and aspirations of the founding fathers of Nigeria.

For the dreams and aspirations of the founding fathers of this country to be realized, therefore, there is need for righteousness and justice to prevail in Nigeria in order to bring about an ideal social order and a country where "truth and justice reign", with "a banner without stain", and "where no man is oppressed" so that "with peace and plenty Nigeria may be blessed." There is no gainsaying in the fact that there is corruption and oppression being perpetrated against some individuals in Nigeria by the rich and those in positions of authority. The efforts of the oppressed to resist oppression often result to political instability, and ethnic and religious rivalries, while corruption remains the bane of socio-economic development in Nigeria.

Meanwhile, to bring about an ideal social order devoid of corruption and oppression, there is need for righteousness and justice to prevail in Nigeria. An ideal social order is achieved through this means when everyone takes a stand to do the right

thing (righteousness), and when everyone is given his due (justice). In this way, there will be no clash of interest and uprising that can mar the peace and progress of the Nigerian society.

Conclusion

An ideal social order is germane to socio-economic transformation, and political stability of any nation. It is a known fact that the Nigerian society is bedeviled with all forms of social injustice like in the days of Amos and other notable prophets and authors in Israel. Also, there is no doubt that injustice as a cankerworm has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian socio-economic and political life. As a result of this, there is need for righteousness and justice to prevail in Nigeria and among Nigerians as an antidote against the evil of social injustice in order to bring about an ideal social order for socio-economic transformation, and political stability in Nigeria. The realization of this will amount to the fulfilment of the dreams and aspirations of the founding fathers of Nigeria.

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