

OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS AND THE CALL FOR A CORRUPTION FREE SOCIETY

Joy Philip Kakkanattu, CMI[♦]

An important component of the Old Testament Prophetic movement is its uncompromising demand for a just society where relationship between man and God is intrinsically measured by and correspondent to the right relationship between man and man. At a time when the institution of monarchy jeopardized the Exodus and the covenant vision of a society based on principle, justice, equality and love to promote the economics of affluence and triumphalism without listening to the cry of the marginalised of the society, the prophets arose to become the voice of the voiceless and took care that the ideals of the Exodus and Covenant be remembered.¹ They raised their voices against the corruption, exploitation and injustice prevalent in their society and stood for the cause of the poor and the vulnerable. Pleading benevolence for the marginalised, they envisaged a new society, where the poor and needy get equal social and legal protection.² A corollary of this theme is the prophetic criticism of corruption existing in various strata of societal relationships. It may not be a hyperbole to consider the biblical prophets, both classical and pre-classical, as great anti-corruption crusaders against all evasions and erosions in moral, religious and societal living. The concept of corruption in the society implies the

[♦]**Dr Joy Philip Kakkanattu, CMI** holds a Licentiate in Sacred Scripture from Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, and a doctorate from Gregorian University, Rome. His doctoral dissertation was published as the 14th title of *Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2 Reihe* with the title *God's Enduring Love in the Book of Hosea*. He is a resident faculty at Dharmaram Vidya Keshtram, Bangalore and visiting faculty at JDV, Pune. Email: jpkakkanattu@gmail.com

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.

² Joy P. Kakkanattu, "Anāwim: The Prophets in Defence of the Poor," *Third Millennium* 9 (2006), 25.

denial of justice in people's lives. "Justice is ultimately connected with the way people's lives go and with the nature of the institutions surrounding them."³ So corruption in any form is primarily injustice and is a denial to the poor of their human rights. Hence, any discussion on the notion of a corruption free society in relation to the OT prophets should necessarily require the study of the notion of justice in the prophetic literature.

1. Justice and Righteousness: Pillars of a Pristine and Corruption free Society

The terms justice (*mispāt*) and righteousness (*zēdāqāh*) are two terms employed by the prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah (Jer 7:5-6; 9:13; 22:3, 13), Amos and Micah, to designate the contours of a society founded on a covenant relationship. These two terms are used in the Bible with various nuances. However, when they are used as a pair, "they refer to the order established by God in human society, particularly in Israel. This is the order that people ought to observe in order to behave rightly, and it is up to the king to preserve it and rule in conformity with it, so that the land may have peace, justice and prosperity."⁴ As J. Jeremias holds, these terms "are not some sort of behavioural goals, but rather primarily gifts from God which Israel can allow to flourish, can support, or can obstruct."⁵ They are relational terms, which refer to humans' relationship to God and to their fellow human beings.⁶ Because of this relational nature, justice and righteousness are *sine qua non* for human beings to find acceptance before God. They declared that the worth of worship as a means to please God is contingent upon the practice of justice and righteousness. Hence Amos says: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). Without justice and righteousness, sacrifice becomes almost a sacrilege. Amos used these words to designate the existence or non-existence of Israel's relationship with God.⁷ For Isaiah the presence and absence of justice and righteousness is the yardstick to measure the faithfulness of Jerusalem. Devoid of justice and righteousness, Israelite society becomes like an adulterated precious metal depreciated by all (1:21-27) and as a

³ Amarthya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, London: Allen Lane, 2009, x.

⁴ Enrique Nardoni, *Rise Up O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004, 102.

⁵ Jörg Jeremias, *The Book of Amos*. Louisville: The Old Testament Library, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, 104.

⁶ Charles S.S. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Willian B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 758.

⁷ Reinhard Feldmeyer-Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*, Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011, 289.

vineyard producing bitter grapes against the expectation of the planter (5:1-7). As is clear from Isa 1:21-23, the litmus test of the prevalence of justice and righteousness is the amount of sensibility to the needy of the society. When the cause of the widows and orphans are trashed as insignificant, it is the covenantal demand of justice that is violated. Without the practice of justice manifested by action on behalf of the marginal and underprivileged of the community, there is no possibility of pleasing God merely through cult. So Isaiah urges the people:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, correct oppression;
defend the fatherless, plead for the widow (Isa 1:16-17).

As W. Brueggemann says, "The large theological issues of life with Yahweh boil down to the concreteness of policy toward widows and orphans."⁸ So, one can conclude that these terms are used by the prophets to explicate the concept of social justice.

The prophetic understanding of justice as the foundational principle of the covenant community was probably derived from the Israelites' understanding of God. In the Bible, God is the standard of justice and those who properly relate to Him become just. The God of the Bible is a God who manifests His sense of justice in his preferential inclination to the cry⁹ of the oppressed and marginalized and in his intervention in human history to alleviate their misery. "This preferential option that is mandated to Israel is rooted in Yahweh's own practice and inclination, so that in the practice of justice Israel is indeed to imitate Yahweh."¹⁰ The cry of the innocent blood of Abel from the earth elicited in God a sense of justice which demanded punishment for Cain, the perpetrator of injustice (Gen 4:10). God listened to the voice of the afflicted child of Hagar, which prompted

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, 22.

⁹ Here I am not considering various Hebrew terminologies for cry and its nuances. For such a study, see Richard Nelson Boyce, *The Cry to God in the Old Testament*, SBL Dissertation Series 103, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988. He says: "At the beginning of Exodus narratives in the canon of Old Testament Scriptures, a rich diversity of thought emerges as to the identity of those who cry out and the one they cry to, the nature of the process they intended to provoke, and the reasons why this process moves forward: a divine judge comes down to judge and save on the basis of an appeal by the legally marginal; a prophetic liberator is sent forth to deliver one national group from another on the basis of the protesting outcry of the oppressed; a covenant partner is moved to remember on the basis of the pain-filled moans of the worshipping community upon whom he has especially placed his promises," 69-70.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, 422.

Him to intervene in their lives. (Gen 21:26-27). God's righteousness is seen in His remembrance of the covenant He made with Abraham and others as He hearkened to the groaning of the oppressed Israelites and in the resultant divine decision to intervene in their history to liberate them from their situation of denied justice (Ex 2:23; 3:7-10). As Juan Alfaro rightly wrote, "That cry was more than a self-pitying complaint; it was an appeal to the justice of God in the face of human injustice. The God of life could not remain neutral in a situation of death; He had to commit Himself."¹¹ Thus, the righteousness of God is not an abstract ideal. Yahweh liberated Israel from the oppressive structures of Egypt to form a new social community based on a covenant relationship which envisages mutuality and reciprocity in societal relationship. An important aspect of this is the sense of justice with a preferential option for the poor and the marginalized. It demands a listening heart to the needs of the less privileged. The Book of Exodus categorically states: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry" (22:21-23). The prophetic demand to do justice and righteousness necessarily implies "to deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood" (Jer 22:3). To quote Breuggemann,

The specific and radical command to do justice is to characterize the whole life of Israel. Such a command, understood as a poignant reflection of Yahweh's own way in the world (as evidenced in the Exodus), clearly is intrusive in and critical of a life of self-protection, self-sufficiency, and self-indulgence. This mandate marks Israel as a community that practices an intense openness to the neighbor, and it balances that openness by a keen sense of self-criticism about socio-political-economic advantage.¹²

Just as the community experienced the justice of God as the result of their outcry from a situation of oppression and marginalization, so are they expected to appropriate the nature of God in their dealings with the outcry of other marginal members of the society. For them, justice is understood as an obligation of the covenant relationship. Any flouting of this obligation is judged by the prophets as injustice and corruption which invite the judgment of Yahweh.

Prophetic concern for justice and righteousness is rooted in the awareness of the injustice prevalent in the community. In their

¹¹ Juan Alfaro, "God Protects and Liberates the Poor - O.T.," *Concilium* 187 (1986) 29.

¹² Breuggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 423.

criticism of the lack of justice, the prophets underscored the lack of “a sense of the monstrosity of injustice.”¹³ This insensitivity to justice made the perpetrators of unjust practices dare to approach the God of righteousness in mere worship. The presence of oppression and corruption was the main preoccupation of the prophetic voice in defence of justice and righteousness. The urgency of justice was not necessitated by any theoretical lacuna, but rather by an urgency of aiding the victims of corruption.¹⁴ No prophet could tolerate the overturning of justice and righteousness through the callous acts of corruption (Amos 5:8-13). The prophets, by the very nature of their mission, could not turn a deaf ear to a cry that resulted from the denial of justice (Isa 5:7).

2. Corruption: Misuse of Powers for Personal Gain and Gratification

Corruption is usually understood as “wrongdoing on the part of an authority or powerful party through means that are illegitimate, immoral, or incompatible with ethical standards. Corruption often results from patronage and is associated with bribery.”¹⁵ In the prophetic utterances against injustice prevalent in Israelite society one can identify references to various corrupt practices that had crept in.

2.1. Misuse of Political Power

In Israel it was the duty of the king (or the authority) to protect the rights of the undefended and weak. The king was understood to be the guarantor and promoter of righteousness and justice (Ps 72:1). As an instrument of divine justice, the ideal king or the administrative heads should take care that the poor and destitute, as members of the people of God, were not only not victims of injustice, but equally, were not victims of the law itself.¹⁶ It was conceived as the duty of the established social power – be it king, prince, elder, judge, etc. – to safeguard and make accessible distributive justice to those who were weak in its domain of administration. When those who were to protect and administer the rights of the people became offenders of them, the prophets arose to point out their corruption of power and to be the defence of the voiceless. As the stories of Nathan’s condemnation of David’s sin (2 Sam 12:1-10) and of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21) amply demonstrate, when the rulers misused their power for personal gain at the cost of the right of the other, it

¹³ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets I*. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2003, 204.

¹⁴ See, Heschel, *The Prophets I*, 204.

¹⁵ <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/corruption.html>

¹⁶ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld-Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*. Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 215.

was the duty of the prophets to defend the cause of the victim. In both instances where the rulers placed themselves above the law and thus abused their power, the prophets were sent as God's mediators in defence of those to whom justice was denied.

This prophetic role of mediation on behalf of the powerless against the corrupt power structure becomes more discernible in Amos and other classical prophets. Micah's words of rebuke highlight the disrespect of the ruling class towards justice: "Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong" (3:8-10). Through the metaphor of cannibalism, the prophet points the finger to the authority's abuse of the people. Isaiah accuses the entire nation of being corrupt. Through the imagery of the human body, he indicts those from the leaders down through the lower strata, showing the corruption to be all-pervasive (Isa 1:2-6). The indictment against the leaders, who were supposed to be the guardians of justice, was that they were the oppressors and violators of social justice. Isa 3:14-15 highlights the corruption of the leadership:

The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people:
It is you who have devoured the vineyard;
the spoil of the poor is in your houses.
What do you mean by crushing my people,
by grinding the face of the poor?
says the Lord GOD of hosts.

Jeremiah reminds the king of his duty "to do justice and righteousness and [to] deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And [to] do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place" (22:3), and to keep away from all denial of justice and righteousness. Later the Prophet Ezekiel accused the politically powerful of corruption, of fattening themselves at the expense of the less privileged, and of utterly failing to take care of them (Ezek 34:3-5; also Jer 23:1-2).¹⁷

2.2. Corruption: Misuse of Economic Power

Just like political power, money can become a power, insensitive to the principles of justice as fairness. It can become a determinant force in the society. Because of its purchasing strength, the rich can silence the many dissonant voices which are critical of their proud and egotistical style of functioning. It can control the political and judicial power to serve their schemes and designs. Lack of concern for the

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 423-425.

poor is visible in the craving of the affluent for satiation and surplus without any concern for the cause of the poor and less-privileged of the community.¹⁸ In this scenario, we see the biblical prophets sound the alarm against the arrogance of the power of money, which jeopardises an important feature of the covenant ideal, i.e., “to pay special attention to the justice due to the powerless groups within the community: widows, orphans, strangers and the poor.”¹⁹ The object of prophetic criticism was not precisely the economic prosperity or financial growth of a part of the Israelite society. What they were against was the social and economic abuses that had come into the society together with the economic growth. They were against the unbridled economic expansion of great landowners, who added estate to estate until they became the sole property owners in the land (Isa 5:8; Amos 8:4; 3:15; Micah 2:2). They criticised in clear terms the greedy attitude of the rich to enlarge their estates by displacing the small holders. What is criticized is “latifundialization”, i.e., “the process of land accumulation in the hands of a few wealthy landowners to the deprivation of peasantry”²⁰. The driving force in this process is more the compulsion of greed than the actual need of more land. In an agricultural economy like that of Israel, to take away people’s land under the guise of the mantle of infrastructural and production enhancement was equal to condemning them to poverty and economic dependence on the rich. For the prophets it was frustrating the goal of Exodus, because the Exodus enabled the landless people to have the blessing of the land that made real the freedom, dignity and security procured through the liberation from Egypt. They opposed land-grabbing as an expression of the greed of the rich elite over their need, an act which jeopardized God’s generous will that all members of the Israelite community be sated.

The misuse of economic power was discernible also in the prophetic criticism of the elite upper class, in the extravagance of their indulgent eating and drinking, and in their rich adornment of themselves with precious ornaments (Isa 3:16-24; 5:11-13; 5:22-23; 28:1-4, 7-8; Amos 4:1-3; 6:4-7). It is all the more despicable when this extravagance of affluence was built on the money exacted by oppressing the dependent poor (*dāl* and *ebyôn*). The two verbs used in 4:1, “to oppress” (*šq*) and “to ill-treat” (*rc*) refer to the devastation of

¹⁸ See Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 28-43.

¹⁹ Rita Burns, “The Book of Exodus”, *Concilium* 189 (1987) 19.

²⁰ D.N. Premnath, “Latifundialization and Isaiah 5.8-10”, in David J. Chalcraft, ed., *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism, A Sheffield Reader*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, 301.

entire families through the debauchery of the rich.²¹ The poor and needy were fleeced and squeezed without any qualm of conscience, not for necessity but for luxury, not to promote life but for kicks.²²

The contrast between the affluent lifestyle of the rich aristocracy *vis-a-vis* the relative deprivation of the peasantry is further delineated in Amos 6:4-7. Many scholars are of the opinion that Amos depicts with concreteness and vividness the life of extravagance epitomized in the *marzeah* celebration in these words:

Plush furniture, indolent leisure, epicurean food, free-flowing wine, perfumed oil, and the sound of music are the hallmarks of festivity. The consumptive pattern conveyed through the *marzeah* celebration could only be characterized as voluptuous or conspicuous. The source of such opulence was the labour and toil of the peasantry.²³

Such a lavish celebration, whether it was secular or cultic, was usually possible and thinkable only for those who had easy money, often made through short-cuts and deception. The festive revelry of the rich who spent their time in drinking wine from big bowls and anointing themselves with finest virgin oil without having any feeling towards the poor was condemned by the prophet as inviting Divine judgement. The prophet seems to be pointing the finger at the carelessness of the leaders who, instead of looking after the security of the state, spent much time and attention on feasting.²⁴ In Isa 3:16-14, similar in tone to Amos 4:1, Isaiah denounces the ostentatious behaviour of the wealthy women-folk of Jerusalem which naturally led to exploitation and destruction of the poor. Even the religious leadership indulged in the extravagant lifestyle of the rich and failed in their entrusted duty to correct the erosion of values (Isa 28:7-8).

Another malpractice criticised by the prophet was bribery, which was a corruption involving use of financial power to influence the actions of an official or other person in charge of public or legal duties (Isa 1:23; 10:2; Amos 5:12; Micah 3:11).²⁵ In fact only the rich could try to influence the authorities through bribery to get their projects passed, bypassing needed scrutiny and verification and at times even defying rules of legitimacy. The leaders, who were supposed to guarantee justice and equity to all, perverted justice by accepting bribes.

²¹ Jeremiah, *Amos*, 64.

²² J. A. Moyer, *The Message of Amos*. Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1974, 93-94.

²³ D. N. Premnath, *Eight Century Prophets. A Social Analysis*. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2003, 139.

²⁴ Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets, vol 1*. Berit Olam, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000, 245.

²⁵ <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/bribery>

Subversion of the judicial process, especially through bribery, by denying just judgement to the vulnerable weaker section of the society was criticised by the prophets as sheer thievery (Amos 5:11-12). Amos' accusation in 5:11-12 denounces the perverted ways of making money. The specific reference to the distorting of judgement by taking bribes in v.12 brings to light the corrupt judiciary. The gate of the city was the spot where public legal hearings took place and where justice was administered. The prophet accuses the judges of subverting the cause of the needy at the gate. As S.M. Paul remarks, "The poor and underprivileged are continuously victims of the local judiciary, who victimize them at the very place where justice should be dispensed."²⁶ Thus the public servants become servants of the "wicked who draw a bribe out of his bosom to pervert the course of justice" (Prov 18:5).

2.3. Corruption: Misuse of Legal Power

The prophets vehemently opposed the manipulation of the legal system by those who were responsible to guarantee equal rights in order to facilitate the sequestration of property of the poor peasants (Isa 10:1-2). In the oracle of Isa 10:1-2, "Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, ² to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!", the prophet "attacks the practice of enclosing peasant holdings on the pretext of insolvency or by application of eminent domain (as with Naboth's vineyard, 1 Kgs 21) or by some form of legal legerdemain."²⁷ Here Isaiah shares a tradition of protest with Amos and Micah against distorted "law making" by the powerful, most often done to their advantage. The prophets warn the powerful of corruption in law-making, exhorting them against the exploitation of the powerless of the society with a verdict - "you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine" (Amos 5:11; Zeph 1:13; Deut 28:30).

Amos 2:6-7 illuminates the ways corruption was present in Israelite society in dealing with legal interpretations. The injustices mentioned in these verses are i) selling the righteous (*zadiq*) for silver and the needy (*ebyôn*) for a pair of shoes; ii) trampling the head of the poor (*dallim*) into the dust of the earth; iii) perverting the way of the lowly (*anāwim*). All of these crimes are taken for granted, apparently without any serious consequences for the violated justice, and thus,

²⁶ Shalom M. Paul, *Amos*, Minneapolis: Hermeneia, Fortress Press, 1991, 175.

²⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*. AB19; New York: Doubleday, 2000, 213.

they can be interpreted as legally permissible. In other words, the sin of Israel belonged to the category of perversion, as it consisted in a distorted interpretation of the meaning of the law.

Amos seems to refer to some legal norms which endorse these malpractices within the Israelite society, and he denounced the same legislation and violence against the less-privileged of the society. Selling the righteous for silver may refer to the institution of a time-bound debt-slavery mentioned in Lev 25:39 ff., a practice originally intended to protect the poor and which was later misused to make profit through selling of debtors into slavery. Another interpretation is that the selling of the righteous for money refers to the setting of a trap for an innocent person in the legal process by false testimony or by bribing the court. In this sense, the accusation of Amos refers to forensic injustice and to the inability of the judges to protect the righteous from a wicked accuser, or even to the acquiescence of these judges in this criminal operation.²⁸

Another group that suffered from the unscrupulous behaviour of their money-and profit-oriented fellow Israelites were the *ebyôn* (the needy). They were miserable persons, who were to be helped to survive and who had no means whatsoever for paying back their debts. The accusation against their oppressors was that those who were supposed to help their needy fellow beings by alleviating their misery, instead, made them a commodity for economic gains. The mention of a "pair of sandals" seems to refer either to the little value given to those persons who were so deep in debt that they were sold for a trifle price or to the selling of the poor even in the case of a trivial debt.²⁹ As Jörg Jeremias remarks: "In both instances, human beings become calculable goods, and become such under the cloak of legality. The nations treat foreigners as if they were goods (Amos 1:6, 9); the Israelites treat their own fellows and neighbours this way!"³⁰

Amos 2:7 continues the charge against the unjust practices in the Israelite society. This verse mentions two more groups, the *dallim* and *anāwim* who were victims of social maltreatments. The common trait of the *dallim* was their marginalisation. The implication of the expression "they trample the head of the *dallim* into dust of the earth" is that the rich treated the underprivileged with contempt and abuse.³¹ The *anāwim* are the economically and socially deprived and

²⁸ H. Simian-Yofre, *Amos*. Milan: Paoline, 2002, 51.

²⁹ See Simian-Yofre, *Amos*, 53; Jeremias, *The Book of Amos*, 35. For a discussion of the verse, see Paul, *Amos*, 77-78.

³⁰ Jeremias, *Amos*, 36.

³¹ Paul, *Amos*, 80.

vulnerable.³² The righteous, the poor, the needy and the lowly form “a group which is powerless and is morally at their lowest ebb due to the discrimination and injustice done to them in the economic and legal matters.”³³ What Amos denounces is the justice denied to the marginalised by the judiciary, which should have guaranteed them impartiality and justice.

3. Seek God through the Works of Justice: Prophetic Mandate for a Just Society

An important prophetic role was to make the rich and the elite of the Israelite society realize the gravity of injustice committed by them against the poor and undefended of the society and to warn them that because of their disregard for the covenant values, Yahweh will punish them (Amos 2:6-8; 5:10-17. 21-24; 8:2-6). The prophets, while highlighting various corrupt practices that had crept into the Israelite society, also showed the way for a return to a free society based on principles of justice. They argued for an alternate society or a contrast community against the dominant culture of the time. If corruption resulted from the misuse of power for a self-centred and self-indulgent life without any consideration for the other human being, the alternate corruption free society would be rooted in a sense of justice and solidarity with the poor and downtrodden. To be in right relationship with God demanded of God’s people that they promote just relations with each other, and, especially with those marginalised (the widow, the orphan and alien) and those denied the community’s resources. Prophet Isaiah presents the contours of this alternate society in terms of a just ruler. Isa 11:4 is part of a splendid poem in Isa 11:1-9, which announces the emergence of a ruler from David’s family line, divinely endowed with all the charismatic attributes required to fulfil the ideal often proclaimed but rarely realised, of bringing about a just order in which the poor and the powerless would enjoy equal rights with the wealthy and the powerful.³⁴ Isa 11:4 describes the manner in which the future universal ruler will execute his judgement in favour of the poor (*dallim*) and the lowly (*anāwim*) of the earth. Here the terms refer to the less-privileged of a socio-economic entity. They stand in contrast to a group of people in the society who are corrupt. The poor and the lowly are those who have suffered exploitation by the corrupt and who are promised social and juridical justice, which has been denied to them. The prophet envisages a future society, where even the lowly and the

³² E. Gerstenberger, “hn” I”, *TDOT* 9, 244.

³³ Kakkanattu, “*Anāwim*: The Prophets in Defence of the Poor,” 21.

³⁴ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 263.

poor will receive justice. The expectation of the rise of a righteous ruler to establish Yahweh's righteousness on the earth, whose administration of power will have the imprint of justice and righteousness for all, is seen in other prophets, too (Jer 33:5-7; 33:14-16; Zech 9:9-10).

Since the God of the Bible is a just God who is an advocate for the poor and oppressed, the prophets categorically state that the only way to please God is by seeking justice in human relationships. Any attempt to please Him through mere acts of worship without justice and righteousness is a futile attempt. The prophetic advice to seek God by doing good implies refraining from overthrowing and hurling down justice and righteousness (Amos 5:7) and by guaranteeing justice at the gate (Amos 5:15). J.A. Moyter's interpretation of this verse summarises the nuances well:

Holiness must be pursued both for self and for society. *Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate* (15). This is no fugitive and cloistered virtue interior to the heart or wrought out solely in a one-to-one relationship between the individual and the God. Its outflow is in terms of a society founded and run on principles of justice backed by sanctions for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of them that do well. The *gate* is the court of justice; behind it lies the law of the land, enshrined then as now in principle and precedent, before it lies a particular cry for justice and beyond it lies the good order of society. The *gate* safeguards, applies and actualizes justice... When he calls the people of God to be concerned with *justice in the gate*, Amos makes it their duty to be concerned basically with social ethics, social welfare, and the amelioration of conditions, the protection of and provision for the poor, the weak, the potentially exploited.³⁵

The sure path to salvation is justice and righteousness (Isa 56:1). As Sarojini Henry rightly writes,

What these prophets were claiming is that God is not to be found in the cultic practices that is unconcerned with unjust structures; rather, God is to be found in seeking justice and goodness by implementing them in society. A true worship and adoration would become possible only by achieving justice, peace and righteousness.³⁶

The prophetic understanding of the possibility of a just society has its foundation on justice and righteousness. It is based on the idea of "covenantal communitarianism, in which justice and righteousness assure that individual good is a subset of communal well-being."³⁷

³⁵ Moyter, *The Message of Amos*, 124.

³⁶ Sarojini Henry, "A Fair and Just Economic Order in the World: Biblical Vision," *Theology for Our Times* 7 (2000) 108.

³⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 645.

When the individual's interests are placed above the community's, when individualism threatens the well-being of all members of the society, the prophets warn of the demise of a just society. Thus the prophetic possibility mentioned in many of the passages we discussed above can be summarised as follows: "When the strong and powerful mobilize their resources and energy for the weak and vulnerable, peace and prosperity are generated for all."³⁸ It means to "render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another." (Zech 7:9-10). If corruption is a menace that hinders the realization of this prophetic possibility, all those who strive for the establishment of a corruption free society stand in the tradition of this prophetic possibility, which would keep the prophetic vision of a just society a realizable possibility rather than a utopian dream.

4. Word of God: Refuge of the Oppressed and the Marginalized

The biblical prophets were ministers and mediators of the word of God. If the word of God was frightening and challenging for those who committed injustice and oppression, it became a hope and refuge for the oppressed and marginalized of the society. The prophets under the guidance of the Divine *dābār* became the champions of the cause of the underprivileged, the weak and the undefended of the society. If the voice of Yahweh, roaring like a lion through them, frightened and unsettled that segment of the people of Israel who acted against the principles of the covenant values of justice, equality and religious commitment, the same power of the Lord's voice became a consoling and hopeful power for those to whom justice was denied, whose rights were jeopardized through perjury and whose privileges were stolen by the greedy (Amos 5:7. 10-13; 8:4-6). The Word thus became a liberating force for them, and the prophets were called to be the instruments and catalysts of this liberative process.

Conclusion

It is the widespread opinion of many that the capitalistic and consumer-oriented economic policies prevalent today affect adversely the equitable distribution of wealth. As a result, the gulf between the haves and have-nots is widening. The rich become richer and the poor become poorer. Those who reap the benefits of the profit coming from economic growth tend to lavish the gains on

³⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 645.

various luxuries without any concern for the deprived classes. The greed for more and more money propels the elite minority to invest in more and more enterprises without thinking much about the impact on those who are on the margins. In a world driven by misuse of financial power, political power, legal power, the prophetic voice on behalf of the voiceless of the society still has relevance. When the religious festivities become a demonstration of financial power, the prophetic voice should serve as a deterrent and a challenge to make the religious feasts a celebration of the believing community's faith and priorities. When the service sectors such as education and medical assistance are made commercial enterprises with the intent of profit and self-sustenance, thus denying the poor and the less privileged any possibility to approach them, they become a perversion of justice. It is then that the prophetic advocacy for the marginalized poor begs for actualization in today's context of denied justice and corrupt systems and greedy individuals. In a socio-economic framework marked by growing fissure between the rich and poor, coupled with corruption and scams of colossal proportions, the prophetic dream of a contrast culture based on justice, equity and fraternity can signal a corrective pursuit for a more just and humanitarian society. If affluence makes people insensitive to the cry of the afflicted, and if in the pursuit to acquire more wealth, one adopts ways and means that would deny justice to others, then the biblical understanding of God as one having a preferential sensitivity to the cry of the afflicted invites us to rethink our religious stance.

The prophetic vision of a corruption free society is essentially related to the prophets' understanding of true religion. It is a religion that seeks God not only in worship, but also in doing justice with a preferential option for the weak and marginalized. It is a religion, which enables the believer to listen to the cry of the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien and all those who are at the lower strata of society. It is a religion that prefers the uplifting of the downtrodden rather than the extravagance of lavish festivities. It is a religion that seeks to "establish justice at the gate" and thus prevent society from the rotteness of corruption. I conclude with the words of Bruggemann: "In our own time, we are surely witnessing on a far more menacing scale the inevitable outcome of opulence-cum-barbarianism, rooted as it is in an ideology of individualism that views the neighbour as impediment. Prophetic ethics greatly illumines the shutdown of historical possibility [of a just society]." ³⁹

³⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 646.