

## **‘ZIMBABWEAN POVERTY IS MAN-MADE!’ DEMYSTIFYING POVERTY BY APPEALING TO THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF AMOS**

Obvious Vengeyi  
Bamberg University, Germany

---

### **Abstract**

*This article serves as a critique of the gospel of prosperity in general although particular focus is on Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches. The model for this critique is the prophetic book of Amos. The article assumes that Amos dethroned a theology similar to the gospel of prosperity – a system that legitimised ill-gotten wealth and condemned the poor for their predicament without critically assessing historical and economic policies militating against their advancement. Pentecostalism is equally blind to historical and economic policies that stand in the advancement path of the poor in Africa. With Africa being one of the fertile grounds for Pentecostalism, the critique of the gospel of prosperity becomes important.*

**Keywords:** Zimbabwe, Poverty, Gospel of Prosperity, Prophet Amos

### **Introduction**

Zimbabweans are generally counted among the poorest people in Africa. The same is how Africa is perceived in the West. Various theories (some empirical and others non-scientific) have been put forward to explain the cause of poverty in Zimbabwe and Africa at large. Pentecostal churches through the gospel of prosperity view wealth of an individual or nation as blessings, while poverty is characterised as a curse from God. Both wealth and poverty therefore are rewards from God, depending on individual or national religious commitment. Prophet Amos of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Israel dismissed almost a similar doctrine (gospel) of prosperity by giving reference to concrete historical, legal and economic policies that were skewed against the poor. In that regard, Amos shifted the blame for the existence of poverty in the Israelite society from God to men. Amos' position is affirmed in this article by pointing to historical, legal and economic policies, as chief culprits for the prevalence of poverty in Zimbabwe and not individual or national religiosity.

In Zimbabwe, it is common to come across elements of the gospel of prosperity from the various churches, street preachers, on the bus, train, in conversations, in songs and in writings. Characteristically, there is no acknowledgement of concrete historical and economic factors as responsible for the poverty. For example, the national newspaper, *The Herald*, on every Saturday since September 2009 has carried articles dedicated to spiritual guidance, especially to poor individuals to acquire prosperity through biblical teaching.

### **Excerpt from one of *The Herald* articles**

*Did you know that your life is the expression of what you have been confessing over the years? In other words, you are what you are today because of the confessions you made yesterday. Where your mouth goes is where your life goes. 1 Peter 3:10 says: “For let him who wants to enjoy life and see good days (good whether apparent or not), keep his tongue free from evil, and his lips from guile (treachery, deceit).” Do you love life and*

*desire to see good days? Do you want to see things go on well in your life, irrespective of the dwindling financial situation in the world? If your answer is Yes, God says: The first thing you must do is refrain your tongue from evil! In this scripture lies the key to living a happy, successful and prosperous life. Those who tell lies cannot experience everlasting prosperity. The Bible says: "The lying tongue is for a moment." (Proverbs 12:19). Lying is not only when someone testifies falsely: it is more than that. It connotes when you say something different from what God has said. Anything you say that is contrary to God's Word is a lie, according to the Bible. So, if your desire is to enjoy life and see good days, God is saying to you: Tame your tongue. Refrain from speaking evil. Do not say things that are not consistent with God's Word. You can achieve this by making a conscious and deliberate effort to speak the Word of God always and on all occasions. You will definitely prosper and see good days.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Context and Interpretation of Content**

Abject poverty is the best description for the Zimbabwean majority. Basic commodities are extremely expensive. Medication is beyond the reach of many. At the same time HIV/Aids has caused untold suffering among the poor. Thousands of people die every day of curable diseases. Sending children to school is now a luxury for many rural and urban families. Employment is difficult to come by as several companies have closed down and rendered thousands jobless. Millions have fled the country to neighbouring countries where they are badly treated, but endure the pain. Rural families survive on wild fruits while urban folks scavenge food from dustbins. The country's currency was eroded by inflation and became useless. At the moment, there is no national currency. It is this context that the author of the above excerpt believes is a result of lying.

The author of the article in short, argues that the Zimbabwean poor are sinners. It is therefore their sins that bred poverty. On one hand, the rich are so because they are truthful and obedient to the word of God, hence are righteous. It is this righteousness that has been rewarded by God through wealth. Placed in the broader context, Zimbabwe and other third world countries are poor because the countries comprise liars but rich countries such as the USA and European countries are so because they are truthful! One Pentecostal church pastor claimed, "*America was founded upon principles of God. America acknowledges God first in everything she does! Such belief in God is evidenced everywhere, even on their currency. It is written, 'In God we trust'*".<sup>2</sup> This is gospel truth among many churches in Zimbabwe, particularly Pentecostal establishments such as ZAOGA (FIF), FOG, AFM<sup>3</sup> and many other sprouting 'spirit filled' churches. In ZAOGA, these views are represented in the doctrine of 'Third World Mentality'.<sup>4</sup> Although the author did not identify him/herself with any particular church, the views imply a strong connection with Pentecostalism.

<sup>1</sup> sarah.tikiwa@zimpapers.co.zw, 'Refrain your tongue from evil'. *The Herald*, 01.08.09.

<sup>2</sup> Pastor Jerusalem, of one of the sprouting churches in Zimbabwe, called Kingdom Mind Church. 02.06.2008.

<sup>3</sup> *Zimbabwe Assembles of God Africa (Forward in Faith) (ZAOGA FIF), Family of God (FOG), Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM). For a detailed discussion of the gospel of prosperity or faith gospel see, Paul Gifford, 'The Bible as a Political Document in Africa'. 16-28, In Niels Kastfelt (ed.) *Scriptural Politics: The Bible and the Koran as Political Models in the Middle East and Africa*. London: Hurst & Company 2003, David Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?': Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 28, Fasc. 3 (Aug, 1998:350-373, Lovemore Togarasei, *Modern Pentecostalism as an urban Phenomenon: The Case of the Family of God Church in Zimbabwe*. Brill, Leiden, Exchange, 34, (4) 2005:349-375 and Gloria Copeland, *God's Will is Prosperity*. Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1978.*

<sup>4</sup> See Maxwell, *Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?*, p. 359, where he cites Ezekiel Guti, founder of ZAOGA as having written: "Go to any nation where they worship idols or cows". He continues: "These countries have

It is the validity of such assertions that this article questions by appealing to prophet Amos' analysis of the causes of poverty. In fact, the article assumes that the causes of poverty in Zimbabwe are synonymous to those that confronted 8<sup>th</sup> century Israel. Amos' diagnosis therefore becomes important in relating to Zimbabwean circumstances.

### **Amos and Israelite Realities: Economic Situation of Israel during the Days of Amos**

At the heart of Ancient Israelite national economy was agriculture. Apart from the city-dwellers almost everyone was involved in farming or herding, each family producing most of its own needs. Since farming is seasonal, at other times family members would occupy themselves with other tasks, such as making walls, tools, and repairing them. It was during this time that some families would make items to sell or exchange for other products and services that they could not produce.<sup>5</sup> All these other trades were secondary to farming. They were not depended upon by the generality of the populace.

The individual's socio-economic status was derived from the amount of land one owned. From the sayings of the prophets one could easily detect that there was an economic problem emanating from the ownership of land, the benefits and the rights that went with it in the society. Land was being accumulated in estates and used as a basis for status; and to generate surplus wealth. Those who lost their land were deprived of status, material support, divine possession and inheritance.<sup>6</sup> Although the theory is heavily challenged, Mays observes that for some studies in the social history, this development has been called 'early capitalism' as it signalled the shift of the primary social good, land, from the function of support to that of capital; the reorientation of social goals from personal values to economic profit; the subordination of judicial process to the interests of the entrepreneur.<sup>7</sup> As a result of the distribution of the economy, the society saw the emergence of two distinct social classes; the poor who were becoming poorer each day and the rich, daily amassing wealth.

The above socio-economic stratification of monarchic Israel led Gottwald (and his disciples) to believe that it was what is generally called by the Marxists the 'Asiatic mode of production', whereby classes are differently related to the means of production. There are those who control the means of production and those who do not. And this state of affairs is what Gottwald termed 'the tributary state'.<sup>8</sup> It is generally assumed that by the time of Amos, the Israelite society could be divided into three socio-economic classes: the upper class, the middle and the lower class. According to Gerhard Lenski' in an 'agrarian society' (of which Israel was), the governing class receives the surplus of production, usually amounting to not less than half of the total national income and this group never represents more than two percent of the population.<sup>9</sup> Gottwald argues that the state (upper

---

problems and are poor. I say lets start with God. A nation that puts its trust in witchcraft, must know that witchcraft leads to laziness, hatred and killing one another... This is the problem with the third world'.

<sup>5</sup> *Poverty and Wealth in eighth century Israel. Hypertext Bible Commentary-Amos*, <http://bible.gen.nz/amos/themes/poverty.htm>, accessed on 17.08.2009.

<sup>6</sup> JL Mays, 'Justice: Perspectives from the Prophetic Tradition', p. 144-158, in David L Petersen, (ed.), *Prophecy in Israel*. London: SPCK, 1987:148.

<sup>7</sup> Mays, *Justice*, p. 148.

<sup>8</sup> Norman K Gottwald, 'Social Class as an Analytic and Hermeneutical Category in Biblical Studies', *Journal of Biblical Literature*: 1993b:3-22.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: Theory of Social Stratification*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966:228-29, as cited by Houston, *Contending for Justice*, p.34.

class) was the primary and perhaps even exclusive, expropriator of the subject classes. Even money-lending could be seen as reliant on wealth derived from taxes or crown lands, and it could even have been a state-administered activity “assigned to persons benefiting from the public treasury”.<sup>10</sup>

With the passage of time, it seems, the upper class developed a sub-category which became almost the middle class consisting of merchants or middle-men; professionals (civil servants)<sup>11</sup> and semi-professionals. Properly speaking they were agents of the government who as Andrew Dearman argues were also the target of 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets’ indictments especially Amos (Amos 3:9, 12; 4: 1; 6:1). For him, most of them were the elite in the apparatus of government who took a corrupt rake-off from the tax.<sup>12</sup> Heaton had aired the same opinion that these were agents of the government several decades ago.<sup>13</sup> This class of individuals was both oppressors and applied the means by which the poor were crushed.

In Israel, the lower class, probably (80-90% of the population) was made up of mostly peasants. Although these commanded the majority, they had access to only 3-5% of the land and national resources. The rich and rulers obtained the most fertile and vast tracks of land by dispossessing the poor mostly for failure to service debts and other obligations such as taxes.<sup>14</sup> Conniving with merchants to dispossess the poor, the rich kept adding one field to another. The rich enjoyed an indolent, indulgent existence (4:1f; 6:1-6) in winter and summer houses (3.13; 6.11),<sup>15</sup> while the poor families squeezed themselves into one room together with their belongings, visitors and their animals at night and during bad weather.<sup>16</sup>

### Legitimizing Theology

In the light of the imbalances that existed glaringly in Israel, some religious personalities, possibly beneficiaries of the status quo decided to legitimize it by coining a theology. We can infer the existence of this theology from Amos’ rant against Israel. The theological interpretation was crafted upon the doctrine of Israel’s divine electiveness (Deut 4:34, Amos 3.2). As Ragies Gunda<sup>17</sup> argues, because of this theology, an individual’s socio-economic status was interpreted as a direct consequence of the religious commitment. Poverty acquired divine origin as it was interpreted as resulting from a curse due to sinfulness, while economic prosperity was a sign of blessings for being righteous. It is possible they went further to argue that since very few people are righteous, that is why only very few people are rich and own vast tracks of land. On one hand, “many people are sinful hence are poor and own small and unproductive plots of land”. It seems scripture,

<sup>10</sup> Gottwald, ‘A Hypothesis about Social Class in Monarchic Israel in the Light of Contemporary Studies of Social Class and Social Stratification’, in *The Hebrew Bible in its Social World and in Ours*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1993a:139-64.

<sup>11</sup> EW Heaton, *Everyday Life in Old Testament Times*. London: BT Batsford Ltd, 1956:174.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew J Dearman, *Property Rights in the Eighth-Century Prophets: The Conflict and its Background*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988:133-34.

<sup>13</sup> Heaton, says, ‘the small army of civil servants distributed throughout the length and breadth of the land on the king’s business helped point the way to what, had the words been coined, would have been called Prosperity and Progress’, *Everyday Life in Old Testament Times*, p. 174.

<sup>14</sup> Max E Polley, *Amos and the Davidic Empire: A Socio-Historical Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989:134.

<sup>15</sup> JL Mays, *Amos: A Commentary*. London: SCM Press 1969:3.

<sup>16</sup> Heaton, *Everyday life in Old Testament Times*, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> Masiwa Ragies Gunda, Reconsidering the Relevance of the Prophet Amos in the quest for a just Society in Zimbabwe. *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa*, 2010. [http://www.mhs.no/article\\_1109.shtml](http://www.mhs.no/article_1109.shtml)

especially Deuteronomy 28, which implies that if one obeys the commandments it will be well with him, was often summoned to justify the imbalance in the society. Due to the impact of this theological propaganda, people no longer sought to address the ills of the existing system, as their poverty could be explained easily. The rich considered themselves to be highly religious as can be seen in their frequenting the religious shrines, tithing, publicising free will offerings (4:4-5). The rich therefore anxiously waited for the Day of the Lord when Israel would be exalted above all other nations (5:18-20). The language of the passage clearly acknowledges that certain factions (the rich especially) of the people looked forward to the Day of the Lord, hence Amos' dramatic reversal of the expectation should have shocked his audience.<sup>18</sup>

### Amos' Response

In a revolutionary way, Amos dashed these hopes of salvation that the rich had clung to. He systematically reversed the traditional symbols and images that sustained the common life and self-perception of the political community. For Amos, Israel had no special status in God's eyes (Amos 9:7-8a),<sup>19</sup> the God of Israel was also the one true God over all nations,<sup>20</sup> the entire apparatus of festivals, sacrifices, religious music and tithing was hateful to Yahweh (5:21-24). Amos realised that worship had become a way of validating their values and assumptions. The cult was no longer serving as means of keeping alive the historical memories and sustaining the moral values that constituted them as a community with definite characteristics and goals,<sup>21</sup> but a means for the gratification of Israel.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Amos was protesting against religious practices that were communally oriented, ritually focused, ethically hollow, ... and against a social behaviour that was wealth oriented, legally corrupt, judicially unfair, and insensitive to the plight of the poor. What Amos provided as an alternative is individual and ethical idealism.<sup>23</sup> His indictments against the rich reveal that Amos overturned the legitimating theology. In effect, the indictments pointed at the rich as the sinners but defended the poor as the righteous.

According to Amos, Israel's sin was primarily in three spheres of public life: the administration of justice in court, the confident affluent life of the upper classes, and the worship of God in the sanctuaries. In his eyes the court in the gates was the most crucial institution in Israel's life. There the weak and poor should have their defender and find their rights. But the judicial process had been corrupted by the powerful and rich, and was used as instrument of oppression [5.12; 2.7]. Courts were no more than markets to enslave the needy and wring the last bit of land and produce from him.<sup>24</sup> The wealth Amos denounces was specifically the result of oppression of the poor and corruption of the courts [3.10;

<sup>18</sup> Polley, *Amos and the Davidic Empire*, 166.

<sup>19</sup> J Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel: From the Settlement in the Land to the Hellenistic Period*. Great Britain: SPCK 1984:94.

<sup>20</sup> Polley, *Amos and the Davidic Empire*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 95.

<sup>22</sup> Tchavdar S Hadjiev, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009:18.

<sup>23</sup> JH Hayes, *Amos: The Eight-Century Prophet: His times and His Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon Press 1988:32.

<sup>24</sup> See Polley, *Amos and the Davidic Empire*, p. 135.

5.11]. Estates had grown by dispossessing the peasants.<sup>25</sup> The managers of the economy were infected with a greed that knew no bounds.

Amos understood that poverty among the common Israelites was as a result of land alienation, hence economic alienation. The institutions that were built by the society no longer worked for the improvement of the poor but the rich. The death sentence passed on the society by Amos was therefore not without basis. Increased centralisation, the need to subsidize a royal court and an elaborate cult, heavy taxation that forced many farmers off their lands, large estates with absentee landlords, military service and forced labour were the major factors undermining the old order – which order Amos stood for.<sup>26</sup> But rather than looking at Amos as a conservative, Herbert Huffmon argues that Amos stands between the two; old and new social and economic orders. Citing Cripps, who argues that “Amos declines the option adopted by naïve primitivists; he is not like the Rechabites and does not call for the return to an idealised conception of the life forms of earlier Israel. Neither does his message offer the people ‘the bitter rebukes of a reformer’”.<sup>27</sup> Huffmon believes that Amos was “just announcing that socio-economic reorganisation, or modernisation without compassion, power without love is not the way for Israel”.<sup>28</sup> From his perspective, Amos is concerned about the socio-economic life-style especially among the urban elite that he saw as opposed to the traditional values of Israel for it lacked humanity and mercy as it was characterised by unbridled and insatiable greedy that knew no bounds. Amos makes no condemnation of wealth or new economic forms per se<sup>29</sup> and the claim that he or any other prophet of his era advocated for the abolition of private property is simply mistaken.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, prophets were advocates of private ownership of property as the right of all Israelites, not a preserve for a few.

As Amos observed, land, economic and property ownership disparities were the factors that caused poverty and not spirituality of the individuals. The system was against the poor. As a result of this system, the prosperity that Israel boasted about did not trickle down to the lower social levels. Side by side with the wealth, extreme poverty was growing.<sup>31</sup> Amos as a result takes up the cause of the dispossessed and excluded, and did so in the name of traditional values. He itemised the crimes that the rich had committed against their fellow men: selling the poor for trivial debts (2:6; 8:6), excessive fines (2:8), falsifying weights and measures (8:5), dishonest trade practices (8:6), corrupting the legal system (2:7; 5:10, 12)<sup>32</sup> among others. These factors, for Amos, were behind the wealth among certain classes and poverty among the majority, not religiosity.

Regarding ‘selling the righteous for silver’ (2:6) there are two possibilities explaining how this happened; corrupt judges decided cases against the innocent in return for bribes or for profit from a conviction. In this case, the abuse of the legal system was the condition which made it possible to ‘sell-out’ the innocent. Of concern to Amos was not bribery as

<sup>25</sup> Mays, *Amos: A Commentary*, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> RS Cripps, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: SPCK, 1955:208), as cited by Herbert B. Huffmon, ‘The Social Role of Amos’ Message’, 109-116, in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, edited by HB Huffmon, et.al, USA: Eisenbrauns, 1983:112.

<sup>28</sup> Huffmon, *The Social Role of Amos’ Message*, p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> Huffmon, *The Social Role of Amos’ Message*, p. 112.

<sup>30</sup> Mays, *Justice*, p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> Leon J Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*. Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979:277.

<sup>32</sup> Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 95.

such, but taking bribes to pervert the justice of the poor.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, the innocent who may have been a property owner, was sold into slavery for non-payment of a debt and his property would be confiscated.<sup>34</sup> Amos speaks to a group who are steadily driving the landed peasantry away from their earlier independence into the condition of serfs. The small farmer no longer owns his land; he is tenant of an urban class to whom he must pay a rental for the use of the land, a rental that was often a lion's share of the grain which the land produced.<sup>35</sup> The most deplorable situation for Amos was that this dispossession of the poor would happen with the cooperation of the courts.

The judicial and economic spheres, which are all too intimately related, had been twisted into something utterly different than intended in the Yahwistic covenant.<sup>36</sup> Since several references to persons, guilty of no crime, who were sold or sold themselves into slavery for debts, occur in the Old Testament (Exod. 21:7; Lev. 25:37; 2 Kings 4:1), Amos in this regard seems to question the morality of the exercise rather than the legality. It is possible that the creditors were themselves officials responsible for the administration of justice, which then means corruptors of the legal system and rapacious creditors could have been the same group. This is obviously connected with the fact that the judges and the rich joined together to squeeze the poor. They are therefore not sharply separated from one another in the individual expressions.<sup>37</sup>

It is the above syndicate that Amos also accuses of 'selling the poor for a pair of sandals.' (2:6; 8:6) The expression connotes a situation of weakness, oppression, and exploitation. Although, the real meaning of 'a pair of sandals' is ambiguous, possible suggestions are that firstly it may be referring to the insignificance of the bribe for which judges were willing to pervert legal cases.<sup>38</sup> Second, it could be possible that debtors may have owed no more than the equivalent of the price of a pair of sandals yet were still sold into debt slavery. The third suggestion is that the property of the poor being described was worth no more than a pair of sandals. The fourth possibility is that the transfer of a shoe or sandal represented taking possession and confirmation of property exchange (Deut.25: 7-10; Ruth 4:7-8; Ps.60:8; 1 Sam.12:3). Finally, the expression could have been used to indicate the ridiculously low payment required to 'purchase' the poor.<sup>39</sup> All the possibilities however evidence a situation of abject poverty and desperation on the part of the common people. Whatever the case may be the obvious fact is the poor were crushed with impunity. The law courts were not there to serve the poor but the rich.

Turning to the social gatherings of the rich, Amos rants at the wild drinking bouts for here too the rich showed how low they had sunk. These feasts were literally held at the expense of the poor. It emerges clearly in 2: 8 that both the cloaks on which they stretched themselves out on at the immoral parties, and wine they got drunk on, were obtained by the impoverishment and distress of the poor.<sup>40</sup> The urban merchants appear to have mono-

<sup>33</sup> Walter J Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament*. T&T Clark: Library of Biblical Studies, 2006:67.

<sup>34</sup> Hayes, *Amos: The Eight-Century Prophet*, p. 108.

<sup>35</sup> Mays, *Amos: A Commentary*, p. 94.

<sup>36</sup> PD Miller, *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets: A Stylistic and Theological Analysis*. Chico, CA: Scholars Press 1982:21.

<sup>37</sup> E Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary*. New York: Schocken Books 1970:47.

<sup>38</sup> Polley, *Amos and the Davidic Empire*, p. 136.

<sup>39</sup> Hayes, *Amos: The Eight-Century Prophet*, p. 109.

<sup>40</sup> Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos*, p. 49.

polized the market; they were able to sell to landless peasants at a high price and had the resources for stockpiling grain, so that in a time of poor crops were in a position to control the economy completely.<sup>41</sup> In the process, they gave short measure, used false balances, and mixed chaff with wheat (8:4-7).<sup>42</sup> The process permanently underdeveloped the poor since from season to season they depended on the rich.

The above aspects, for Amos, were the real causes of poverty in the Israelite society – not some abstract concepts such as prayer or ritual cleanliness. This observation agrees with the scenario in Zimbabwe where poverty is a result of human manufacturing by economic systems that serve and are manipulated by the rich and powerful. Historically the system favoured and continues to favour the whites against the blacks. At the attainment of Independence, the few blacks that wielded political power were guaranteed of economic control. The poor, although they have benefited much from the black government, there is still a long way to go in as far as attaining prosperity is concerned. Apart from some government policies that are favourable to the elite, corruption has become endemic in society – it has become one of the impoverishing factors, of such a nature that condemning individuals for their predicament is unwarranted.

### **The Historical Context of Poverty in Zimbabwe: Overview**

It goes without saying that colonialism is responsible for the poverty that many African states are going through. Although Africa is politically independent, it is still ‘economically colonised’. In Zimbabwe for example, there was a deliberate and systematic process to manufacture poverty during the colonial times, so as to force the blacks to serve European economic interests. One element of this colonial impoverishing strategy that had long lasting effects was land alienation. The effects of colonial land alienation are felt even today in most African countries. Land was and remains the means of production for many indigenous Africans. As such, land alienation was in effect economic alienation. Everything was carefully planned to make sure an African becomes poorer each day. Law courts were ready to undertake this special assignment. In many cases the settlers were the law unto themselves. Individual whites could undertake to push the whole tribe off a piece of land. In some instances they could force the whole clan to work on their farms for free.

The impact of land alienation was quickly felt owing to the ever increasing population among the Africans. This led to several attempts towards liberation whereby people wanted control of their land hence their economy. Until year 2000, 70% of arable land in Zimbabwe was owned by 4 500 whites while more than 13 million were landless. Whites had either inherited the land from their ancestors or had bought from their parents and friends. However, it should be made clear that most of them obtained access to these vast lands through inheritance from their ancestors who came as colonisers. This is the reason that forced thousands of poor peasants to invade the white-run farms in Zimbabwe. It is in this context that Zimbabwean poverty is to be looked at. When the government (possibly for political convenience) did not protect the white farmers against hordes of genuine poor peasants clamouring for control of their land and their economy, Western governments accused Zimbabwean authorities of human rights abuses. The sanctions that were enacted thereafter, increased the level of poverty in the country and militated against the efforts the government put in place to empower the poor.

---

<sup>41</sup> Mays, *Amos: A Commentary*, p. 143.

<sup>42</sup> Polley, *Amos and the Davidic Empire*, p. 135.

### Effects of Colonialism on Poverty Today

Before colonisation, the indigenous people of Africa lived without great risk of poverty as happened afterwards. Travellers' accounts of East and Central Africa in the nineteenth Century evidence agricultural prosperity of many – though not all – of its peoples and the great variety of produce grown, together with the volume of local, regional and long distance trade and the emergence of a wide range of entrepreneurs.<sup>43</sup> In the case of Zimbabwe, the Shona were inseparably attached to the land. In general they were skilled agriculturalists who enjoyed a degree of prosperity. The Early Iron Age ancestors of the (later Iron Age) Shona accomplished the transition from hunting and gathering economy to agriculture between c.200 BC and c. AD 1.<sup>44</sup> By the time of colonisation therefore, the Shona had become 'professional or expert' farmers. The Shona agriculture to a greater extent was highly diversified.

Evidence for the above claim abounds in the variety of crops the Shona grew. The basic grain staples included finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*), known as *rapoko* or *rukweza*, bulrush millet (*Pennisetum typhoideum*) known as *mhunga* and Sorghum (*mapfunde*). From the 20<sup>th</sup> century on, equally popular was maize (*chibage*). The abovementioned crops were popular in drier regions of the country while in wetter, eastern districts in particular, rice was grown by the Ndaou, (a Shona group), though it could be grown on a smaller scale in other *vlei*. These staples were supplemented by a variety of fruits such as pineapples, lemons, and paw paws; by vegetables like peas, beans, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes; and by cucurbits such as pumpkins, marrows, melons, and cucumbers. In various parts of the country tobacco, cotton groundnuts, yams cassava and sugar were also produced. Further variety was provided by game and fish; the Shona were excellent hunters and fishermen. Numerous wild foodstuffs were also collected from the plant and insect life. Livestock included cattle, goats, sheep, dogs and fowl. Other activities included working on iron for agricultural tools and weapons, pottery, woodcarving, making of cloth, baskets, nets and mats.<sup>45</sup> Gold had been mined and traded extensively with the east coast between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, and even though the volume of this trade had declined, the washing of alluvial gold continued and copper was also mined although in small quantities.<sup>46</sup> With all these activities, it was difficult for the Shona, if not impossible, to go hungry. Nobody could sleep on an empty stomach as many of the people are doing now.

From the 1920s began an increasing cycle of rural poverty driving more and more people away to the towns.<sup>47</sup> European strategies had begun to yield desired fruits; that blacks work for them for whatever rate of payment. This was achieved through legal and economic pressure. For instance, in 1894 the hut tax was imposed on the Africans to force them to enter the money economy, to work for whites in homes, factories, farms and mines.<sup>48</sup> By 1939 African economic independence had been shattered and African

<sup>43</sup> R Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia*. USA: University of California Press 1977:13.

<sup>44</sup> DN Beach, *The Shona Economy: Branches of Production*, in Palmer, and N Parson, (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*. London 1977.

<sup>45</sup> Beach, *Zimbabwe Before 1900*. Gweru: Mambo Press 1984.

<sup>46</sup> Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia*, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> Palmer, in Palmer, and Parson (eds.), *The Roots of rural poverty in Central and Southern Africa*. p. 13. see also, W Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London 1972.

<sup>48</sup> R Austin, *Racism and Apartheid in Southern Africa: Rhodesia*. Paris: UNESCO Press 1975:32.

cultivators had become tied to a world market over which they had (and still have) no control, and a pattern of underdevelopment was firmly established.<sup>49</sup>

According to Palmer, by the 1930s, the agricultural economy of the Shona and the Ndebele, like that of the Kikuyu and most of Southern Africa had been destroyed. The struggle between the European farmer seeking to reduce the African farmer to a proletarian and African seeking to retain the maximum amount of economic independence had been won conclusively by the Europeans.<sup>50</sup> This was because European agriculture was heavily subsidized while African agriculture was utterly neglected. Potential European farmers wooed in Britain and South Africa were offered training on arrival, received Land Bank loans to help establish themselves, and had a wide range of extension facilities placed at their disposal. Indigenous farmers who had clearly demonstrated their potential were not afforded such assistance.

Moreover, with the control over land came also control over labour. After 1920, reliance on cheap labour was a fundamental prerequisite for the success of European agriculture.<sup>51</sup> But it took many years of economic pressure combined with a constantly growing body of laws.<sup>52</sup> Forced labour was also very widespread although it was resented.<sup>53</sup> The Native Commissioner of Hartley said in 1895, "I am at present forcing the natives of this district to work sorely against their will, using such methods as I think desirable". Earlier in 1892 one pioneer had written home, "we have great trouble in getting native labour up here, the only way we can do it is to go and catch them at dawn and compel them to work". The conditions of work were generally appalling. There was frequent recourse to the *sjambok* or *chikoti*, (the hide whip), both by the employers and the Native Commissioners.<sup>54</sup> In such circumstances therefore, one cannot be blamed for failing to feed himself or his family. Africans did not control the economy and were systematically impoverished. As the African population grew, labour surplus formed. So the low wage policy continued.<sup>55</sup> It is also assumed that Africans, especially the Shona and Ndebele workers, were paid low as punishment for the 1896 resistance to colonialism by their ancestors.

Palmer argues that the competitiveness of African peasantry was reduced by increasingly forcing them off 'European land', either by direct eviction or by imposing such battery of financial and other burdens that they elected to go. Once settled in the reserves, they could aspire to be little more than subsistence cultivators – and migrant labourers, prepared to work for prevailing low wages. Those who chose to remain on European lands either as labourers or as rent-paying tenants, were obviously in no position to compete with the landlord.<sup>56</sup> Over time a quasi-feudal system of labour relations emerged on the farms with African workers totally dependent on their employer for social welfare, including health and education – which again was rarely provided. Workers were 'allowed' to

<sup>49</sup> Palmer, *The Roots of rural poverty*, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Palmer, 'The Agricultural History of Rhodesia', in *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*. London 1977:221-254

<sup>51</sup> Palmer, *The Agricultural History of Rhodesia*, p. 221-254.

<sup>52</sup> D. G. Clarke, 'Settler Ideology and African underdevelopment in Post-war Rhodesia' *Rhodesian Journal of Economics*, vol.8, 1974.

<sup>53</sup> Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia*, p. 42.

<sup>54</sup> Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination*, p. 43.

<sup>55</sup> Austin, *Racism and Apartheid in Southern Africa: Rhodesia*, p. 61.

<sup>56</sup> Palmer, *The Agricultural History of Rhodesia*, pp. 221-254.

cultivate small plots on the farm thereby helping to keep the wages low, while the farm stores tended to suck wages back thus reinforcing indebtedness and dependence.<sup>57</sup> Under such circumstances of underdevelopment, the Africans were bound to a life of perpetual poverty. There was no way an African would prosper regardless of religious commitment.

Inequality was not only limited to the legal tenure of land. The country was divided up, not haphazardly but carefully, for a long period to ensure the best possible conditions to whites who were born in Rhodesia or those who immigrated to Rhodesia.<sup>58</sup> The main roads and railway lines were planned only to service white areas, urban centres and hence industry and associated areas were dotted all over white areas. By and large whites had almost as much good land as bad land, while African land was three quarters bad and only a quarter 'good'. In 1975, Austin observed that the situation had put Africans in a situation of economic subjugation from which it was virtually impossible to recover, unless something was to be done.<sup>59</sup> Unfortunately nothing revolutionary was done until year 2000 with the beginning of the Land reform.

There were deliberate policies to restrict opportunities for Africans in terms of education, training, enterprise and collective bargaining. The educational system trained Africans to provide service at lower levels while ensuring for Europeans a superiority designed to confirm a racial mythology in which they were cast as a perpetual leadership elite who alone can ensure continued 'standards of civilization'. There were two departments of education, one for Europeans in which coloureds and Asians were included and another for Africans. Government educational spending on a European child was ten times higher than on a black child. Over 75% of government expenditure on black education was in primary school. Secondary schools only became available to blacks from 1940. Education for Europeans was compulsory since 1930 with the enactment of the Education Act but for Africans it was voluntary<sup>60</sup> until after Independence. African education was very inferior to that of Europeans. Africans were to be provided with "a systematic training in household work or agriculture". The Rhodesian Front policy (in 1966) was "to gear the African educational output to the job opportunities which Europeans were willing to offer to Africans".<sup>61</sup>

It is this background that should inform any discourse on the cause of poverty in Zimbabwe. Since the colonial era, the economic setup has been tilted against Africans, who should only become labourers and not masters of their economy. In many African states vast tracks of land are still in the hands of whites. As such, to claim that Africans are poor as a result of lying, hence sinful, is not only unfair but also a belief in lies. European economies have developed on the basis of concrete economic policies some of which included colonialism. Cheap labour is one of the most influential factors to this. To then claim of abstract beliefs such as sin, prayer or rather tongue as being responsible for prosperity or for poverty is not objective. Facts on the ground show that each day, Western nations drift away not only from Christianity or belief in God but also from religion in general yet they are rich. On one hand, Africans cannot comprehend let alone live without religion yet they are worse off. Mugambi has always tried to reconcile this contradiction

---

<sup>57</sup> Clarke, *The Political Economy of Discrimination and underdevelopment in Rhodesia with special reference to African workers, 1940-73*, PhD Thesis, St Andrews 1977:311-20.

<sup>58</sup> Austin, *Racism and Apartheid in Southern Africa: Rhodesia*, p. 34.

<sup>59</sup> Austin, *Racism and Apartheid*, p. 35.

<sup>60</sup> Austin, *Racism and Apartheid*, p. 43.

<sup>61</sup> Austin, *Racism and Apartheid*, p. 44.

without success when he says; “I have often raised the question as to how we can explain the apparent contradiction that contemporary Africa continues to be, perhaps, the most ‘religious’ continent in the world, and yet its peoples remain the most abused of all in history. How could it be that the peoples who continue to call on God most reverently are the ones whom God seems to neglect most vehemently? Could it be that irreligion is the key to success, and that religion is the key to backwardness?”<sup>62</sup>

Blaming colonialism, however, for all the misery in Africa is creating another myth and lack of objectivity. Some African problems are a result of greed politicians and blind economic policies. These are very strong contributory factors to the impoverishment of the majority particularly in Zimbabwe.

### **Immediate Context of Poverty in Zimbabwe**

The centrality of land alienation as the cause of poverty in present day Africa cannot be over-emphasised. Most African states acknowledge that to effectively eradicate poverty there is need for land redistribution or economic redistribution. It is the same programme that saw Zimbabwean people for the past 10 years experiencing the toughest times that can ever be imagined. Since the country’s economy is agro-based, disturbances on the farms during the redistribution exercise practically brought the economy to a standstill. It is not possible in one article to relate all the problems that the poor faced but a brief analysis of the few would be enough. There were virtually no foodstuffs on the shelves and millions were starving yet some few individuals afforded to eat three times a day. They even got richer every day. Most of them had strong connections to government officials or themselves serving in the various departments of the government. These individuals would buy groceries from neighbouring countries for resale in the country at exorbitant prices that the ordinary men would not afford.

Although the land reform sought to correct historical imbalances created by colonialism, it also exposed the greediness among Zimbabwean politicians. Several cases of multiple farm ownership are known. In some cases the black government minister would replace a white farmer from two or three farms. In the end, the land was transferred from one rich man to another, the only difference being skin colour. At the same time it is difficult for these to fully utilize the farms, since a majority of them have equally demanding government jobs in towns, hence the presence of absentee landlords. Production on the farms drastically decreased and this contributed to widespread starvation in the country.

It was these politically and economically powerful that also abused the government farm mechanisation programme that was meant to empower the poor to develop the recently acquired plots of land. The government provided farm machinery and inputs such as fuel, fertilizers, pesticides, ploughs, cattle, tractors, among others, but these landed in the hands of the rich. They would take more than they needed only because the implements were either free or heavily subsidized by the government. Worst of all, some would resell at exorbitant prices to the poor. The ordinary poor people who by the way had initiated the land reform and had been targets of government subsidies were pushed to the periphery. It is this context that breeds and nurtures poverty in Zimbabwe not sin/tongue as suggested by the gospel of prosperity.

---

<sup>62</sup> JNK Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War*. Nairobi. East African Educational Publishers Ltd, 1995:33.

The abuse of both the poor and government facilities were common scenarios in the selling of fuel and foreign currency. While all the fuel service stations were literally dry, the rich could afford to import fuel for resale to the ordinary men. In many cases they would use the poor youths as salesmen. In order to maximise profits the fuel dealers would mix fuel with water. For example, the dealers would mix 4 litres of diesel plus 1 litre of water. The price would be for 5 litres of diesel while in effect one would have bought only 4 litres. The same is true with foreign currency. While the banks did not have foreign currency for the ordinary people, the little foreign currency reserves were at the central bank where they were only accessible to the rich and powerful. The same government officials and associates accessed it at the government approved rate of exchange. But they would 're-sell' (exchange) at more than 50 times above the government exchange rate. The middlemen were the poor and unemployed youth.

Most of the foreign currency dealers were not arrested since they were connected to the 'big fish' or 'cash barons.'<sup>63</sup> Since these dealers – 'roadrunners'<sup>64</sup> as they were called – were connected to influential people, the police and law courts had no power over them. Moreover, with the high levels of corruption, the police were easily bought into silence by the rich.

An example is the case of Jonathan Kadzura. Kadzura is a prominent businessman with strong links to the government. He also sits on the advisory board of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe. Kadzura is said to have given Primrose Mutekede Z\$10bn cash in exchange for US\$4 900 suggesting that Mutekede was Kadzura's roadrunner. As the court case unfolded, Kadzura was acquitted for lack of evidence, in spite of not only the police having caught Mutekede with the cash but also Mutekede having proven beyond doubt that she received the money from Kadzura. The police had returned the cash they took from Mutekede to the Reserve Bank without recording the serial numbers. Upon receiving the money, the Reserve Bank personnel also did not record the serial numbers thereby destroying exhibit.<sup>65</sup> At the end of the day Mutekede was fined but Kadzura went scot-free. This is a clear case evidencing the interconnectedness of the corruption syndicate.

The economic problems gave birth to unethical market practices that adversely affected the poor. Quite a number of items were re-packaged to reduce the quantity but only to increase the price. For example, at Mbare market, tins that were supposed to weigh 20kgs would carry only 15kgs after being collapsed. But still would be sold at the price of 20kgs. Scales were adjusted to record falsely. If for example one was buying wheat, a 50kg bag could be bought for the amount of a 25kg after the scale was adjusted to record falsely. This was quite common in areas such as Gokwe where cotton buyers would adjust scales to short-change the farmers.

Established companies reduced the size and quality of their products as well, but increased the prices. For example, Lobels Bread and Bakers Inn, were selling a standard loaf of bread at Z\$9 million, misrepresenting it as whole wheat loaf. Standard loaf was supposed to cost Z\$6 million, while whole wheat was to be charged at Z\$9 million.<sup>66</sup> Some milling companies resorted to milling super-refined mealie-meal of which the price was not controlled, instead of Roller meal that the majority could afford. Some businessmen were

---

<sup>63</sup> Cash baron was a term used by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe to designate male employer of the foreign currency dealers who were subsequently called, roadrunners.

<sup>64</sup> See above.

<sup>65</sup> *The Herald*, 28.12.07, \$10bn cash deal: Kadzura accused.

<sup>66</sup> Walter Muchinguri, 'Bakers Inn GM arrested', *The Herald* 19.03.08.

diverting sugar meant for domestic markets to foreign markets where returns, in foreign currency, were high.<sup>67</sup> Manufacturers of bath soap reduced the size of their products, for example, from 250g to 150g but the prices were higher than those gazetted for 250g. Dairy board Zimbabwe reduced the size of their milk packets. At several market places in Zimbabwe, traders sold rotten produce such as maize, wheat, rice, vegetables, etc at very exorbitant prices. All these affected the poor and increased levels of poverty in the communities.

Accommodation too, was exorbitantly charged, with most landlords charging the rent in foreign currency. This was a tall order for the poor. In a country where unemployment levels had reached 95% that effectively drove families to the streets. Several families were forced to move to the rural areas as they could not afford to obtain foreign currency. In big cities (as well as in rural areas), it is common to have the whole family sharing one roomed house.

Students, particularly in Harare and Bulawayo, had an equally pathetic life. In Harare, in suburbs near the University of Zimbabwe, it was common to have as many as 14 students sharing one room. However, each of the 14 was expected to pay the amount equal to renting a room of his/her own. Several students, either from poor families or from other towns not close to Harare, dropped out of university since they could not afford accommodation. In most cases people would rent accommodation without electricity, water, toilet facilities, window panes, doors and other things. The quality of accommodation was not considered particularly after operation *Murambatsvina*<sup>68</sup> in 2005. As all this happened the rich could afford to build houses with as many as 20 bedrooms, three storeys high, etc in every opulent suburb. These were the same people that would charge exorbitant rents to students.

These economic woes have been exacerbated by economic sanctions that were mooted by Western countries against Zimbabwe as a result of political problems. The ruling party was accused of human rights abuses, particularly in crushing opposition supporters and any voice of dissent. The country would not receive funding from the multi-national donors – World Bank and the IMF. European countries also warned their citizens against visiting the country, thereby negatively affecting the country's tourism industry that used to bring millions in foreign currency. Although these sanctions are described as targeting the so called 'perpetrators of human rights clique', the reality of the situation is that they have affected the common man. No matter how much the poor man would pray, the effect of the sanctions remained; no foreign currency, no medication in hospitals, no food on the shelves, no agricultural inputs, etc.

## Conclusion

The article has successfully dismissed the validity of the gospel of prosperity in Zimbabwe in particular, and Africa at large, by appealing to the prophetic book of Amos, who exposed concrete factors that were architects of poverty in Israel not religiosity. In the same vein, the poverty that many Africans face is because of a combination of historical-colonial programmes put in place to impoverish Africans and poor government policies, especially

<sup>67</sup> Parliament of Zimbabwe. *First report of the portfolio committee on Foreign affairs, international trade on the inquiry into commodity shortages and the pricing system*, (May 2006) distributed by Veritas (accessed, 15.08.09)

<sup>68</sup> *Murambatsvina* was a government coined term to denote an operation that destroyed illegally constructed houses in towns and growth points. The operation increased the shortage of accommodation.

lack of willingness to address corruption, among other problems. If prosperity was harvested directly from sowing religious commitment, Africa would have been the richest continent on earth since Africa does not know, neither can she comprehend life independent of religion (especially Christianity) as some cultures do. This is why nearly every religion of the world is represented in Africa generally and in particular, Zimbabwe. Several churches harvest converts every day in Africa as they compete for followers with other religions.