Chapter: 5

Monarchy in Israel: Ethical Issues

Critical Scholarship demonstrated that, the books First Samuel, Second Samuel, First Kings and Second Kings originally belong to single work.\(^1\) Moreover, the above-mentioned work is edited and composed by different editors over the time. It seems that, final editor could have been from 6\(^{th}\) century BCE.\(^2\) The above-mentioned four books cover the history of monarchy in Israel from 10\(^{th}\) century BCE to 6\(^{th}\) century BCE. The events in ‘Historical Books,’ are evaluated in the light of laws presented in the book of Deuteronomy, therefore, these books are considered as ‘Deuteronomistic History’. In this regard, Gina Hens- Piazza states that:

“As Deuteronomy serve as the template by which kings and their deeds are constantly assessed.”\(^3\)

As observed in the last chapter, people of Israel occupied the land of Canaan as nomadic tribes. After settling in Canaan, people of Israel were engaged in agricultural activities, leading to private ownership of land and other natural resources.\(^4\) Consequently, private property became predominant part of the society with increasing wealth of the

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\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Gina Hens- Piazza, *1-2 Kings*, p.3.

individuals. The nations surrounding Israel had a long history of settlement, with good infrastructure and weapons of war, and found Israel as an easy target to plunder. On the other hand, people of Israel seem to have felt insecure, because there was not centralized administrative structure and army to defend and provide security from surrounding nations. Consequently, in 10th century BCE, monarchy was institutionalized. Like other oriental kings, monarchs of Israel became the supreme judge, with well-structured army and administrative structures.

Saul was the first king of Israel, followed by David and his son king Solomon. After Solomon’s reign, the kingdom of Israel was divided into two nations, Israel and Judah, with Samaria and Jerusalem as capital cities respectively. Subsequently, Israel with its capital Samaria was captured by the kingdom of Assyria in 7th century BCE. Similarly, the kingdom of Judah with its capital Jerusalem was taken over by the kingdom of Babylon in 5th century BCE. In addition, people of Israel were taken as captives to Babylon; this period of captivity in Babylon is called ‘Exile’.

Along with the rise of monarchy in Israel, there was an increase in the economic surplus that created social inequality and social stratification. The king and the elites of administration gained more

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control on lives of people, taxes and encroachment of land by monarchs was frequent. Debt slavery, debt servicing by the wealthier classes also became a predominant part of the society. Thus, there developed a conducive atmosphere for social, political and economic oppression of the poor and weak in Israelite society. The tribal confederation, which provided social security, economic equality and political power to all the tribes and members, disappeared. Along with the monarchy, the Israelite society was rapidly moving towards centralization of power and concentration of wealth in few hands. Centralized power in few individuals also controlled the religious activities to further the interests of the elite and monarchy.

The following paragraphs deals with the incidents, which detail the abuse of centralized power of monarchy and consequent injustice and oppression wrought on the poor and the weaker sections of the society. In addition, this section portrays prophets who censured the above-mentioned oppression and injustice. The prophets, who were considered as representatives of God, spoke on behalf of God with divine authority. Prophets spoke so that the people will conform to the law of God. The prophets evaluated monarchs and their deeds based on ‘Justice and Righteousness.’ Justice and Righteousness are closely connected; Righteousness comes from the Hebrew root word tsedeq,
which refers to norm or a moral standard of God.\textsuperscript{7} Justice comes from the Hebrew word \textit{mishpat}. According to Christopher J.H. Wright, \textit{mishpat} is what needs to be done in a given situation, if people and circumstances are to be restored to conformity with \textit{tsedeq}.\textsuperscript{8} Justice refers to fair play, equality or legal equality. Justice is linked to God’s will, revealed in the form of narratives especially in the legal codes and moral norms of the scripture. In this backdrop, the subsequent paragraphs delve into the lives of two monarchs of Israel, David and Ahab.

\textbf{Ethical Issues of King David}

David ruled United Kingdom of Israel for more than thirty three years, with Jerusalem as his capital. He defended Israel successfully and subjugated its enemies. He reinforced the trade routes and consequently wealth of the nation increased. Because of David’s strong army and strategic military operations, Israel became one of the regional powers. In addition, David reinforced religious life in Jerusalem, so that whole nation was bound to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, David’s moral standards were paradox, and were censured by the prophet, as detailed in the following text from the book, Second Samuel, chapter eleven:

“\textbf{In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle, David sent Joab, and his

\textsuperscript{7} Christopher J. H. Wright, \textit{Living as the People of God}, p. 134.
\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Ibid.}
servants with him, and all Israel; and they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking upon the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" So David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house. And the woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am with child." So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab was doing, and how the people fared, and how the war prospered.

Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." And Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will let you depart." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day, and the next. And David invited him, and he ate in his presence and drank, so that he made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord,
but he did not go down to his house. In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die." And as Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant men. And the men of the city came out and fought with Joab; and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite was slain also."9

At the outset, the narrator presents that, king David skipped responsibility of going to war in springs as it was the tradition for Near Eastern kings to go for war.10 As per the narrative, it is very clear that David was quite aware of the fact that, the Bathsheba was married, and identity of her father and husband, as Eliam and Uriah respectively. Even after, knowing the married status of Bathsheba, David sent his messengers to bring her. Bathsheba, without any questions, followed the messengers, because they came in the authority of the king. David had sex with Bathsheba, which was considered as adultery according to the legal codes of Pentateuch. When David came to know that, Bathsheba is pregnant, he wanted to conceal it. Therefore, David ordered Uriah, the faithful soldier in David’s army, to come back from the battle so that he will sleep with Bathsheba and take the responsibility of illegitimate pregnancy.

9 The Bible, II Samuel, 11:1-17(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
10Smith G Richard, The Fate of Justice and Righteousness During David’s Reign: Rereading the Court History and it’s Ethics according to 2 Samuel 8:15b-20:26, p.121.
The narrator presents Uriah’s character in contrast to David’s character; Uriah was not willing to enjoy the pleasure of home and wife when the battle was on. Therefore, instead of going home, Uriah slept in the palace along with servants of David. Thus, Uriah expressed unflattering loyalty to the king and interests of the kingdom. Subsequently, David intended to kill Uriah, and take Bathsheba as his wife, so that all his crimes will be covered up. In addition, in public view, David will be commended for taking widowed Bathsheba as his wife. Therefore, David devised subtle murder plan of Uriah, by purposefully placing him in the most dangerous place of battlefield without any support, which led to the death of Uriah.

In addition, David’s response to Uriah’s death was without any human face, he covered his crime subtly. To the outside world, David portrayed murder of Uriah as a usual death that takes place in the battlefield. In addition, David attempted to mislead Joab, the military commander, by advising him not to consider Uriah’s murder as evil, as seen in the following verse from chapter eleven of Second Samuel:

“David said to the messenger, "Thus shall you say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; strengthen your attack upon the city, and overthrow it.' And encourage him." ¹¹

¹¹ The Bible, II Samuel, 11:25 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).
From the above-mentioned statement of David, it can be observed that, he misled Joab morally, by advising him not to worry about the death of Uriah. In this regard, Smith G Richard, states that:

“David attempts to dilute what he thinks is Joab’s moral perspective...David’s smug confidence is in contrast with Joab’s apparent moral concern”\(^{12}\)

But, the paradox of David’s moral standards were censured by prophet Nathan, as seen in the subsequent verses from Second Samuel, chapter twelve:

“And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." Nathan said to David, "You are the man. Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul;"

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\(^{12}\) Smith G Richard, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness During David’s Reign: Rereading the Court History and it’s Ethics according to 2 Samuel 8:15b-20:26*, p.131.
and I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if this were too little, I would add to you as much more.

Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.' 13

David’s subtle coverage of his crime is brought to light, when prophet Nathan confronted David. To expose the crime of David, Nathan detailed a simple parable; where a rich man with many flocks and herds oppresses a poor man by snatching his only beloved lamb, for feasting with the guest. Unaware of Nathan’s intention of the parable, David judges the rich man to be punished by death sentence. Thus, it is implied that, David’s reasoning faculty was fully functional, and consequently he was fully responsible for his crime. David was caught by his judgment. As observed in the above-mentioned scriptural passage, Nathan spoke on behalf of Yahweh. According to Nathan, David not only committed crime against human being or human law, but against Yahweh. Nathan

condemns David for not being loyal to precepts of *Yahweh*. Therefore, David’s crime was tantamount to revolt against *Yahweh*.

Nathan announces retribution justice; just as David took Uriah’s wife, someone will take wives of David and have sex with them; this also symbolizes the fact that, David looses his kingdom, his power as a king. Moreover, Nathan announces that, sword will be upon the house of David, referring to death of family members of David. Consequently, implying that, The law of *Yahweh* holds everyone equally responsible, irrespective of the status of the culprit. In this regard, Gnana Robinson, rightly points out that:

“…God shows no partiality, but deals justly with all his people-the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor-becomes evident here.”\(^{14}\)

As observed earlier, justice is integrally connected to the nature of God and the will of God, as revealed in the scriptures, especially in the legal codes of Pentateuch. Moreover, from the above-mentioned discussion it can be deduced that, justice was not compromised because David was the king and victim Uriah was an ordinary soldier, and ethnically different. David, the king, who was supposed to be a supreme judge was not spared for his crime, but was punished as per the law. Consequently, it can be implied that, all humans are made in the image of God, bestowed with equal dignity and worth, thus all humans are

treated as equal before God and the law of God. In addition, the above-
mentioned discourse, underlines that, human life is equally precious,
needs to be protected and nurtured.

**Ethical Issues of King Ahab**

Ahab ruled Northern Kingdom of Israel for twenty-two years, in
8th century BCE. Politically Ahab was considered as a strong king,
who defended his nation from frequent wars with Syria. However, Ahab
was considered as evil king for he was not conformed to standards of
**Yahweh**. Therefore, Prophet Elijah, frequently confronted Ahab on
different issues. The following verses from First Kings, chapter twenty-
one, portray, the episode of Ahab illegally possessing the land of his
subject, Naboth:

> “Now Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. And after this Ahab said to Naboth,
> "Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; and I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." And Ahab went into his house vexed and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." And he lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no food. But Jezebel his wife came to him, and said to him, "Why is

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your spirit so vexed that you eat no food?" And he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite, and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if it please you, I will give you another vineyard for it'; and he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" And Jezebel his wife said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Arise, and eat bread, and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who dwelt with Naboth in his city.

And she wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people; and set two base fellows opposite him, and let them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death." And the men of his city, the elders and the nobles who dwelt in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. As it was written in the letters which she had sent to them, they proclaimed a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people. And the two base fellows came in and sat opposite him; and the base fellows brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king."  So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death with stones. 0Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead."  As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead."  And as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. And you shall
say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, "Have you killed, and also taken possession?"' And you shall say to him, 'Thus says the LORD: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood." Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD. Behold, I will bring evil upon you; I will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin. And of Jezebel the LORD also said, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel.'"  

The above mentioned scripture passage commences with a dialogue between Ahab and Naboth. Ahab makes an offer to trade the vineyard of Naboth. However, Naboth rejects the offer of Ahab, because in Israel society, land was considered as God’s gift to the family lineage, and God is the real owner of the land. Therefore, Israelite family was integrally connected to the land. Therefore, anyone who sold the land due to economic emergency always had a right to buy back the land. In addition, if anyone mortgaged the land, the creditor had to give back the land to the original owner in the year of Jubilee, as observed in the preceding chapter. According to book of Leviticus, Jubilee occurs every

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fiftieth year. In Jubilee, Israelites are mandated to cancel all the debts, to set free the slaves, and return all the mortgaged items to the debtors.  

Land was considered as sacred property of each family to survive independently without getting into servitude. In this context, Naboth rejection of Ahab’s offer was appropriate. In fact, Ahab’s desire to possess the land of Naboth was unjust, as Gina, Hens-Piazza rightly pointed out:

“…Ahab’s request is asking much more of Naboth than a mere plot of land. He is asking Naboth to violate his ancestral religious obligation.”

Therefore, as observed in the second verse of the above mentioned scripture passage, Naboth, cites that ancestral property cannot be traded, for the land is God’s gift. Naboth invokes God’s protection from committing sin of selling land, as Patrick Cronauer, aptly states that:

“…God forbid that I should sell” can be understood as “Lord protect me from selling”

Ahab treated land as commodity to be traded, but for Naboth, land was God’s gift, inheritance of family, in fact identity of family. In this regard, Patrick Cronauer, rightly points out that:

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“This can be interpreted as an expression of Naboth’s sincere piety and fidelity to the traditions of people - a tradition evidently he believed that he could not sell his inheritance.”\textsuperscript{21}

After failed business deal, Ahab returns to palace, and his obsession for Naboth’s land can be measured by his depression, he was not willing to eat food but confined himself to bed. When Jezebel enquired reason for Abab’s depression, the king explains the failed business talks, but did not explain the reason for rejection cited by Naboth. Jezebel’s response in verse seven, represents the power exercised over citizens by ancient near eastern kings, where king had full sway over the people, controlling all the resources of the kingdom. However, in Israelite society, king was expected to rule according to the precepts of the law prescribed by God; it was not the will of the king but law of God that mattered.

Jezebel took control of the whole issue, and started scheming to posses the Naboth’s land at any cost. She wrote letters to the nobles and elders to trap Naboth on false charges of blasphemy so that he will be stoned to death, which was executed neatly by the elders and nobles. As mentioned in verse sixteen, Ahab took possession of land after the death of Naboth, implying that Ahab endorsed all the crimes committed by Jezebel.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}
The narrator of above-mentioned scripture brings forth another group called ‘Nobles and Elders’ who were addressees of Jezebel’s letter. The term ‘Elders’ refers to an upper class group, who had power to administer justice. In this context, Patrick Cronauer, states that:

“Apparently, by the time of the dissolution of the United Monarchy in Israel, the elders had become part of the upper class with a role in the governance of the individual kingdoms…the elders of the various cities apparently were responsible for legal decision-making, including cases involving capital offences.”

Along with the ‘Elders’, the term, ‘Nobles’ seem to refer to a group belonging to upper class, closely working with monarchy. The elders and nobles comply with the instructions of letter to unjustly condemn Naboth to death, therefore it can be implied that, there was criminal and unjust nexus between elders, nobles and monarchy. As per the instruction of letter sent by Jezebel, elder and nobles called for a community fast. Community fasting was generally invoked when some danger looms over the community, especially the punishment of Yahweh, or other national emergencies. However, in the context of Naboth, community fasting was called without any reason. In this regard, Patrick Cronauer, states that:

“A plain reading of the text shows that it is not the fast or its supposed cause that is of primary interest; rather, attention focuses on the fact that

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23 Ibid., p.140.
the calling of the fast was a facade, a ruse in order to make possible the public condemnation of Naboth.”\textsuperscript{24}

Community fast created a sense of emergency, which necessitated a quick judgment; so that Naboth is denied time to defend his case. Finally, Naboth was condemned to death on the false charges of cursing God and king, because of two false witnesses. Immediately after Naboth’s death, Ahab went on to possess Naboth’s Vinayard. At this moment, as observed in verse nineteen, \textit{Yahweh} instructs Prophet Elijah to confront Ahab. Accordingly, Prophet Elijah declared to Ahab that, he had breached the law of \textit{Yahweh}, by murdering Naboth and illegally possessing the vineyard of Naboth, as a result, Ahab and his family would be destroyed. Along with Ahab, Jezebel would die. The implication of the punishment is severe; Ahab would lose his kingdom, his life, his family, and his wife Jezebel.

For \textit{Yahweh}, the status and dignity of Ahab and Naboth was equal as human beings. The narrator of the above-mentioned scripture brings out the fact that, all are equal before the law of God irrespective of one’s status. As the supreme judge of the kingdom, Ahab was responsible to administer justice, but he abused justice by allowing Jezebel to murder Naboth, thus, implicating Naboth on false charges. All for Naboth’s land which was source of his livelihood and a family inheritance.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, p.142.
Ahab and Jezebel not only oppressed Naboth, but as monarchs and supreme judge of the nation mislead people from doing justice. In this regard, Gina, Hens-Piazza, has aptly state that:

“The king, who is entrusted with the responsibility to promote justice among citizens regarding economical and political matters, ends up perverting it and instead promoting the spread of injustice.”

The Role of Prophets

As mentioned earlier, this section delves into two prophetic books, Isaiah and Amos, these books present the prophecies of Amos and Isaiah both of them lived in a similar socio-economic and political context in kingdom of Israel and Judah respectively. Therefore, they addressed almost similar ethical issues of their times.

The book of Isaiah consists of 66 chapters; these chapters are divided into three broad divisions. 1 to 39 chapters are linked to 8th century BCE. Chapters 40-50 are linked to 540 BCE and chapters 56-66 are connected to 520 BCE. Chronologically, the three divisions are termed as First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Third Isaiah. Therefore, it can be implied that, the book of Isaiah went through different layers of editing in different times of above-mentioned dates. However, the contemporary scholarship recognizes the literal complexity, but also

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26 Walter Brueggemann, Isaiah 1-39, p.3.
aims at looking the book of Isaiah, as masterpiece in integrated manner.

In this regard, Walter Brueggemann, states that:

“The newer perspective seeks to understand the final form of the complex text as an integral statement offered by the shapers of the book for theological reasons.”

Prophet Isaiah lived in the period of king Uzziah, the monarch of Judah. Isaiah’s span of ministry is considered to be from 740 to 700 BCE. Isaiah condemns pseudo-religious rituals, injustice, human arrogance and all kinds of corruption in the oppressive society. For Isaiah, God is holy, and therefore cannot tolerate any kind of violation of justice. ‘Holiness of God’ refers to the fact that, *Yahweh* is highly exalted and distinct from creation, with absolute moral perfection, and absolute power over creation, including affairs of the human world. Isaiah predominantly was a prophet in kingdom of Judah, had a access to administration and monarchy, consequently he had good knowledge of the socio-political and religious affairs of his time. Therefore, prophet Isaiah seems to be familiar with the affairs of administration in Judah, especially, luxury and indulgence of monarchy and ruling class at the cost of poor and needy. The following section discusses first chapter in book of Isaiah, delves into the oracles of Isaiah concerning the

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29 *The Bible, Isaiah*, 7:3, 8:2(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
oppression of the poor and needy in Judah and consequent punishment of Yahweh:

“1 The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

2 Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: "Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.

3 The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand."

4 Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.

5 Why will you still be smitten, that you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.

6 From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they are not pressed out, or bound up, or softened with oil.

7 Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by aliens.

8 And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.

9 If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

10 Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

11 "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats.
12 "When you come to appear before me, who requires of you this trampling of my courts?
13 Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies--I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.
14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.
15 When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.
16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,
17 learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.
18 "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.
19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;
20 But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
21 How the faithful city has become a harlot, she that was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers.
22 Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water.
23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Every one loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them.
24 Therefore the Lord says, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I will vent my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes.
25 I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.
26 And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city."
27 Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness.
28 But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.” 30

Verse one and two, introduces the time of Isaiah during the period of different monarchs in Judah and moral degradation of the nation. Prophet Isaiah portrays the unfaithfulness of people in Judah towards Yahweh. Verse three portrays unfaithfulness of people in Judah, explained with metaphor of faithfulness of animals to their masters, but people of Judah were portrayed worst than animals. 31 Fourth verse describes the moral degradation of people with different terminologies; sinful, evildoers, corrupt and people filled with iniquity, as a result, people of Judah were estranged from Yahweh. Consequently, Verse five and six describe the punishment of people by Yahweh. Punishment on people is described by imagery; where a person was smitten so that an entire body is filled with bruises, sores and bleeding wounds, but without any healing balm. In addition, verse seven foresaw that, Judah destroyed by fire and by foreign invaders as a punishment of Yahweh. Verse ten, specifically addresses the rulers and people of Jerusalem

referring to the monarchy and administration apparatus. They are called to repent and follow the precepts of *Yahweh*.

In verses eleven to fifteen, Isaiah questions the religious ritual practiced by rulers and people, who perform various rituals and offer sacrifices. Prophets condemns such practices, which do not have any meaning, as people are filled with iniquity, and corruption. In this regard, Brevard S Childs, writes that:

“Israel’s offerings are deemed “empty,” “abhorrent,” and its sacred liturgy a “trampling” in God’s court. God’s reaction is portrayed in graphic language. He is “fed up,” weary and disgusted before this tedious ordeal, and is even filled with “revulsion” towards Israel’s carefully orchestrated rituals.”

Prophet Isaiah challenges the paradox of religious activity of people filled with iniquity, prophet exposes how God treats these religious activities. Prophet underlines that; one cannot please God, by religious rituals alone, the true religiosity demands obedience to precepts of God. In verses, sixteen and seventeen, Prophet emphatically states that, one has to quit evil deeds, practice justice, stop oppression, and safeguard the vulnerable people like orphans and widows. Prophets connects justice, good deeds, safeguarding the week, ceasing to oppress

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as important demands of Law of God.\textsuperscript{34} In this context, Brevard Childs states that:

\begin{quote}
“These are not universal ethical teachings, but a highly existential application of the divine will that had long since been revealed to Israel, and now delivered with a fresh poignancy to a corrupt, complacent, and self-righteous population.”\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

The above-mentioned mandate to practice justice, safeguard the week, and to do good to others is crux of the Old Testament teaching. Consequently, in verse eighteen, prophet invites the people to repent and obey \textit{Yahweh}, so that will be blessed, but in verse twenty prophets warns that rebellion against \textit{Yahweh} will bring death and destruction, apparently by the foreign invaders.\textsuperscript{36}

In verses, twenty one and twenty two, the moral degradation of the city is described by two imageries, firstly, the city is compared to harlot, a woman who is unfaithful to her husband, secondly the city is compared to silver and wine which have lost their purity. Verse twenty three, describes the corrupts practices of rulers and people. The princes, who were rulers, have become thieves, who steal and manipulate others for selfish interests. Isaiah highlights the perversion of society and justice by bribes. The rulers and ruling class, in their covetousness, had become thieves, who perverted justice to indulge in bribery,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{The Bible, Isaiah}, 1:16-17 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).
\item Ibid., p.20.
\item \textit{The Bible, Isaiah}, 1:18-19 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
consequently oppressing the poor, widows and orphans. In this regard, Walter Brueggemann, mentions that:

“Everyone seeks self-advancement, and no one cares anymore for the public good. When there is such self-serving and self-seeking, moreover the needy of society predictably disappear from the scene of public awareness.”37

In verse twenty-four, *Yahweh* swears to punish all those who have rebelled by indulging in injustice, corruption. Consequently, the devastation of Jerusalem is caused by *Yahweh*. In this context, Walter Brueggemann, rightly points out that:

“The consequence is the savage work of the sovereign God. Jerusalem is not autonomous, is not free to pursue its own indulgent agenda… Jerusalem is not permitted to enjoy the sure structures of order and government if those orders renege on their proper function of obedience to Yahweh.”38

However, in verse twenty five, prophets underlines the interest of *Yahweh* to restore people of Israel, with a pruning punishment, so that people of Israel would be free from all malice and be faithful to *Yahweh*, as expressed in the metaphor of purifying the metal by removing all the alloy. Similarly, as observed in verse twenty six, *Yahweh* intends to restore justice and righteousness by transforming judges and counselors,

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but all the rebels, who wants to continue in injustice and wickedness would be destroyed.\textsuperscript{39}

In fifth chapter of the book of Isaiah, the corrupt practices of the elites and monarchs are further detailed:

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8 Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land.
9 The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing: "Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.
10 For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah."
11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening till wine inflames them!
12 They he lyre and harp, timbrel and flute and wine at their feasts; but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD, or see the work of his hands.
13 Therefore my people go into exile for want of knowledge; their honored men are dying of hunger, and their multitude is parched with thirst." \textsuperscript{40}
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In verse eight prophet censures the elites who encroach the houses and fields belonging to others. As Brevard Childs writes:

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"The first woe oracle is directed against the abuse of power by the wealthy who exploit the poor by driving them off their land."
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This oracle echoes the tenth commandment of Decalogue, which prohibits covetousness. In Judah of eighth century, with the support of

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\textsuperscript{40} 
\textit{The Bible, Isaiah}, 5:8-13(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

\textsuperscript{41} Brevard S. Childs, \textit{Isaiah}, p.47.
monarchy and its administrative apparatus, dispossessing weak from their land and their houses became the norm of the day. In this regard, Walter Brueggemann, rightly states that:

“In prophetic usage this warning does not pertain to particular acts of greed but to a general economic policy and frame of reference whereby big landowners buy up and crowd out small farmers in what we might now term agribusiness. This economic procedure, which destroys the neighborly fabric of the community, apparently was wide-spread in eighth-century Judah and was regarded by the prophets as a grave violation of Yahwism.”

Consequently, verse nine and ten, foresees the judgment of Yahweh. The military attack on Judah would destroy all the beautiful houses, which were product of exploitive economic policies, even the land looses it productivity giving considerable lower yield. Verses eleven and twelve, refer to wealthy who indulge in luxury of wine and music without the knowledge of God; ethical demands of God. It is apparent that, the wealthier class of Judah, accumulated land and property by dispossessing the poor from their property, without any concern for the justice demanded by God. As verse thirteen portrays that, the wealthier class, which marginalized the weak, would be disposed from the land and sent into exile. This prophecy is generally

Prophetic Concern for Justice

Prophet Isaiah was aware of the corruption in Judicial proceeding by the rulers of the land, and perversion of justice by the elites. This condition of moral degradation and deception in judiciary is lucidly explained by the prophet in following verses from fifth chapter:

“20 Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!
21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!
22 Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink,
23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!
24 Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.”  

Verse twenty refers to the manipulation and deception prevalent in Judah of 8th century BCE, the rulers and elites who ruled the nation for their benefit, projected something which was bad as good and misled the ordinary people. Especially in judicial proceedings, by false witness and faulty arguments, the lie is presented as truth, and truth is hidden.

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under the garb of lie, this paradox of truth, is explained by imagery of calling darkness as light, and conversely calling light as darkness. The lies and deceptions are used by the powerful to hide their exploitive practices.’ For an instance, Ahab under the garb of blasphemy murdered Naboth. In this context, Walter Brueggemann, rightly points out that:

“The woe certifies that manipulation and deception that cover over exploitive brutality will come to a harsh and sorry end.”  

Similarly, in verse twenty two and twenty three, prophet refers to, indulgent rulers, who practice bribery and corruption in judiciary. In this regard, Walter Brueggemann, rightly comments:

“The issue is the distortion of public order, the collapse of an equitable judicial system whereby for a price courts will rule for those who exploit others; conversely, the innocent—here the vulnerable, weak exposed innocent—have no chance for the favor of the court.”

The bribery and indulgence of rulers and judges had corrupted entire judiciary, consequently a culprit would go scot-free and innocents would be punished. Therefore, bribery and corruption created an inequitable judiciary, where powerful are privileged at the cost of the weak. Prophet Isaiah reveals the punishment of Yahweh in verse twenty-four. The oppressors in Jerusalem would be destroyed as if a fire devours the dry grass, they would become dust. In addition, in the same

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verse, prophet explicitly states that, the reason for above-mentioned destruction is the violation of law of \textit{Yahweh}, which amounts to rebellion against \textit{Yahweh}. In this regard, Walter Brueggemann, rightly states:

“This rejection is tantamount to rejecting Yahweh, for in Israel, Yahweh is never available apart from Torah. The consequence of such rejection is given in a series of metaphors—fire, rot, dust—all of which bespeak failure and nullification.”\textsuperscript{47}

The corruption in judiciary is further detailed in the following denigration by prophet Isaiah in the tenth chapter:

“1 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! 3 What will you do on the day of punishment, in the storm, which will come from afar? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth? 4 Nothing remains but to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain. For all this his anger is not turned away and his hand is stretched out still. 5 Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury!”\textsuperscript{48}

Verse one and two of above-mentioned passage refers to the powerful oppressive forces of the society who frame the oppressive

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}, p.55.  
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{The Bible, Isaiah}, 10:1-4(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
policies, so that the oppression becomes legalized. In this context, Walter Brueggemann, opines:

“the making” is the privilege of the powerful, most often done to their own advantage. The writing of law turns out to be “the writing oppression” whereby exploitation of the vulnerable-widows and orphans-is legal.”

Moreover, prophet was concerned about human wrong wielded on vulnerable individuals-orphans and widows, implying that these vulnerable individuals are precious in the sight of Yahweh. Therefore, any assault on the vulnerable group was considered as a rebellion against Yahweh. After detailing the oppression, prophets turn to pronounce the judgment in verse three. Prophet speaks about ‘Day of Punishment’, referring to the military attack on the Jerusalem, which is described in the imagery of storm, which dispossesses the wealthy of their wealth, and there would be no room to safeguard their wealth. This fiasco of elites is aptly explained by Walter Brueggemann:

“The poet anticipates a drastic social reversal wherein the wealthy, powerful, and manipulative will be recast as desperate fugitives, now placed in enormous jeopardy.”

As depicted in verse four, the anger of Yahweh was so severe, that there would be no other option but face either death or to go into

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50 Ibid.
captivity of the enemy. In verse five prophets, present Assyrian empire as an instrument of Yahweh to plunder and destroy Jerusalem.

**Ethical Message of Amos**

Prophet Amos lived in the period of Jeroboam II, the monarch of Israel. Based on the apparent prosperity and security enjoyed by Israel, the period of Amos is gauged around 760 BCE. Jeroboam II executed lucrative international trade, and consequent merchant class came into existence in Samaria. However, the wealth created by foreign trade was not distributed equally, but concentrated with few families, who lived with luxury and leisure. Conversely, the peasant class that formed the backbone of economy of the nation was marginalized. Therefore, oppression of the poor by the rich became norm of the day. Rich were indifferent to the hunger and needs of the poor. Moneylenders exploited the poor. Judiciary was controlled and perverted by the powerful.

The above-mentioned economic inequality and oppression influenced the religious activities of Samaria. Empty rituals were carried out with godlessness and immorality. In this backdrop, Amos confronts religious rituals; Amos asserted that religious rituals couldn’t undo unrighteousness and disobedience to the law of Yahweh and prevent punishment of God. For Amos, Yahweh is the creator and sustainer of universe, and can control the rise and fall of the empires. Moreover, Amos firmly believed that, Yahweh is God of righteousness and justice
therefore punishes all kinds of injustice. The following text from chapter three from book of Amos, depicts the oppression prevalent in Samaria and consequent punishment of *Yahweh*:

“9 Proclaim to the strongholds in Assyria, and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt, and say, "Assemble you upon the mountains of Samaria, and see the great tumults within her, and the oppressions in her midst."
10 "They do not know how to do right," says the LORD, "those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds."
11 Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: "An adversary shall surround the land, and bring down your defenses from you, and your strongholds shall be plundered."
12 Thus says the LORD: "As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed."
13 "Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob," says the Lord GOD, the God of hosts,  
14 "that on the day I punish Israel for his transgressions, I will punish the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground.
15 I will smite the winter house with the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end," says the LORD.”

In verse nine, *Yahweh* is symbolically calling foreign nations to witness the oppression in the city of Samaria. Samaria, the capital city, refers to the monarchs, administrative officials and other elites of the

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city. 52 Prophet Amos, is concerned with the rampant oppression in the city of Samaria. Verse ten explicitly describe the rampant and general moral degradation of the city, as it states that, the powerful and rich of the Samaria are degraded to such an extent that, they have forgotten what is right, in other words they forgot the law of God. Instead, they were filled with violence and robbery.

Consequently, eleventh verse prophesize the judgment; the enemy nations would attack Samaria, and plunder all the wealth. The severity and attack on Samaria is stated in verse twelve; rulers and leaders of Samaria would be devoured as if a lion devours a sheep. In spite of moral degradation reflected in violence and robbery, it is apparent that religious ritual was diligently carried out, especially by the rulers and the elites. This religious paradox is questioned and condemned by the prophet in verse fourteen. In this regard, John H Hayes, rightly points out that,

“Since the sacrifice at Bethel was the primary state cult place for the northern kingdom, Yahweh’s attack on this sanctuary would represent a direct attack on the monarchical institutions of Israel. Throughout the book, Amos’s denunciations are primarily addressed against the ruling powers in the north, the institutions associated with monarchy and monarchy itself.” 53

It is implicit that, the prophet intends to state that, the rituals done in Bethel are empty for public display, rather than to please God, because the law of God was ignored, instead rulers were filled with violence and robbery. Therefore, censuring the ruling class and their pseudo-religious activity at Bethel, prophets foresaw the destruction of sanctuary at Bethel by *Yahweh*.

In verse fifteen, prophets speak about the destruction of the royal palaces of winter and summer, decorated with ivory, which is the sign of luxury and opulence of the king. It is implicit that this opulence of the monarch was achieved at the cost of oppression of the weak and poor. Prophet condemned the rulers in royal palaces, who were indulged in wine, and were without any concern for the oppressed and poor. Consequently, the prophet foresaw the destruction of these palaces as a punishment of *Yahweh*.

There seems to be a nexus of religious leaders and rulers of the land. The religious leaders like priest never questioned the oppression of the elite on the poor, instead by offering sacrifices of the oppressors at the altars, they endorsed the oppression. The nexus of religious institution and political power is clearly established in the subsequent verse from the seventh chapter:

“10 Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house
of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words.

11 For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"

12 And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there;

13 but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."54

The religious altar at Bethel was state sponsored cultic centre as mentioned in verse thirteen. Amaziah, the priest at Bethel, opposes Amos, for his oracles against Samaria. As Bethel was considered religious centre for kingdom of Israel, and state sponsored cultic centre. Moreover, Amaziah threatens Amos, to flee the nation of Israel and go to kingdom of Judah. Therefore, it is implicit that, the priest at Bethel supported and endorsed the ruling class. Consequently, the priest sent message to king Jeroboam, to exile Amos from the kingdom of Israel. Along with religious endorsement of ongoing oppression in Samaria, the elite women of the ruling class were also motivation factor for oppression. Therefore, prophet Amos turn his anguish against the elite women of Samaria, who were also equally responsible for the oppression of the weak and poor along with their male folks as depicted in chapter four:

1 "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the

54 The Bible, Amos, 7:10-13(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, 'Bring, that we may drink!'
2 The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.
3 And you shall go out through the breaches, every one straight before her; and you shall be cast forth into Harmon," says the LORD."55

In verse one, the prophet addresses, the elite woman belonging to royal palaces and administrative officials as ‘Cows of Bashan’. Bashan was a region in Transjordhan, a fertile land known for its fine pasturelands, which produced high quality cattle. Amos compares elite women of Samaria to ‘Cows of Bashan’ apparently referring to the carefree and luxurious life style of these women. In this regard, John H Hayes, states that:

“The general tenor of the verse 1 suggests that the expression “cows of Bashan “refers to an indulged opulent class of women in the capital city. The wording of the verse seems to imply that they were women closely associated with the royal court and monarchical administration.”56

The charges leveled against these elite women were of economic and governmental exploitation, who encouraged their men folk to indulge in luxury of wine by oppressing and crushing the poor and needy. In this regard, John H Hayes, comments:

55 The Bible, Amos, 4:1-3(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
56 John H. Hayes, Amos the Eighth-Century Prophet: His times and his Preaching, p. 138.
“The women are depicted as a major stimulus for the extravagant and hence oppressive court lifestyle which Amos condemns. The women are clearly depicted as demanding a lifestyle leading to oppression.”

Consequently, in verse two and three of fourth chapter, Amos foresees the judgment of Yahweh; all the oppressive elite woman of courts of Samaria would be destroyed. Elucidating above-mentioned verse, John H Hayes opines:

“Amos thus proclaimed a radical form of judgment upon the ladies of the Samarian court. Those who were presently living in luxury and opulence at the court through oppression of the poor would soon become, along with their offspring, corpses to be gathered and discarded on the garbage dump.”

Prophetic Concern for Poor

Amos accuses the rulers and judges for oppressing the righteous and needy; the terms for ‘Righteous’ and ‘Needy’ in Hebrew is tsaddiq and ebhyon respectively. R Martin Achand and B Paul Reemi, aptly describe the term poor in Old Testament context:

“In general the Old Testament refers to the poor in Israel, one way or another are deprived …those whose status is called in question, not only in economic realm, but also in the social and subsequently in the cultural and religious realms as well. Consequently, the poor are

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57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
manipulated like mere objects by those who hold the power.”  

In the following verses from second chapter, Amos depicts the economic exploitation and oppression of poor and needy by the judges and the merchant class:

“6 Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes--

7 they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted; a man and his father go in to the same maiden, so that my holy name is profaned;

8 they lay themselves down beside every altar upon garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined.”

In verse six Amos condemns corruption in judiciary. He points out that, the judges are bribed by silver to give judgment against a righteous, a person who is innocent. In Hebrew, the term for ‘righteous person’ is sadiq, which refers to the fact that a person is guiltless before the law, and who lives according to the rules of the society. Similarly, the term, righteousness, in Hebrew is tsaddik, referring to ‘righteousness,’ in legal context, it connotes equality of all persons

60 The Bible, Amos, 2:2-8(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
irrespective socio-economic status. Selling the righteous refers to the fact that, a person was unjustly sold to slavery for a silver because he owes trivial sum to the creditor. The word ‘sell’ in Hebrew text is makar, which refers to legal transaction. Here exist a nexus of judge and creditor to make money by selling a person who owes paltry sum equivalent to pair of sandals as mentioned in verse six. In this regard, K Jesurathnam, rightly points out that:

“…there is also an opinion that reference to the selling of the poor for a pair of sandals probably indicate hyperbolically the ridiculously low prices for which the poor and righteous are sold.”

Therefore, it can be implied that, Amos was addressing a context, in which, there was no value either for human dignity or for justice. In verse seven and eight, Amos censures the rich and powerful for trampling and crushing the poor. As the rich, illegally took the pledge items from the poor and ill-treated them. The implications of the phrase, ‘crushing the poor’ is aptly stated by K Jesurathnam:

“…the underprivileged class is bullied and oppressed by the wealthy, who deprive and block them from obtaining privileges and prerogatives, to which they are naturally entitled.”

The words for ‘poor’ and ‘afflicted’ in Hebrew are dalim and anawim. Dal connotes to a person who is weak and powerless, and

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62 Ibid., p.73.  
63 Ibid., p.76.
anawim refers to one who is oppressed. Therefore, the persons belonging to category of dal and anawim were easy targets of oppression.

In verse eight, Amos condemns the powerful that defile the altars of Yahweh, by using the pledged garments and drinking wine by fined money, right in the altars of Yahweh. In legal traditions of Old Testament, there were stringent rules for taking items in pledge. In certain cases, taking certain items for pledge were prohibited. For instance, the cloak of a poor man cannot be kept overnight on humanitarian grounds. Similarly, the garments of widow cannot be taken as pledge. Therefore, in the above-mentioned verse, Amos condemns the rich for violating the laws of Yahweh by keeping the garment, apparently belonging to a widow. Thus, it is implied that, the upper class not only marginalized the weak and poor and but also dishonored Yahweh. Consequently, the oppression of the poor is connected to the fact that, powerful forgot to honour and obey the laws of Yahweh. Amos repeats his concern for justice especially for poor and needy as expressed in fifth chapter as well:

7 “O you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth!
10 They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the t

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64 Ibid.
In verse seven, prophets condemn judges for perverting justice into bitterness by denying justice to one who is without guilt. Moreover, in verse ten prophet censures that, there was no value for truth or to one who speaks truth, in other words false witnesses followed by unjust judgments became accepted patterns of society. Consequently, as mentioned in verse twelve, the needy and righteous are let down to be crushed at the gates. Here the term ‘gate’ refers to place where judicial proceeding were held and a designated place for business transactions of the town

Amos intended to protect the interest of the poor and needy from corrupt judiciary, it is apparent that in the social context of Amos, judicial corruption was rampant. As K Jesurathnam, mentions:

“…the prophet by making a clear reference to the Judges, pointed out the laxity in the legal sphere, especially the innocent being punished due to the bribery of Judges. Because of this practice of bribery, the situation leads to declaring the innocent guilty and the guilty innocent.”

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66 The Bible, Amos, 5:7, 10, and 12(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
In the succeeding verses from eighth chapter, Prophet Amos elaborates the oppression and economic deception and exploitation of mercantile class, and consequent punishment of Yahweh:

“1 Thus the Lord GOD showed me: behold, a basket of summer fruit.
2 And he said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them.
3 The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day," says the Lord GOD; "the dead bodies shall be many; in every place they shall be cast out in silence."
4 Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end,
5 saying, "When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances,
6 that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the refused of the wheat?" 68

In verse one and two, Amos indicate that Israel is in its last days, apparently indicating the end of the empire. In addition, this destruction of an empire was as an act of Yahweh as indicated in verse two. Consequently, calamity will strike the nation. Probably a military attack from an enemy nation. In verse three, Amos predicts that, there would be wailing and lamentation, no more songs in the temple but only wailing, for the utter destruction resulted in loss of lives, consequently,

68 The Bible, Amos, 8: 1-6 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).
corpses scattered everywhere because of the attack. This situation is aptly stated by John H Hayes:

“So when the judgment of Yahweh strikes in the form of military calamity or civil war, then the walls of the palace will wail, that is, will reverberate with the sounds of wailing. Corpses shall be everywhere and left unburied. Silence shall be necessary as a response to the horrible situation.”69

In verses four to six, Amos explains the reason for above mentioned tragedy of Israel. Verse four was addressed to a category of people who are known for crushing the needy and destroying the poor. In these verses Amos does not address the oppressors directly but sarcastic quotations of wrong doers are depicted. The merchants are so restless and desperate for holiday to get over so that business can be resumed, for making money by false measures and balances. As verse explicitly states that, the primary targets of above mentioned exploitation are poor and needy, who form vulnerable sections of the society. Moreover, the merchant class intends to subjugate the poor and needy to servitude by illegal business practices like false measures and weight, which are prohibited in the legal codes of the Old Testament.70

In this context, John H Hayes, states that:

“For Amos, mercantile deceit was exceptionally costly for the poor and

impoverished since it could lead to indebtedness and eventual debt servitude.” 71

After explaining above-mentioned rationale for destruction and punishment by Yahweh as stated in verse two and three of eighth chapter, Amos continues to foresee the punishment of Israel in following verses of the same chapter:

9 "And on that day," says the Lord GOD, "I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight.
10 I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth upon all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.
11 "Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord GOD, "when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.
12 They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.”72

In verse nine, the phrase ‘And on that day’ refers to ‘Day of Judgment’, when Yahweh punishes all the oppressors in Samaria. Amos uses the imagery of solar eclipse, where suddenly darkness pervades in daytime. Similarly, punishment of Yahweh is reflected in sudden reversal of the prosperity to poverty, secured life to vulnerable life, well

72 *The Bible, Amos*, 8:9-12(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
being and happiness turned into tragedy and wailing. In this regard John Hayes, aptly states that:

“As an eclipse suddenly transforms things into their opposite, making the sun set before evening and bringing darkness in the middle of broad daylight, so the people’s lives shall suddenly be transformed from celebration and joy to lamentation and mourning.”

The sudden reversal of the situation is detailed in verse ten. The festival and feasts marked by celebrations and feastings are turned to wailing. In Old Testament tradition, when disasters hit causing loss of life and property, the individuals shaved their heads and wore sackcloth around the waist to wail and lament for the tragedy. Amos explains the gravity of tragedy with metaphor; the gloom and pain of the heart will be equivalent to a person who lost his only child.

The punishment of Samaria is not only in physical dimension, but also in spiritual dimension, Yahweh stops communication with people of Israel for their oppressions and wrongdoing, as stated in verse eleven and twelve. Consequently, people of Israel would wonder all the places to the seek the word of Yahweh but without any success.

**Ethical Maxims in Proverbs**

The Books of Proverbs provides moral and ethical instructions. Therefore, proverbs are categorized as wisdom literature in the Bible.

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73 John H. Hayes, *Amos the Eighth-Century Prophet: His times and his Preaching*, p. 211.
The term ‘Wisdom’ frequently occurs in the book of Proverbs. The frequently used Hebrew word for wisdom is *hokmah*, which refers to skills of artisans, singers and other professionals. But in the context of ‘Book of Proverbs,’ *hokmah* refers to possessing knowledge to live in conformity to God’s law. In this regard, Sid S Buzzel mentions:

“So in the Bible’s Wisdom literature being wise means being skilled in godly living. Having God’s wisdom means having the ability to cope with life in a God-honoring way.”

The book of proverbs seems to be authored by multiple authors. King Solomon, the monarch of united Israel is considered as the author of some units in book of proverb. In addition, it believed that, group of unidentified wise men were also responsible for some units in the book of Proverbs. Therefore, it is observed that, the book of Proverbs was written and edited during the span ranging from 9th century BCE to 5th century BCE. Monarchical court contributed much to the book of Proverbs; along with King Solomon, the men of Hezekiah, the king of Judah copied and apparently redacted the portion of Proverbs. Moreover, it is apparent that, there was a considerable amount of Egyptian influence on the sayings of Proverbs. In this regard, Werner H Schmidt, states that:

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75 Ibid.
“Proverbs 22:17-23:11 is taken more or less verbatim from the book of the maxims of the Egyptian Amenemophis, but in addition to close agreements this section also contains specifically Israelite material.”

Consequently, the content of Proverbs is similar to Ancient Near East Wisdom literature. Book of Proverbs contains unique feature, which emphasize right relationship with God. Therefore, wisdom is connected to obedience to God. Conversely, without right relationship with God, wisdom cannot be attained, as mentioned in the following verse from the first chapter in the book of proverbs:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

In the above-mentioned verse, the term fear refers to respecting, trusting and honoring God, and fear of God is the prerequisite to become wise. The Hebrew word for proverb is ‘masal’, which apparently refers, ‘to be like or to be compared with’. Therefore, ‘masal’ can be categorized as an allegory. The term ‘masal’ also refers to the ‘byword’ where a person or act of person becomes an example for others, or a lesson to learn. Book of proverbs aims at cultivating a human character and disposition, addressing the individual and not necessarily

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77 Ibid.
79 The Bible, Proverbs, 1:7(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
group or a nation of Israel at large. Therefore, book of Proverbs covers various human emotions, dispositions, characters, in order to guide an individual to lead a life of wisdom. Some of the issues covered in the book of Proverbs include, social ethics, business ethics, justice in judiciary. The following section delves into the sayings of proverbs, which are concerned, with exploitation of poor.

In line with the legal codes of Old Testament and subsequent prophetical oracles, the book of Proverbs emphasize the well-being of poor and needy, and condemns injustice, bribery and false witness. Book of Proverbs intends to safeguard the wellbeing and security of poor. Therefore, book of Proverbs condemns mockery of poor, implying that all human beings are made in the image of God, and therefore, worthy of equal dignity. Any assault on the dignity of poor is considered as an assault on God, as stated in the following verses from chapters seventeen and fourteen:

“He who mocks the poor insults his Maker; he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished.” 82

“He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is kind to the needy honors him.” 83

In the above-mentioned verses, it is implicit that, poor people are also in the image of God, any assault on their dignity because of their

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81 Ibid., p.904.
82 The Bible, Proverbs, 17:5 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).
83 The Bible, Proverbs, 14:31 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).
poverty is an insult to God. In this regard, Ellen F Davis, rightly points out that:

“Through the poor, the creator of heaven and earth becomes vulnerable to our contempt! Likewise, in them God waits to be honored.”

Moreover, the above-mentioned verse underlines the significance of treating the poor with kindness and love, which is tantamount to honouring God. Therefore, any oppression or mockery of poor is an act of direct confrontation with God. In addition, book of Proverbs states that, any good deed done to the poor or vulnerable sections of the society attract the reward from God. As stated in the following verse from nineteenth chapter:

“He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.”

The above-mentioned proverb implies that, no human being can lend to God, but one who lends to poor is lending to God. Therefore, all the good deeds done to poor are considered as done to God. Consequently, God blesses and repays what is done to poor and needy.

Conversely, Proverbs point out that, a person who neglects the needs of the poor would be cursed by God, as stated in chapter twenty eight.

“He who gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse.”

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84 Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, p. 95.
The above-mentioned verse categorically states that, helping the poor and needy is not a voluntary action, but an obligation towards God. Consequently, an individual who meets the needs of the poor would not lack anything in life, as a promise of God. Therefore, what is given to poor would ultimately benefit the giver. Conversely, he who withholds from giving to poor will not be benefited.88 Similarly, the below mentioned verse from twenty first chapter warns that, one who does not respond to the cry of the poor, will not receive any help when in distress:

“He who closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself cry out and not be heard.” 89

The preceding verse implicitly states that, God ignores the cry of person, who ignored the cry of the poor. Therefore, it can be observed that, helping and responding to the needs of poor people is a prerequisite to please God and receive God’s help in need. In this regard, Richard J Clifford rightly points out that:

“One must hear the cry of the poor in order to be heard by God. Neglect them and you will be cut off from God.”90

Consequently, helping the poor people, meeting theirs needs is one of the significant demands for righteousness, as stated in the subsequent verse from chapter twenty-nine:

89 The Bible, Proverbs, 21:13 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).
“A righteous man knows the rights of the poor; a wicked man does not understand such knowledge.”

According to the above-mentioned verse, the person who does not recognize the rights of the poor is condemned as wicked in the sight of God, as in opposition to the righteous person who reckons the rights of the poor. Therefore, it is inferred that, God is actively interested in safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of the poor. Conversely, God destroys the person who afflicts and robs the poor, as stated in the following verses from chapter twenty two:

“Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD will plead their cause and despoil of life those who despoil them.”

The above-mentioned verses are addressed to the rich and powerful rulers who hold the authority to judge the people at the ‘Gate.’ Gate is referred to the entrance of the city, which was prime place for all the business transactions and judicial proceedings. It is apparent that, the above-mentioned verse indicates that, poor are oppressed and human wrongs are committed against them in business transactions and judicial proceedings. In this regard, Ellen F Davis, states that:

“Therefore it is probable that the robbery envisioned here is not ordinary theft but rather

91 The Bible, Proverbs, 29:7 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).
legally sanctioned forms of oppression, disguised as sound business practice." 93

A poor person who owes paltry sum to the creditor can be legally sold as slave for huge profit. In this context, above-mentioned verse warns with serious consequence of God’s punishment to the one who afflicts the poor. As observed in earlier sections, like Naboth, poor and weak of the society are often dispossessed of their properties by the powerful. In this context, the following verses from chapter twenty three, warns the elites of the society:

“Do not remove an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless; for their Redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.” 94

As mentioned in earlier sections, Israelites believed that land to each tribe and family is a gift of God, and God is the real owner of the land. 95 Therefore, any attempt to grab someone’s property was an assault on God. The powerful who intend to grab the land of the weak and vulnerable are warned that, God is the protector and redeemer of the weak, who takes up the cause of the poor. 96 Moreover, poor are the victims of injustice in the judicial proceedings by the influence of powerful, bribery and false witness. In this backdrop, the following

93 Ellen F. Davis, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, p.122.
95 Ellen F. Davis, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, p.124.
96 Ibid., p.125.
sections delve into the sayings of proverbs concerned with administration of Justice.

**Wisdom Demands Justice**

In the book of Proverbs, wisdom of a person is reflected in his/her practice of righteousness and justice. In other words, wisdom of God demands justice. Consequently, at the outset, book of Proverbs connects wisdom to justice and righteousness, as mentioned in the following verse from first chapter:

> “receive instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity;”\(^97\)

Therefore, all injustice and discrimination, is categorized as folly. In similar lines, the following verse mentions that righteousness and justice are pre-requisite to please God:

> To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.”\(^98\)

The preceding verse echoes the oracle of Amos observed in earlier section. Amos condemned sacrifices offered by rulers and elites who were perverted by bribe and unjust judgments. In the similar lines, the above mentioned verse states that, there is no use of sacrifices offered to God without practicing righteousness and justice. In this context, Richard J Clifford rightly points out that:

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\(^{97}\) *The Bible, Proverbs*, 1:3(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

\(^{98}\) *The Bible, Proverbs*, 21:3(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
“There is a sacred dimension to just action.” 99

Book of Proverbs specifically address the rulers and kings to practice justice and righteousness in their dealings, especially in administering justice to poor, as they are more vulnerable to suffer oppression and injustice:

“If a king judges the poor with equity his throne will be established forever.” 100

The above mentioned verse from twenty ninth chapter, mandates the king to consider the poor as equal in status in par with the rich, and never allow the powerful to pervert the justice due to the poor. Consequently, the king would be rewarded with the stability of the kingdom. In this context, Richard J Clifford aptly states that:

“One might assume that ruling in favor of the rich and powerful would win their support and provide political stability for the king, but our saying recognizes that ultimate stability comes from the divine patron of the king who looks out for the poor.” 101

Conversely, the king who indulges in bribery and perverts justice would be ruined, as stated in the subsequent verse from twenty ninth chapter:

“By justice a king gives stability to the land, but one who exacts gifts ruins it.” 102

100 The Bible, Proverbs, 29:14(Translation: Revised Standard Version).
The verse clearly depicts that kings who take undue advantage of their power and authority perverting justice would be ruined. The phrase, ‘exacting gift’ apparently refers to heavy taxes, and unjustly confiscating property or assets.\(^{103}\) Thus, the above mentioned verse echoes judgment and punishment on king Ahab and David, who bent the laws according to their selfish interest. In addition, book of proverbs categorically condemns bribery, which is one of the major reasons for perversion of justice, as mentioned in the succeeding verse from seventieth chapter:

“A wicked man accepts a bribe from the bosom to pervert the ways of justice.” \(^{104}\)

In the above mentioned verse, it is noticed that, the person who takes bribe is considered as wicked, and it is implied that, such person mocks the law God. As the legal codes of Old Testament, condemn bribery and consequent perversion of justice.\(^ {105}\)

Along with the bribery, the book of proverbs condemns false witness in judicial proceedings, as seen in nineteenth chapter:

“A worthless witness mocks at justice, and the mouth of the wicked devours iniquity.” \(^{106}\)


\(^{104}\) *The Bible, Proverbs*, 17: 23(Translation: Revised Standard Version).


Consequently, the innocent is punished and culprit would go scot-free. However, false witness would not escape the punishment, as stated in the following verse from nineteenth chapter:

“A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who utters lies will not escape.
A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who utters lies will perish.”\(^{107}\)

The above mentioned verses censure false witness, and state that person who gives false witness will be punished. In this regard, Richard J Clifford states that:

“Perjurers who try to convict others will themselves be convicted, and those who seek to destroy others by legal means will be destroyed by the same means.”\(^{108}\)

In similar lines, as observed in the preceding chapter, the legal codes of the Old Testament stipulate serious laws concerning the false witness; a false witness will be punished with the same punishment, which the innocent would have suffered by false testimony.\(^{109}\)

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\(^{107}\) The Bible, Proverbs, 19: 5, 9 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).


\(^{109}\) The Bible, Deuteronomy, 19: 16-21 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).