

AMOS THE PROPHET: A MEDITATION ON THE RICHNESS OF "JUSTICE"

FRED GUYETTE

*The Lord roareth from Zion, and uttereth His voice from Jerusalem;
and the pastures of the shepherds shall mourn, and the top of Carmel
shall wither (Amos 1:2).*

So begins the message delivered by the prophet Amos. The message he is given is not the *Comfort ye* of Isaiah 40. No, instead Amos tells about the roaring of a dangerous lion, an agent who intends to restore justice in Israel. Whoever has been profiting from injustice should tremble, says Amos. The Lord's judgment is coming!

Anyone who heard him speak in the eighth century BCE would ask: How has Amos come to believe that he is responsible for delivering this radical message? Here is the answer Amos gives: Up to now, he has always made his living in agriculture – herding sheep and tending sycamore trees. His name is not to be found in the rolls of the "professional" prophets [*neviim*], nor is he a seer [*hozeh*]. Nevertheless, the Lord has given the command; Amos will deliver this message. It is not a vocation that Amos chooses from several possibilities laid out before him. Nor is it a role that he creates for himself.¹

The narrative section in Amos 7:10-17 is important for understanding the nature of this commission. It tells of a confrontation between Amos and Amaziah, the priest who serves King Jeroboam II of Israel at Bethel. It is hard to imagine that, of his own accord, a herder of sheep would suddenly come out with words that could so easily be construed as treason: '*Jeroboam shall die by the sword and Israel shall be exiled from its soil*' (7:11)! Amaziah, the one person most responsible for the royal liturgy that celebrates Samaria's economic success and military victories, cannot countenance such a challenge. Who is Amos, that he should call this whole enterprise into question? So Amaziah makes a point of

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instructing this troublemaker on how he might save his own skin: *'Seer, off with you to the land of Judah . . . do your prophesying there . . . [This] is a king's sanctuary [mikdash melekh] and a royal palace [bet mamlakha] (vv. 12-13).*² Amaziah would be dumbstruck if he were to find out that Amos' message truly is from the Lord. Yet, Amos does know about the Divine origin of his message. Amaziah's warning, then, does nothing to deter him. Amos must go on prophesying.

THE ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS

For three transgressions of Judah, yea, for four, I will not reverse it: because they have rejected the law of the Lord, and have not kept His statutes (2:4).

Amos' first public words about justice come in the form of a commentary on international events. He uses a recognized genre – "Oracles before Battle" – but he stretches this genre in an unexpected way, in order to undermine Israel's moral complacency. Such oracles were normally used in ancient Israel's public speeches to stir up enthusiasm for military campaigns.³ In the first and second chapters of Amos, there is a litany of Israel's enemies and the punishments that await them for their war crimes:

Damascus destroyed Gilead – now Damascus will be destroyed too.

Because of what Moab did, it will be burned with fire.

Gaza carried people off into exile, now it too will suffer calamity.

Ammon ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead: a whirlwind will come upon it suddenly.

By means of repetition in the naming of various nations and their transgressions Amos crafts his speech so as to build the emotional momentum to which his hearers are accustomed. But before they are completely aware of what is happening, Amos confounds their expectations: Judah and Samaria are added to the list of nations under the Lord's judgment! They, too, will be held accountable for their deeds. It does not matter that they are the Lord's Chosen People. In fact, "chosenness" only signifies greater responsibility.⁴ Nathan caught the conscience of King David with a little story about a lamb (II Sam. 12:5-12), and Amos accomplishes something very similar with the rhetoric of Chapters 1 and 2. He forces Israel to apply the very same moral standard to its own actions as it does to the actions of other nations.⁵

THE RICH AND THE POOR AS AMOS KNEW THEM

'For I know how manifold are your transgressions, and how mighty are your sins; ye that afflict the just, that take a ransom, and that turn aside the needy in the gate.' (5:12)

What is the specific nature of the indictment issued by Amos? Israel has failed to live up to its covenantal obligations, especially in its treatment of the poor. Amos uses several different words to describe the plight of the poor in Israel:

1. The word *evyonim* means "the needy ones." In Exodus 23:11, the *evyonim* lack food; the focus in Isaiah 41:17 is on their lack of water; in Job 30:19, they have need of clothing. Amos wants his hearers to see – not to turn away, but to see – that the *evyonim* are being "crushed" (4:1) and "trampled upon" (5:11) by their more powerful neighbors.⁶

2. In Isaiah, the *anavim* are the brokenhearted (61:1-2), the homeless (58:7), and those who have been robbed of their rights (10:2), but it is Amos who first uses this word in Israel's prophetic preaching. According to Amos, the *anavim* of the land are afflicted and vulnerable (8:4).

3. Amos proclaims that the poor are *tzadik* ["innocent" or "blameless"] according to the Torah. They have done nothing to deserve the oppression that has been inflicted on them by their rich countrymen (2:6, 5:12).⁷

4. When Amos uses the word *dallim*, he has in mind "the have-nots" of society. He uses this word to help describe the troubling gap he sees between the rich and the poor in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Since the *dallim* must borrow money at exorbitant rates in order to survive through poor harvests, they frequently fall into debt slavery and lose their family land. Amos 8:6 highlights the systematic injustice of this debt slavery, a way of "acquiring the poor," as if they were a commodity like any other. The image of the sandals (8:6) indicates that these transactions are recognized as legal. Nevertheless, legal does not equal just.⁸

Amos has compassion for these poor families who are struggling to survive, and he is outraged when he sees how the rich are engaged in conspicuous consumption of material goods and an endless search for sensual pleasure.⁹ Their farms and vineyards are dedicated to profitable luxury crops, while the basic needs of the poor are being ignored (8:5). Those *at ease in Zion* have both summer and winter houses (3:15). The furniture on which they sprawl in their

drunken banquets is made of imported ivory (6:4). What they have accumulated has been gained through dishonesty or *crooked, deceitful scales* [ul'avet moznei mirma] (8:6).¹⁰ In the city gate, Amos has seen how people shamelessly use their riches to undermine the judicial process: *Woe to those who change judgment into wormwood* (5:7). They are guilty of *subverting justice through bribes* [lok-chei kofer] (5:12).¹¹

AMOS AND HIS "EDUCATION" AS A PROPHET

O Lord God, forgive, I beseech Thee; how shall Jacob stand? For he is small. (7:2, 5)

Since the Northern Kingdom has shown so little regard for the poor, the Lord has determined that He must pronounce a death sentence over the nation. Judgment and destruction are coming, and on the Day of the Lord there will be no escape.¹² Five powerful visions overwhelm Amos and signal the inevitability of what is to come:¹³

1. The Lord will send a swarm of locusts to devour the land (7:1).
2. The Lord will destroy the land by fire (7:4).
3. With a plumb line, the Lord will separate what is crooked in Israel from what is straight (7:7-9).
4. See that basket of ripened fruit? The Lord will throw out whatever is "rotten" in Israel (8:1).¹⁴
5. When the Lord strikes the altar (9:1), the state will totter and fall.¹⁵

Taken as a group, these visions are a record of Amos' "education."¹⁶ He is dismayed by each of them and by what they mean for the future of his people. He does his best to intercede for Israel, asking the Lord to have mercy on the land, rather than destroying it through locusts or fire. Eventually, however, Amos comes to see that Israel needs the Lord's judgment. It has forsaken the Covenant and embraced injustice instead. Before making a new start, the Lord will have to sweep all that away.

AMOS AND COVENANTAL JUSTICE

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine (9:13).

Amos is grounded in Mosaic traditions that teach the depth of the Lord's compassion for the poor. The Lord upholds them and sustains them. He performs mighty deeds on their behalf. Through the message He gives to the prophets, the Lord also means to shake the conscience of the oppressors, to overturn their moral indifference.¹⁷ He censures their selfish ways and threatens them with appropriate forms of punishment. His aim, however, is not their destruction. His desire is that they might change their ways; that they might be restored to the covenantal relationship with Him; that they might walk in the ways of justice.¹⁸

In the liberal tradition of public philosophy, the principles of justice are sometimes described as "thin." Human rights codes, for example, are "thin" because they must traverse many different moral and religious frontiers. Medical ethics, too, are oriented to impersonal principles such as beneficence, autonomy, and informed consent. "Principles" shape the way we negotiate life in public spaces, where we are likely to encounter strangers who do not share our narratives and traditions about life's deepest meaning. A principled account of justice might be shaped by "thin" maxims such as these:

Contractual justice: to each according to promises that have been made.

Retributive justice: a punishment must be measured out "to fit the crime."

Compensatory justice: something that a victim has "lost" must be restored to him by the wrongdoer.

Distributive justice: society's goods are divided according to need (as a socialist version might say) or according to merit (as a capitalist might say).

The conception of justice in the biblical tradition, however, is "thick." There are statutes in Exodus that resemble a rule-based morality, but the preface to the Decalogue tells us of a more basic relationship: *'I am The Lord . . . who brought you out of Egypt!'* The *simchat torah* [the delight of Torah] seems to depend less on "principles," then, and more on story, imagery, and metaphor. Those we find in Amos are especially rich: The basket of summer fruit, the crooked scales, the plumb line.

The Book of Amos is (among other things) a teaching document, and what it teaches is justice. It speaks to us mainly through concrete images and story rather than through abstractions, because the goal of justice in Amos is the formation of a beloved community that is faithful to the Lord.¹⁹

NOTES

1. For further insight on Amos' calling as a prophet, see: S. Cohen, "Amos Was a Navi," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 32 (1961) pp. 175-178; Z. Zevit, "Misunderstanding at Bethel: Amos 7:12-17," *Vetus Testamentum*, 25:4 (October 1975) pp. 783-790; T. Giles, "A Note on the Vocation of Amos in 7:14," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 111 (Winter 1992) pp. 690-692; G. Tucker, "Prophetic Authenticity: A Form-Critical Study of Amos 7:10-17," *Interpretation* 27 (October 1973) pp. 423-434; H. W. Wolff, "The Irresistible Word (Amos)," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 10 (1983) pp. 4-13.
2. D. N. Freedman, "Confrontations in the Book of Amos," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* XI:3 (1990) pp. 240-252; J. M. M. Vincent, "Visionnaire, va-t en! *Interpretation d'Amos 7/10-17 dans son contexte*," *Etudes Theologiques et Religieuses* 75. 2 (2000) pp. 229-250.
3. Y. Hoffman, "From Oracle to Prophecy: The Growth, Crystallization, and Disintegration of a Biblical Gattung," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 10 (1982) pp. 75-81; J. Barton, *Amos's Oracles against the Nations* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980) pp. 3-5.
4. L. Katzoff, "Noblesse Oblige," *Dor le Dor* 16.4 (1988) pp. 213-216.
5. See M. Walzer's reflections on Amos 1-2 as a forerunner of what we think of as international law in "Universalism and Jewish Values," <http://www.eccia.org/viewMedia.php?prmlID:114>.
6. P. Humbert, "Le mot biblique 'ebyon'," *Revue d'histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 32.1 (1952) pp. 1-6; T. Giles, "The Poor and the Needy in the Book of Amos," *Baptist Review of Theology/La Revue Baptiste de Theologie* 1.1 (1991) pp. 12-20.
7. H. Gossai, "Tzadik in Theological, Forensic and Economic Perspectives," *Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok* 53 (1988) pp. 7-13.
8. D. N. Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003) pp. 158-170.
9. B. Lang, "The Social Organization of Peasant Poverty in Biblical Israel," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24 (1982) pp. 47-63.
10. The Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Bathra* (90b), comments on Amos' critique of "crooked scales," and applies it to a wide range of unethical business practices: *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino Press, 1938) Vol. 11, pp. 372-373. See also, H. Gellis, K. Giladi, and H. H. Friedman, "The Biblical and Talmudic Basis of Accounting Ethics," *The CPA Journal* 72.9 (2002) pp. 11-13.
11. J. L. Mays, "Justice: Perspectives from the Prophetic Tradition" *Interpretation* 37 (1983) pp. 5-17.
12. For a dialogue on the possibility of repentance in Amos, see the following articles: R. Smend, "Das Nein des Amos," *Evangelische Theologie* 23:8 (1963) pp. 404-423; P. R. Noble, "Amos' Absolute No," *Vetus Testamentum* 47:3 (1997) pp. 329-340; B. A. Asen, "No, Yes and Perhaps in Amos and the Yahwist," *Vetus Testamentum* 43:4 (1993) pp. 433-441.
13. S. Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Knopf, 1963) pp. 57-59; J. Linville, "Visions and Voices: Amos 7-9," *Biblica* 80:1 (1999) pp. 22-42.
14. Y. Sherwood, "Of Fruit and Corpses and Wordplay Visions: Picturing Amos 8:1-3," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 92 (2001) pp. 5-27.
15. H. Moltz, "A Literary Interpretation of the Book of Amos," *Horizons* 25:1 (1998) pp. 58-71.
16. L. Eslinger, "The Education of Amos," *Hebrew Annual Review* 11 (1987) pp. 35-57.
17. R. Vande Walle, "The Minor Prophets as Conscientizers," *Jeevadhara* 19 (1989) pp. 118-132.

18. H. Huffmon, "The Social Role of Amos' Message" in *Quest for the Kingdom of God* (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, 1983) pp. 109-116; F. Seilhamer, "The Role of Covenant in the Mission and Message of Amos" in *A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974) pp. 435-451.

19. T. Grimsrud, "Healing Justice: The Prophet Amos and a 'New' Theology of Justice" in *Peace and Justice Shall Embrace* (Telford, PA: Pandora, 1999) pp. 64-85; P. Berthoud, "The Covenant and the Social Message of Amos," *European Journal of Theology* 14.2 (2005) pp. 99-109; D. Sturm, "A Vision of Justice and Solidarity," *Journal of Law and Religion* 13.1 (1999) pp. 5-15.



עשה תורתך קבע

**THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ**

January	Jeremiah	39 – 52
	Ezekiel	1 – 12
February	Ezekiel	13 – 39
March	Ezekiel	40 – 48
	Hosea	1 – 14
	Joel	1 – 4
April	Amos	1 – 9
	Ovadhiah	1
	Jonah	1 – 4
	Micha	1 – 7
	Nahum	1 – 3
May	Habbakuk	1 – 3
	Zephaniah	1 – 3
	Haggai	1 – 2
	Zechariah	1 – 14
	Malachi	1 – 3
	I Chronicles	1 – 4



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