

“Plumb Line”

Amos 7:7-17

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Meet Amos, one of the twelve “minor prophets” in the Bible. Tradition may call him “minor,” but he had a *major* impact 28 centuries ago, and continues to impact people today who read his book.

I became fascinated with Amos when I was in my second year of college, in a course exploring the history and literature of ancient Israel. One of the course requirements was to memorize a passage of our choosing, some 10 to 12 verses long; I chose a passage from the Amos. I remember this distinct feeling: *how come I'd never heard about Amos, after all those years of Sunday School?* I felt like I had been *cheated*, like an essential part of my religious education had been neglected. Amos was *way cool*.

We do not know a whole lot about Amos's personal life. What little we do know mostly comes from the passage I just read. “I am no prophet, nor the son of a prophet; but I am a shepherd, and a trimmer of sycamore trees. The Lord took me from shepherding the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” That's most of what we know. Amos's dad was not a prophet; Amos's grandfather was not a prophet; he did not come from a family of prophets. There were other prophets who did. There were schools of prophets; people sent off to learn how to *be* a prophet. Most of them just said things that the king and the people wanted to hear. They supported the status quo; they never brought up any difficult issues; never raised concerns about injustice, or greed, or false worship, or any of the other themes that are so prevalent in Amos and Hosea and the other prophets. People who were faithful to God realized, *those people are false prophets. Amos and others like him were the real ones.*

Amos was a shepherd. He was responsible for the sycamore trees in his father's fields. Here's what a sycamore tree looks like. It's a fruit-bearing tree; it produces little figs that look like this. Each of those figs is about an inch wide. They're edible, and Amos's job was to help them ripen.

Amos probably would have spent his entire life trimming sycamore trees... except *God* had other plans for him. God said to Amos, “I want you to leave your little village here, and head north to the kingdom of Israel. There, I want you to speak my word to those corrupt people. I want *you* to hold them accountable for the things they are doing that aren't right.” How exactly that happened, we don't know. What Amos's parents had to say on the subject, we don't know. We just know that Amos went.

Now Amos was from a little village called Tekoa. That was in the southern kingdom of Judah. At this point in history the twelve tribes of Israel were spread across two different countries – Judah in the

south, and Israel in the north. Tekoa was in the southern kingdom of Judah. It's about ten miles southeast of Jerusalem. I've actually been there. Sort of. Today, there are *two* villages called Tekoa, practically adjacent to each other. I'll say more about them in a little bit. The point for now is that Amos was from the southern kingdom, and God told him to go to the *northern* kingdom to speak God's word.

So, Amos went. He started uttering prophecies, words from Almighty God. This was similar to what Elijah and Elisha had done a century earlier, but Amos's words were carefully recorded. He's the first prophet whose oracles from God were written down, word-for-word. Whether he was the one who wrote them, or someone else, doesn't really matter. What matters is that we have his *exact* words.

So it starts out, at the beginning of the book, with Amos uttering a prophetic oracle denouncing the sins and injustices of Damascus, a foreign city-state to the northeast. Then there are oracles denouncing Gaza and Ashdod, two of the old Philistine cities. Then one denouncing Tyre, another city-state to the northwest. Then more oracles denouncing the neighboring countries of Edom and Ammon and Moab. The typical Israelite would have *cheered* as they heard Amos denouncing all their enemies. Then Amos denounces *Judah*, to the south. That's a little closer to home, but most Israelites would have been fine with that too. But then, Amos starts denouncing *Israel*. "They crush the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of their way. Father and son have intercourse with the same young woman, degrading my holy name. In the house of their god they drink wine bought with fines they imposed." That's just the beginning. Amos is speaking *bold* words, *harsh* words. It would be like, as one commentator put it, an illiterate Alabama farmer going up to the mayor of New York City and telling him everything that was wrong in his city, and with his administration. This guy's got *guts!*

The whole book is worth reading. Amos stresses that *God* is the one who is in charge, that it is *God's Word* that must be followed, that God cares more about *right living* than he does about *right sacrifices*, and that God *will* hold people accountable for their actions. Amos raises concerns about the oppression and exploitation of the poor, about unfair taxes, about bribery, about the fact that the prophets had been instructed *not* to proclaim the word of God, about the worship of foreign gods, and a variety of other similar matters. He goes so far as to call the wealthy aristocrats "cows." He says they have "turned justice into poison." And he pleads: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Martin Luther King quoted that line in some of his most famous speeches.

So, Amos declares, *God is not going to let all these wrongs and injustices continue*. God is going to send *judgment* upon the northern kingdom of Israel. There will be distress; there will be weeping; there will be death. God says, "I am setting a plumb line in the middle of my people Israel." A plumb line is simply a rope with a weight, like a rock, attached to the end of it. You attach it someplace high; you let the weight drop; it's going to give you a *perfectly* straight line. If you want to check to see if something is straight, hold it up against a plumb line. Amos is saying that God is holding the whole country of Israel up against a plumb line, to demonstrate that Israel is crooked *all over the place*. There were a whole *ton* of things in that country that weren't right! God uses Amos to point them all out.

Well, as you might expect, Amos's words weren't very popular. People do not always appreciate being confronted about their sins. Amos was prophesying at a place called Bethel. The priest

of Bethel tells the king what Amos has been saying. “He saying you’re going to *die*, King. He’s saying this country is going to *fall*.” He slanders Amos, telling the king that Amos is plotting a conspiracy against him, *which isn’t true*, but sometimes people like to exaggerate the truth. “The land isn’t able to cope with everything that he is saying.” That part’s true. Israel loved its sin too much. So the king deports Amos back to his home country of Judah. Round 1 goes to the king. But there will be a round 2.

Now I mentioned I was going to tell you more about Tekoa. Originally Tekoa was a Jewish village. After the Jews were decimated by the Romans in the 2nd century AD it was largely abandoned. Christians started living in that vicinity in the 4th century. Muslims joined them in the middle ages. Slowly over time the Christian population dwindled; the last Christians moved to nearby Bethlehem in the 18th century. Today, about 9,000 people live in Tekoa, all of them Arab Palestinians. Muslims.

After Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967, Israel confiscated large portions of Palestinian land for the purpose of constructing Israeli settlements and military bases. A portion of land near Tekoa was one of the areas seized. In 1975 the Israeli government established a military base there, then turned it into a civilian village, and encouraged Israeli citizens to move there. They gave it the same name as the nearby Palestinian village. Today there are about 4000 Jews living there. This is the Tekoa I visited. The very existence of this village violates Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which states, “The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.” The United Nations Security Council, the United Nations General Assembly, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Court of Justice have all affirmed – repeatedly – that Israeli settlements like this one are illegal. The U.S. State Department has also affirmed that “the establishment of the civilian settlements in those territories is inconsistent with international law;” however the United States has habitually abstained from or voted against United Nations resolutions declaring essentially the same thing. Basically, we have a policy, but we’re reluctant to re-affirm it, and we turn a blind eye to a variety of things Israel does that violate international law.

We met with one of the Israeli settlers in Tekoa. He shared his view on the matter, which basically boils down to, “This is our ancient homeland; God gave this land to us; we have every right to live here.” We also met with an Israeli woman who works for an organization that is trying to get Israel to abide by international law. She made an interesting comment: there is no leader among the Israelis advocating for what is *right*. There is no Amos; no Martin Luther King; no Nelson Mandela, nobody holding Israel up to a plumb line ... which basically means that things keep happening, that shouldn’t.

Every country needs an Amos. Every country needs a gutsy prophet ... and a plumb line.

Who is it for us? One could argue it used to be Billy Graham, but he is no longer with us. I don’t see any clear successor. What happens when a country no longer has a prophet, somebody courageous enough to speak God’s truth to power? What happened in ancient Israel? Injustice reigned. The powers-that-be and the common people didn’t want to hear God’s truth. Eventually, the country fell.

We need a plumb line. We *all* need a plumb line. We need *someone* calling us to account.

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