

“The Path to Apostasy”

Amos 2:4-16

May 14, 2006

Review

The opening section of Amos was a series of oracles of judgment pronounced against Israel's neighbors: Syria, Philistia, Tyre, and so on. In each case these nations are condemned not for their false religion and worship but for their various crimes against humanity. They violated principles of morality that are universally recognized by human beings. But Amos did not preach these oracles to those nations themselves. They are rather part of Amos' sermon against Israel, Israel being, as we learn in 1:1, the focus of Amos' preaching and prophecy. The point of these oracles of judgment will be that if these foreign nations would not escape God's wrath on account of their sins, Israel most assuredly will not escape it for her similar sins.

The argument moves slowly toward Israel. As one commentator puts it: “While Amos was thus winning his audience's attention to his message, it is probable that few of them gave attention to the fact that the review of the encircling nations was also a noose of judgment about to tighten round their own throats.” [Motyer, 50] While Syria, Philistia, and Tyre were simply Israel's neighbors, Edom, Ammon, and Moab were more like her cousins, and Judah her brother.

Text Comment

v.4 The prophet comes closer to home, now, and takes up Judah, the southern kingdom, the other part of the divided people of God. Relations between the two kingdoms, ever since civil war had divided them after the death of Solomon, had never been good. At their best the two nations lived in peaceful coexistence; more often there was outright hostility and sometimes war. So Amos' Israelite audience, that would have enjoyed his message so far – glad to hear of the Lord's judgments to befall their enemies roundabout – would have been gratified to learn that Judah too was going to suffer.

We said that the six nations that are the objects of Amos' oracles of judgment in the first section are condemned for crimes against humanity, crimes that are known to be crimes by the judgment of the conscience, a universal standard of morality recognized by all mankind. But now the ground shifts. Judah is condemned for her failure to obey God's law, the will of God as it was revealed to her by Moses and the prophets. Judah has silenced the voice of God in his revelation. Remember, *torah*, translated here “law” means much more than simply commandments or rules. It means basically “instruction” and includes all the truth that God has revealed to his people about himself, about themselves, about the world, about salvation, about his covenant with them and about the life he has called them to live.

v.5 Judah's judgment would not occur for a century and a half, when she was destroyed by the Babylonians.

- v.6 Now, finally, Amos reaches Israel and finds her guilty of the same crimes against human beings for which he had condemned the pagan nations around her. Judges are bribed, the innocent are condemned and the poor are sold into slavery for a pittance, all in a headlong rush for wealth. Corrupt courts provide the grasping rich with slave labor.
- v.7 Israel is also blatantly disobeying the commandments of God's word, involving herself in incestuous and promiscuous sexual relations, no doubt especially in regard to fertility rites at the temples and shrines, and so this debauchery is practiced in public. There may be additionally the suggestion that the women involved are unwilling. Sexual abuse is a daily event in Israel. The Hebrew literally reads not "and so profane my holy name" but "in order to profane my holy name." Amos represents Israel as deliberately throwing off the claims of the Lord.
- v.8 The garments taken in pledge, according to God's law, were to be returned at night to the debtor but Israelites were using them through the night and not returning them – what is more, they were using them at altars, making their religious life the context for their disobedience. Moreover, fines were, according to the Law of Moses, a vehicle for making restitution, not for enriching the wealthy, who here were drinking them up in orgies at their sanctuaries.
- v.10 Israel's sins were sins against God's grace. He had done so much for them and they were repaying him with selfish indifference to his will.
- v.11 God had spoken to his people through his prophets, right up to Amos' day. He had also raised up Nazirites – men and women – who cared about God's will and by example called on others to do the same.
- v.12 The burden of this oracle is found in contrasting the "I" that opens v. 11 with the "But you..." that opens v. 12. What God provided, Israel ignored or disobeyed. Nazirites vowed not to drink wine and Israelites forced them to do it in an act of cruel blasphemy or, perhaps more likely, the statement is to be taken metaphorically to describe Israel's utter indifference to the spiritual challenge and example of such godly people.
- v.16 As before, with the other nations, God's judgment would come in the form of an attack by a stronger nation that Israel could not resist. This would prove to be Assyria, of course, just a few decades later. The Assyrian's theory of conquest was the complete devastation of a nation, the depopulation of its territory, and the terrorization of its remnants. So it was to be.

Now there are two facts of immense importance highlighted in Amos' two oracles against Judah and Israel. And these two facts are intimately related to one another. What is more, they are profoundly relevant to our own situation today, as they have been to that of every generation of the church from Amos' day to our own.

The first is the progress of apostasy through its various stages. Judah is not as far gone as Israel, though Amos sees the inevitable consequence of her dabbling with unbelief and disobedience.

Judah, you remember, had a number of good kings. Only a few great kings perhaps, but a number of kings who were, according to the Bible's own testimony, believing and faithful men. Think of Uzziah himself, mentioned in Amos 1:1, or of Jehoshaphat, the faithful king of Judah when the execrable Ahab was king of Israel, or Hezekiah in Isaiah's time, who by faith withstood the Assyrians and, by the power of God, sent them packing, or Josiah in Jeremiah's time, whose determination to restore and renew a proper worship led to the discovery of a copy of the book of Deuteronomy in the temple which, in turn, led to a revival in the nation. It was a revival that was to prove short-lived, but it was a revival nevertheless. The fortunes of the covenant in Judah waxed and waned from generation to generation, though, to be sure, unbelief and disobedience were never thoroughly rooted out of Judah's life.

Israel on the other hand, began her life in rebellion against the law of God and never recovered. She embraced pagan worship at the outset when she cut herself off from the worship of the temple in Jerusalem and over time heartily embraced the entire pantheon of Palestinian gods and goddesses and their depraved worship. A thin veneer of the old faith remained, but apart from individuals who still believed and practiced their faith, the nation's public life and worship was virtually indistinguishable from that of the pagan nations around her. She had thoroughly accommodated herself to the culture of her time and place.

What we see, in effect, in Amos' two oracles of judgment, side by side, Judah first, then Israel, is the progress of apostasy. Things are not nearly so bad in Judah at this time as they are in Israel, but Amos can see that where Israel is at the moment, Judah will arrive in due time. Judah, in fact, would survive a century and a half longer than Israel before God's fierce judgment befell her, but eventually she suffered what her sister had suffered one hundred and fifty years before. *Unbelief does not usually leap upon the church; it is a poison that often acts more slowly, taking time thoroughly to infect the entire body.* Amos does not have so much to say about Judah here. There was openness in the country to false worship, to idolatry, though it has by no means been accepted by everyone. Uzziah, indeed, is, by and large, a faithful king. But, we read of him and other kings of Judah, that he did not remove the high places. He did not thoroughly exterminate false worship in Judah. And the permission of that false worship and false belief – for there cannot be the one without the other – Amos saw must eventually lead to the corruption of Judah's faith and life. And so it did. And eventually Judah would be guilty of all the sins that Amos accuses Israel of in vv. 6-12. Such situations have very frequently occurred in the history of the church. The truth is known and taught, but mixed in is too much of the thought and practice of the unbelieving culture round about.

When Augustine was a bishop in North Africa, for example, he had to rebuke members of his congregation who would say, "Just because I frequent idols and get advice from visionaries and fortune tellers, that does not mean I have left the church – I am a [Christian]." [*On the Psalms*, 88.2.14 cited in Garry Wills, *St. Augustine*, 6-7] We can hear a great many people saying the same things today. "Sexually I'm a person of my time, I can't any longer believe that you have to be a Christian to be saved – who can believe that in a pluralist world like ours – and I have to run my business as businesses are run nowadays – but that doesn't mean I'm not a Christian!" But, of course, a tipping point is eventually reached and the gospel falls away completely and only the pagan ideas and practices are left. So it was in Israel in Amos' day and so it would be later in

Judah. Error can survive mixed with the truth, but truth will eventually be overcome by error. That is why truth is lost so easily and so often.

So we have here the historical relationship between apostasy in Israel and apostasy in Judah, the one sooner than the other, but Judah is following inevitably in the footsteps of Israel's.

But, in the second place, we also have here the principle of that apostasy, its first cause if you will. We have it in Amos' oracle against Judah in v. 4. They have rejected the law, the instruction, the *torah* of the Lord. But we have the same thing in his oracle against Israel. We not only read of Israel's specific and direct violations of God's commandments, as we saw, but Amos makes a point of saying in vv. 11 and 12 that the Lord provided his revelation to his people and they ignored it. He sent prophets and they told them to shut up. He gave them spiritually minded, godly men and women – such as would take the Nazirite vow – and they mocked them, made fun of them, and ignored them. It was not a failure of God to speak, but of Israel to take heed.

In both cases, this treatment of God's revelation lies at the bottom of Judah and Israel's rebellion and is the first cause of the disaster that is about to befall her. You see it clearly in v. 4. They received the truth from God but exchanged it for what was false. We hear the psychology of it, too, here in Amos' description. They heard the will of God and they chose instead the traditions of men, "the gods their ancestors followed." They stuck with what was familiar to them. As has so often happened, the popular rebellion of one generation becomes the axiom of the next and children canonize the errors of their fathers and grandchildren still more easily. [Pusey in Motyer, 53] And what was true to a degree in Judah was entirely true in Israel. The Word of God had become an irrelevance in Israel. The law of Moses nothing but a relic. They were a modern nation. They needed, so they said, modern ideas. They wanted to be like other nations they admired. And their prosperity blinded them to what they had become. It never ceases to amaze me how utterly convinced our own culture is of the truth of the nonsense and wickedness that two generations ago had to be whispered, that a generation ago was the fodder for a cultural revolution, and that now is accepted as entirely normal, right and sound, no matter the devastation it has caused to untold numbers of human beings. So it was in Israel. There was no going back to the old faith. It had been forgotten. Prophets who preached it were thought a joke. People who lived it were thought hopelessly out of date and out of touch. The society went on without a thought to Yahweh and his righteousness. *Or, it did until the Assyrians arrived on their doorstep as Yahweh's avengers.*

There may have been, there were a few righteous folk who heard Amos gladly and prayed that his sermons would fall upon receptive hearts. Amos speaks of men who took the Nazirite vow. There were some who prayed for Israel's salvation, for her return to God, but they were a tiny minority on the margin of Israelite society. And what they feared happened. Amos preached and no one listened. Most ignored, others jeered.

The problem here was precisely the problem in Eden. The temptation was precisely the same. Israel followed in the steps of Adam and Eve. "Did God really say..." was how the Devil began his conversation with Eve. He cast doubt on the veracity and authority of the Word of God. When that doubt had taken root in Eve's heart and then Adam's the fall was complete and the

rest inevitable. But the Word of God is truth and so when men reject it for another standard – human reason or a man’s inner light or some other religion or philosophy – it is inevitable, by rigorous necessity, they must be choosing falsehood, folly, and ruin. No matter how beguiling these other ideas may be, they cannot be the truth. They must be error.

And, then, we learn here that there is an inevitable connection between error in the mind and error in the life. The great fourth century church father, Jerome, says of Israel here, “they would not have been deceived by their idols unless they had first rejected the law.” [Cited in Motyer, 54]

Amos is simply being true to the Bible’s teaching everywhere when he draws attention to the inner spring of Israel’s sinful living. “Life begins on the inside” [Motyer, 55] Israel’s rebellion began in her mind, in first her doubts about the Word of God and then her mental and spiritual rejection of it as the supreme authority for her life. From that rejection of God’s Word came, inevitably, the corruption of her life. Having lost the truth, she was deceived by every manner of dumb idea that was popular at the time: from worshipping idols to sexual license to an every-man-for-himself lust for money, pleasure, and power. Is it as easy for you as it is for me to think I am describing the United States of America in the early 21st century? As more than one observant person has pointed out: if a man will not believe in God, he will believe in anything. Cut off from God’s truth he loses the power of right judgment and begins to embrace with a ready will every manner of silliness, perversion, and downright evil.

I have been reading a fascinating book of late, an intellectual history of George Adam Smith. Smith was a son of the Free Church of Scotland, born in 1856 in India to devout parents. The Free Church of Scotland was, if you remember, a church born in revival. This was the revival of Thomas Chalmers, William Burns, the Bonar brothers, Robert Murray McCheyne, and men of that character. But by the time Smith went to seminary, at the New College in Edinburgh, the critical views of German scholars were beginning to penetrate the thinking of Free Church scholars. Smith latched on to that teaching and, first as a pastor, then as a professor of Old Testament, and finally as the president of the University of Aberdeen, became one of its most influential popularizers in Scottish Christianity and society. He wrote a number of influential books, books that I have today on my shelves and that many ministers have on their shelves, all of which were written from the vantage point of modern critical views of the Old Testament. He accepted an evolutionary view of Israel’s religion, believing that Israel slowly moved from pagan polytheism to monotheism, that the Pentateuch comes late in Israel’s theological development, not early as the Bible itself claims, that much of the history reported in the Old Testament is legendary, and so on.

But Smith was an evangelical. If you read him, you hear him say over and over again, that he has embraced the modern theories about the OT precisely because he is sure that only in this way can the truth of the Bible be made to live in the modern mind and heart. He was, he thought, saving the gospel of Christ, not destroying it. He was giving it to a new generation in a form that modern folk would find powerful and persuasive. The church didn’t need, he argued, the old dogmas of the verbal inspiration of the Bible or its inerrancy. What mattered was the spiritual message it contained.

Now, human nature being what it is – the same in Israel’s day as in our own – and the testimony of the OT history being what it is, I have no doubt that there were George Adam Smiths in the early days of Israel’s life as a separate nation and throughout the course of Judah’s history. There were priests and so-called prophets and lay leaders who argued that the ancient faith of Moses would be best preserved by accommodating it to the new ideas of Israel’s present. They warned that a faith unwilling to change with the times was bound to be left behind and become irrelevant. They argued that reason itself proved that Moses had to be brought up to date. The religious sensibilities of the peoples that Israel was rubbing shoulders with every day couldn’t be entirely wrong. It was arrogant to say that Yahweh was the only God and that Israel was his only people. And some of those men who said such things, were, as George Adam Smith, real believers. I don’t doubt it. We know, for example, that there were a number of kings of Judah who were, by the express testimony of the Old Testament, believing men. And yet they incorporated into Israel’s life and worship things that God’s law forbade. No doubt they offered reasons for what they did. No doubt they justified their accommodation to the thinking and the worship of the peoples around them. No doubt they were clever, articulate men.

George Adam Smith, like many of his contemporaries – these were the days of Alexander Whyte – felt that the result would be a stronger, more vigorous and influential Christianity. I’m sure he really believed that. So did the huge majority of the membership of the English Baptist Union that rejected the concerns of Charles Spurgeon and refused to make fidelity to the Bible a test of fellowship and union in Christian ministry.

But the question is: what would anyone say now? It was all very well for Israel to argue that her new ideas and her “modernizing” of the ancient faith of Moses was a streak of genius and her prosperity was proof of it. She had not yet tasted the bitter fruit of her unbelief. Her confidence in Amos’ day would later seem a cruel hoax. As columns of Israelites trudged eastward in 721 B.C., leaving their dead behind them, the smoking ruins of their cities and their country estates, their prospects for wealth and comfort crushed under Assyria’s boot, now facing a future of slavery, nothing before them but their remaining years spent serving their new masters in the most menial way, what did they think then? How clever did their new ideas seem then, the new ideas for which they had deserted the Word of God? How much good had their idols done them? Or were they, by then, so spiritually dead that they could neither remember nor understand what Amos had said to them? Had they become, through their long love affair with falsehood, in John Owen’s memorable phrase, sermon proof and sickness proof?

Well, in the same way, I can’t help but wonder what George Adam Smith would say about the Church of Scotland a generation and a half later. Smith was sure that the new skepticism about the authority of the Bible would actually prove to unleash the ancient gospel upon the modern world. The opposite, of course, has happened. The Church of Scotland is a pale shadow of what it was in Smith’s day. If Faith Presbyterian Church were a member congregation of the Church of Scotland, its morning attendance would be the largest in the denomination! In Smith’s day, Alexander Whyte would fill the enormous sanctuary of Free St. George’s twice on Sunday and very large congregations could be found throughout the cities of Scotland. No longer. Most of what remains of the membership of that once great church doesn’t even attend service on Sunday mornings. On the 23rd of this month, at the annual general assembly of the Church of Scotland – now largely an irrelevance in Scottish life – a vote will be taken effectively to legalize the

blessing of homosexual partnerships in the churches. It is the very kind of development that Amos found in Israel: sexual corruption as the inevitable outgrowth of unbelief. It is a step, so the remaining evangelicals in the church are saying, that will complete the accommodation of the church's belief and life to the pagan society of modern Scotland.

I guarantee you that George Adam Smith never thought this would be the result of his embrace of skeptical views of the Bible's teaching, authority, and truth, just as no one in Israel thought that Assyrian conquest would be the inevitable result of their flaunting Yahweh's revelation, and just as no one in Judah supposed that the accommodations of the Word of God to modern life that they were recommending would prove to be a virulent germ that would eventually infect the entire nation with a fatal disease.

But such is the role of God's Word, his revelation, his disclosure of his will to his people. It is the foundation upon which alone the church can be safely built.

George Adam Smith was forever talking about the authority of Christ. That is our true authority, he argued, not the Bible. Smith's older contemporary, the saintly Alexander Moody Stuart, wisely replied:

"In these days many good and able men count it a great discovery and a grand principle that the authority on which we are to trust is not the Bible but Christ, and so they have no scruple in making the Bible one of the least trustworthy of all books; yet we know nothing of Christ except what we read in the Bible, and when it is discredited men can have no Christ except by their own conception. The authority of both is supreme. We have both or we have neither." [*Memoir*, 202]

The Scottish man of letters, Thomas Carlyle, one of the Victorian age's most celebrated authors, and not a friend of historic Christianity himself, put it more bluntly:

"Have my countrymen's heads become turnips when they think they can hold the premises of German unbelief and draw the conclusions of Scottish evangelical orthodoxy?" [J. Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, 310]

Well, history has answered that question and, as it vindicated Amos shortly after his day, it vindicated Moody Stuart and condemned George Adam Smith for his capital error. Judah and Israel would not be the last generations of God's church to turn away from the Word of God – dazzled by the bright lights of this world – but they would also not be the last to suffer the brutal and fatal consequences of their betrayal of the Word of God. History is a stern teacher and has taught this lesson too many times for anyone to be excused for failing to learn it.

Here we are a congregation of 21st century people, a comparatively sophisticated group of folk, giving ourselves week by week to the study of a little book written in the 8th century B.C. by a virtually unknown shepherd/farmer to a society, a population that no longer exists. And we are finding that it describes our present world with precise accuracy. It exposes the very follies that are, in our own day, being embraced with the very same touchingly innocent enthusiasm with which they were embraced by Israel three thousand years ago. What better illustrates the divine

inspiration, the permanent relevance, and the unchanging and unchangeable authority of the Word of God?

Let us this morning, as individuals and as a congregation, commit ourselves anew and afresh to this revelation from God that has been written for us in Holy Scripture, of which Amos is one small but very typical part. Let us promise ourselves and our children and the Lord himself, that we will remain steadfast in our loyalty to his Word come wind, come weather, no matter how out of date it may seem to be in this or any other age. For we know that

“The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the Word of our God stands forever.” [Isa. 40:8]