



Jeroboam's boom

2kings 14.<sup>24</sup>

I still have the occasional Caligula devotee—for truly their loyalty, however misplaced, borders on religious—ask me if, in light of the booming economy, I am prepared to admit, even if it be grudgingly, that I have been wrong about the nakedly mad emperor. Apparently, in true idolatrous fashion, a booming economy justifies the wickedness of the wicked, and is even viewed as some kind of evidence of God's pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

Though tempted to simply declare that for any "Christian" to hold forth such views is tantamount to apostacy, and, with that, be done with it, I will, instead, respond to my inquisitors through homily. I will exercise faith in Alma's declared discovery.

"The preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them..."

I will, therefore, as Alma, "try the virtue of the word of God," and tell a little story.

Once upon a time, long, long ago in a country far, far away, there was a king by the name of Jeroboam II. Archaeologists, historians, and scripture all agree: during the reign of Jeroboam II, the northern kingdom of Israel experienced an impressive renaissance. First, Israel enjoyed a

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<sup>1</sup> We will not, here, debate for whom the economy is booming, or how the poor are being left further and further behind. We will just pretend, notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary, that the economy is booming for everyone.

series of military victories that resulted in the restoration of territories that previous Israelite and Judean administrations had lost in military campaigns. The Book of Kings informs us that Jeroboam II

“restored the coast [borders] of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain... he recovered Damascus, and Hamath, which belonged to Judah, for Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

What this “restoration” and “recovery” meant was that for the first time in many generations—really since the halcyon days of King Solomon—Israel was able to occupy most of the “promised land” that God had stipulated as “Israel” during its earliest days under the administrations of Moses and Joshua.

At the same time, the nation was experiencing an economic boom unmatched in Israelite history. In addition to the archaeological record, including settlement surveys and population studies, we find indications of this boom in the prophetic book of Amos. Amos’ ministry took place during Jeroboam’s reign.<sup>3</sup>

In his book, Amos speaks of “winter” and “summer” palaces that the wealthy possessed. Such multiple residences are indicative of the profligate financial resources available to the wealthy during Jeroboam’s reign. Amos also speaks of palaces adorned with ivory, an expensive luxury item, then as now.<sup>4</sup> Many of these palaces were constructed using the very finest of building supplies, including stone cut to exact measured specifications. Around these mansions, one found gardens and vineyards of the very best stock.<sup>5</sup> Wineries sprang up everywhere.<sup>6</sup> The wealthy enjoyed frequent banquets during which they enjoyed these fine wines, which they

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Kings 14.<sup>25, 28</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Amos 1.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See 3.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See 5.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The prophet criticism surrounding the multiplication of vineyards and wineries is not about “drunkenness.” Rather, it is about the accumulation of wealth, which permits individuals to waste societal resources of pleasure rather than on such moral activities as creating a just and equal society. In the past several years, I have watched with interest as common grocery stores have doubled, doubled, and doubled again their stocks of wine in ever more extravagant wine shops. I have not the faintest doubt that if a prophet such as Amos were around today—sadly he is not—he would proclaim loudly against the American groceries’ wineries as evidence of America’s wealthy decadence.

drank from the nicest of goblets as they reclined upon dining sofas inlaid with expensive ivory decorations. No common meats were good enough for the wealthy who enjoyed such feasts. Rather, they enjoyed the best lamb, along with beef from the finest, most carefully cultivated grain-fed cattle. During such feasting, live musicians entertained the wealthy with the viol and other musical instruments designed by a society with plenty of leisure time for such non-essential inventions. In addition to the scents of cooking food, the sweet smell of scented lotions and perfumes wafted about the luxurious dining apartments of the wealthy.<sup>7</sup>

No doubt, the unparalleled military and economic accomplishments, dubious and ephemeral though they were, inspired a resurgence of confident and proud nationalistic feelings, and a firm belief that providence smiled upon the king, his administration, and, indeed, the entire Israelite nation. If such successes were not enough, surely Jeroboam's secure generation-long reign of forty-one years<sup>8</sup> reinforced such convictions.

But they would have been wrong. For Jeroboam

“did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD.”<sup>9</sup>

Jeroboam was an evil man. The economic boom was not to be thought of as some sort of divine approval of the man, his administration, or his policies. The boom, as economic booms so often are, was built upon wickedness. The accumulation of wealth on the part of the more advantaged class was not the result of God's favor. Rather, the accumulation, enjoyed by only a small portion of the citizenry, was a consequence of sin! The wealthy acquired their wealth by means of unethical financial practices aimed against the less advantaged classes, and always underwritten by government economic policy.

Amos' rhetoric and imagery are powerful, full of furious condemnation of the economic boom and the few who enjoy its questionable benefits. The palaces of the wealthy, filled with all their luxurious appurtenances, Amos declared indecorously, were the consequence of “oppression”

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<sup>7</sup> See 6.<sup>4-6</sup>

<sup>8</sup> 2 Kings 14.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>9</sup> 2 Kings 14.<sup>24</sup>

and “violence and robbery.”

“Assemble yourselves upon the mountains of Samaria,  
and behold the great tumults in the midst thereof,  
and the oppressed in the midst thereof.  
For they know not to do right, saith the LORD,  
who store up violence and robbery in their palaces.”<sup>10</sup>

This wealth-producing oppression, violence, and robbery, certainly made possible and legitimized by government policies, targeted the poorer elements of society.

“They sold the righteous for silver,  
and the poor for a pair of shoes;<sup>11</sup>

That pant after the dust of the earth  
on the head of the poor,  
and turn aside the way of the meek.”<sup>12</sup>

The wealthy ruling class utilized many devious means to steal from the vulnerable in order to fill their own coffers.

“Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor,  
and ye take from him burdens of wheat:  
ye have built houses of hewn stone...  
ye have planted pleasant vineyards...”<sup>13</sup>

Here, we not only get confirmation that the economic boom, and the wealthy’s attending

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<sup>10</sup> 3, 9-10

<sup>11</sup> Note, please, that the “righteous” and the “poor” are found in parallel within the poetry. There is no thought, here or anywhere else in the Bible that the poor are poor for any reason other than they have been taken advantage of. They are not poor because of some character flaw in themselves, but because of the character flaws found in the wealthy, governing class.

<sup>12</sup> 2, 6-7

<sup>13</sup> 5, 11

accumulation of wealth, was, at least as far as the prophet was concerned, a consequence of wicked and unethical means. We also learn a little something about the nature of those wicked and unethical means, which Amos thought of as “treading” or “stomping” upon the poor. The powerful and wealthy governing class imposed some sort of tax upon the poor that took wheat, the most basic resource and staple of life, right out of the mouths of the poor.

In his eighth chapter, Amos reveals a little more concerning the devious practices by which the wealthy acquired their riches—the means by which the economic boom was accomplished for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many.

“Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy,  
even to make the poor of the land to fail,

Saying, ‘When will the new moon be gone,  
that we may sell corn?

and the sabbath,

that we may set forth wheat,

making the ephah small,

and the shekel great,

and falsifying the balances by deceit?

That we may buy the poor for silver,

and the needy for a pair of shoes;

yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat?”<sup>14</sup>

So, not only was the wealthy ruling class “stomping” upon the poor, it was also “swallowing” them,” “eating them alive,” if you will. This resort to the language of cannibalism allows us to sense Amos’ intense and condemnatory feelings about the economic policies of the nation and the boom that accompanied them. Economic policies of the regime allowed the merchants to sell bad wheat at inflated prices. Not only did the poor come away with less wheat than was fair, they walked away with a bunch of inedible straw mixed in.

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<sup>14</sup> 8. 4-6

If the poor gathered up enough gumption to challenge the wealthy's immoral practices, the wealthy used their influence, and especially their money to squash such isolated presumption.

“For I know your manifold transgressions  
and your mighty sins:  
they afflict the just, they take a bribe,  
and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right.”<sup>15</sup>

The entire judicial system was bought by and sold to the highest bidder. “Justice” had become “poisonous”—King James’ “wormwood”—the thought of utilizing the legal system to do the right thing buried deep under ground.”<sup>16</sup>

It didn't take long for word to get around among the poor. It was a waste of time and resources for a poor man to appeal to the courts. It was the better part of valor to keep one's head down and just endure the oppression silently.

“Therefore the prudent ~~shall~~ keep silence in that time;  
for it is an evil time.”<sup>17</sup>

But Amos, warned to “prophesy not,”<sup>18</sup> would not be cowed into silence.

“Ye have turned judgment [justice] into gall,  
and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock...”<sup>19</sup>

If all of this sounds eerily familiar, it should. We could easily be describing our own day and society. We might consider, for example, the millions of children who go to school hungry, perform poorly in class as a result of that hunger, and then at the end of the day go to bed hungry. In response to such an immoral state of affairs, what is the policy desires of our

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<sup>15</sup> 5.<sup>12</sup>. Note, again, the poetic parallelism. “The just” and the “the poor” are parallel with each other and equated.

<sup>16</sup> See 5.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>17</sup> 5.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See 2.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>19</sup> 6.<sup>12</sup>

Jeroboam-like government? Reduce the already too meager food subsidies that impact children, while lowering taxes on the wealthiest citizens. All of this during an economic boom! All of this when the wealthiest Americans possess two, four, eight “palaces” in every corner of the globe and float about on the seven seas in one of their dozen yachts! Yes, a dozen! And here, in these palaces and yachts, no cost is spared. Why, even bathroom faucets and toilet seats desire a touch of silver, gold, platinum, marble, quartz, etc., etc.

What, I wonder, would Amos say?

Actually, no, I do not wonder. Nor can anyone else. It is as obvious and obvious can be what Amos would say about such profligate spending.

In addition to the denial of food necessities to so many of our poor, our government allows, through prohibitive health insurance cost structuring, the denial of another “necessity of life”—health care. In today’s world, health care is as necessary to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as is food. Yet, Jeroboam-like government policies allow health insurers to deny coverage, offer junk policies that pay for nothing, and cheat on and even deny legitimate claims even as those companies and their CEOs walk away with billions in profits.

Again, we need not wonder what Amos would have to say about this.

“Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy,  
even to make the poor of the land to fail,  
Saying, ‘When will the new moon be gone,  
that we may sell corn?  
and the sabbath,  
that we may set forth wheat,  
making the ephah small,  
and the shekel great,  
and falsifying the balances by deceit?’

That we may buy the poor for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of shoes;  
yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat?”<sup>20</sup>

And what, pray tell, is society’s response to the poor’s too meek and too mild complaints? The poor are informed in oh so holier-than-thou tones that it is their fault—a charge that scripture never imagines—that they should work harder. This from the rich who lounge on the soft waterproof cushions of their twenty-million-dollar yacht before their night of fine dining during which they enjoy their vintage wines from 1856 Tuscany—all made possible by government handouts in the form of immorally low taxes. And all of this made possible by corrupt government officials enjoying the kickbacks they receive for their legislative protectionism toward the rich.

...And on and on and on it goes.... Where it ends, Amos knows.

“And I will smite the winter house  
with the summer house;  
and the houses of ivory shall perish,  
and the great houses shall have an end,  
saith the LORD.”<sup>21</sup>

“All the sinners of my people  
shall die by the sword,  
which say,  
The evil shall not overtake nor prevent us.”<sup>22</sup>

“Therefore the LORD, the God of hosts,  
the Lord, saith thus;

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<sup>20</sup> 8.4-6

<sup>21</sup> Amos 3.15

<sup>22</sup> Amos 9.10



Wailing shall be in all streets;  
and they shall say in all the highways,  
‘Alas! alas!’

and they shall call the husbandman to mourning,  
and such as are skilful of lamentation to wailing.

And in all vineyards shall be wailing:

for I will pass through thee,  
saith the LORD.”<sup>23</sup>

“Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel:  
and because I will do this unto thee,  
prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.”<sup>24</sup>

“Shall not the day of the LORD be darkness, and not light?  
even very dark, and no brightness in it?”<sup>25</sup>

No, my friend, do not get me started. Do not suggest that I consider even the smallest part of our current Caligula-style economic boom as anything but an ungodly scandal. Do not attempt to appeal to me by means of some base economic greed. I have too little greed, and understand scripture well enough to know better than to “suppose that gain is godliness.”<sup>26</sup>

Notwithstanding America’s latest economic boom, I have no doubt that heaven has already passed its verdict, and recorded it with an iron diamond-tipped pen

“Caligula did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD.”

In heaven, where things are seen for what they really are, Caligula’s unequal economic boom is seen for what it really is: a big fat bust.

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<sup>23</sup> Amos 6.<sup>16-17</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Amos 4.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Amos 5.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>26</sup> 1 Timothy 6.<sup>5</sup>

Sorry, I ain't drinking the poison cool-aid. I'll keep the beast's blasphemous number off my forehead, thank you very much.