



Prophetic imagination: imagining justice

Amos 5.¹⁰⁻¹²

Introduction

The 8th century B.C. Israelite prophet, Amos, is, for good reason, a favorite of those of us who seek a more just and equitable society. Criticism of injustices perpetrated by the ruling and monied classes (generally the same class, actually)—injustices intended to advantage and advance the interests of those same classes at the expense of society's vulnerable—is central to the prophet's work. Criticism of social injustice is central to the entire Old Testament prophetic imagination.

In Amos 5.¹⁰⁻¹², the prophet 1) offers a critique of one specific social injustice, of many perpetrated against the vulnerable poor; 2) explores its (intended) short-term consequences; 3) identifies how and why the injustice was maintained; 4) complains of the nation's response to and rejection of those who, like him, dare offer criticism of the injustice; and 5) warns of Yahweh's ultimate judgment against those perpetrating the injustice. We will examine each of these elements found in Amos 5.¹⁰⁻¹².

We do so out of more than antiquarian or even theological interest. We believe that there are many direct and indirect parallels between the injustices that Amos describes and those that we see in American society today.

It is mind-boggling, but far from unprecedented, that many who call themselves Christian—especially those identified as evangelical—respond negatively to individuals and groups who preach a “social gospel” and call for “social justice.”^a Jesus died, in no small part because of his insolence in resisting the social injustices so prevalent in this day. Before him, in 8th century B.C. Israel, those who called themselves Yahwists viciously attacked Amos for his call for a more just society.

The first half of Amos 3, in fact, represents Amos’ prophetic defense against those who “commanded the prophets, saying, ‘Prophesy not.’”¹ He concludes his defense with these familiar words:

“Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing,
but he revealeth his secret
unto his servants the prophets.
The lion hath roared,
who will not fear?
the Lord GOD hath spoken,
who can but prophesy?”²

Like Jeremiah—who found that God’s word was like “a fire shut up in [his] bones,”³ making it impossible for him to do anything other than proclaim the word of the Lord—Amos can do nothing but prophesy what he has heard from the mouth of God.

We witness the threats of those who oppose Amos and his message come to a head in Amos 7, where Amaziah, priest in Beth-el (capitol of the Northern Kingdom of Israel), warns Amos,

¹ Amos 2.¹²

² Amos 3.⁷⁻⁸

³ Jeremiah 20.⁹

“Prophesy not again any more at Beth-el:
for it is [the place of] the king’s chapel,
and it is [the location of] the king’s court.”⁴

Amaziah’s warning reminds us that criticism of those advocating for a more just society often come from the political, economic, and religious ruling elites. It also reminds us how, just as the prophet’s religious message often intersects with “politics,” religious space often, perhaps always, doubles as political space. This is certainly true for the world that Amos inhabited.

Opposition to the prophetic call for a more just society is mentioned in Amos 5.¹⁰.

“At the gate, they hate anyone who challenges them;
find abhorrent anyone advocating for justice“⁵

In ancient Near Eastern cultures, city gates, with their associated squares, were often gathering places where the general public and ruling officials discussed and decided criminal cases, military needs and campaigns, and economic and other governmental policies.^b The city gate represents something akin to the White House, the Capitol Building, the Supreme Court, the Pentagon, and Wall Street all rolled into one.

The prophetic imagination of individuals such as Amos, with its criticism of unjust decisions made and actions taken by such bodies, along with its recommendations for changes that would produce a more just society was and is rarely welcome at such places and in such gatherings.

the injustice: “your treading is upon the poor”

What decisions and actions were being taken at Israel’s gates, or governing centers, that drew such sharp rebuke from individuals such as Amos? What individual and societal changes

⁴ Verse 13

⁵ Amos 5.¹⁰. Author’s translation

were Amos and other like-minded individuals advocating? Immediately upon his complaint concerning Israel's resistance to those, including himself, calling for a more just society, the prophet launches into one of his many specific and spirited criticisms of Israelite society.

“Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor,
and ye take from him burdens of wheat:
ye have built houses of hewn stone,
but ye shall not dwell in them;
ye have planted pleasant vineyards,
but ye shall not drink wine of them.
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.”⁶

There is much to unpack here. We begin with the injustice, or the crime:

“Your treading is upon the poor,
and ye take from him burdens of wheat.”

In his introduction, Amos speaks of the contempt that the wealthy and the institutions that empower them have for the poor.

“... they sold the righteous for silver,
and the poor for a pair of shoes;
[they] pant after the dust of the earth
on the head of the poor,
and turn aside the way of the meek...

And they lay themselves down upon clothes laid to pledge by every altar,
and they drink the wine of the condemned...”⁷

⁶ Amos 5.¹¹⁻¹²

⁷ See Amos 2.⁶⁻⁸

We have examined this passage elsewhere. For now, we will only note that in the eyes of the wealthy and their complicate institutions, the poor, if they are thought of at all, are thought worth no more than the price of a pair of shoes. The poor are objectified and turned into a calculation. “How can I advantage myself by using (or abusing) the poor?” We hear their calculations in another of Amos’ devastating critiques of Israel’s unjust society.

“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?”⁸

Now, let’s consider this matter of wheat, and spend just a moment to examine what we learn about Israelite society, and just how far it is willing to go in permitting the plunder of its most vulnerable populations. We learn first that some sort of targeted tax is applied to wheat, the most basic commodity of the poor—often the final barrier between the poor and a slow agonizing death. Secondly, we learn that the wealthy tamper with their weights and measures so that those who purchase wheat pay more money for less wheat. Obviously, this disproportionately impacts the poor. Thirdly, we learn that after the poor pay more than they should have paid for less wheat than they thought they were buying. and then paid yet more due to the targeted wheat tax, they find upon examining their wheat that it is filled with an inordinate amount of wheat husks, straw, pebbles, etc.

⁸ Amos 8.⁴⁻⁶

The roughly contemporary prophet, Micah, describes similar injustices.

“Are there yet the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked,
and the scant measure that is abominable?
Shall I count them pure with the wicked balances,
and with the bag of deceitful weights?
For the rich men thereof are full of violence...”⁹

We should note that economic injustices perpetrated against the poor are identified as grossly violent acts. The Hebrew word translated here as “violence” is *ḥāmās*. It is the same word used in Genesis 6 to explain the cause of the flood—“The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with *violence*.”¹⁰ We might be inclined to think of the violence that brought an end to the pre-flood world in terms of private acts of “*physical violence*.”^c However, the more likely culprit is massive institutional injustice carried out in courts, markets, and government halls—always perpetrated by the powerful against the vulnerable.

I’m not kidding. I really do think that I hear the distant thunder of flood waters approaching America.

Now, this Israelite exercise of violence against the poor in respect to wheat is bad enough. But we learn elsewhere, and suspect that it is the case in Amos’ day as well, that the poor receive unfairly low wages and, sometimes, no wage at all. We may reasonably see this reflected in Amos’ “they sell the poor for a pair of shoes.” So, in addition to cheating the poor in the purchasing transaction, the wealthy class denies the poor the resources needed for the purchase. This creates debt, which allows the wealthy to further subvert the poor.

No joke. We really do witness such analogous grotesque immorality every day in America.

How far is ancient Israel’s wealthy and their captive institutions willing and ready to go to gratify their own unbounded lust? We can answer in a word: Murder. Though it costs the poor their life, the wealthy take the barest of necessities from the poor—their shoes, a cloak in which they protect themselves from the nightly cold, and their most basic food staple, wheat.

⁹ Micah 6.¹⁰⁻¹²

¹⁰ Genesis 6.¹¹

What kind of people do this? Deny the poor even the barest of necessities? Pretty normal people, as it turns out—pretty common, “salt-of-the-earth” Americans, actually.

We have for the most part to this point kept the social critique of current affairs at arms-length, focusing on a people and society that flourished thousands of years ago.^d In the past, we would have stopped here, hoping that the reader or listener would not need further prompting to hear and apply the message to themselves and their society. However, it has become increasingly clear that our readers and listeners have not been doing so. They have *kept* such subtle discourse at arms-length.

So, as we have said elsewhere, the time for parables is past. No more still small voices. We must speak—and, when necessary, shout—directly and frankly of the wanton wickedness and gross violence of our own society. No longer can we afford the gentle touch. No longer will we apply a comforting balm to sooth any wounds we may open.

We could fill pages with examples of our American society’s abuse and oppression, not only of our own poor, but of the world’s poor. What our nation is currently doing, as but one of many examples, to assist the Saudis in their immoral warmongering in and economic blockade of Yemen, is unconscionable.^e Of course, in their blockade—or, as I call it, “block-aid”—of Yemen, the Saudis are only following America’s immoral and habitual example. This abominable practice never does what it is advertised to do. It only murders poor people (Millions of Yemeni people, including innocent children, are dying of starvation and its related diseases), while the power elites continue to live high on the hog and reign with blood and horror.

But now is not the time to catalogue all our crimes against humanity, particularly humanity’s poor.¹¹ However, I will mention one timely example of how we violently “tread upon the poor,” even so far as to deny them the *necessities of life*.

Whether you call the American left “liberal,” “leftist,” “progressive,” “socialist,” “communist,” or just plain “idiotic,” it has, it seems to me, been guilty of a grave error in appealing to “rights,” including “rights” of the poor, when addressing societal injustice. Now, to be clear, it isn’t that I disagree with the basic premise that there are inalienable rights. It is

¹¹ I try to keep visitors to my website, *ponderthescritures.com*, up to date with such violations of human decency on the “Just Reporting” page of the site.

just that I do not think “the left” has accurately gauged where the American people are today (the right, it seems, has and does). Too many Americans—certainly enough to control, through elections, the institutions that rule our lives—seem not to give a hoot about anyone’s rights but their own.

Now, I do not know whether such Americans care any more about the “necessity” of others, especially the poor, but it seems to me “the left” should speak in terms of “necessities.” The “rights” argument has failed. Maybe, just maybe, one based upon necessity can get through the hardened heart of so much of the American electorate.

We can debate till the cows come home whether healthcare is a “right” or not. *But there is no debating the fact that it is a necessity.* Only a fool, or a fiend, would argue otherwise. Affordable health care is necessary for a healthy, happy, and productive life. In an affluent society such as America, if it wishes to call itself “civilized” (and, certainly, if its values have even a shot at being considered consistent with “Christian” values and principles), it ought to go to extreme effort and expense to be sure it’s most vulnerable citizens have this necessity. When a society such as ours does not ensure that the poor—and “poor,” in this instance, would, in addition to the economically poor, include anyone of any economic standing who has “pre-existing health conditions”—have the necessity of affordable health-care available to them, it is to be convicted of being violently unjust and under the same condemnation that Yahweh uttered against Israel by the mouth of Amos. Denying the poor affordable health-care kills people. It is, therefore, murderous.

Time does not permit a discussion, here, concerning housing, food for children, care for the mentally ill, mass incarceration, global warming, illegal immigration, etc., etc., etc. We have and will continue to cover the entire gambit on the pages of this site. For now, it is enough to say that our “treading upon the poor” is habitual and pervasive. It is both individual and institutional. And, perhaps most devastating of all, as in ancient Israel, our treading upon the poor is often, and falsely, portrayed as “just.” Such false portrayals are further evidence of a society that has “turned justice to wormwood”¹²—a society that distributes poison to all its citizens, but targets the poor with particular dedication.

As Israelite society did, American society is, in many ways and by many means, denying

¹² See Amos 5.⁷

vulnerable populations the necessities of life while it enriches our already grossly advantaged population—particularly the infamous 1%.

the (intended) consequences of injustice: “ye have built houses of hewn stone...”

We note that Amos 5.¹¹⁻¹² begins with a causative, “forasmuch therefore as”—in plain English, “because.” Society’s “treading upon the poor,” denying them even the barest necessities of life through a combination of individual greed and public policy has consequences. What are those consequences?

“Ye have built houses of hewn stone.”

“Ye have planted pleasant vineyards.”

This may not be what you were expecting. Perhaps you were expecting

“... ye shall not dwell in them...”

“... ye shall not drink wine of them.”

Well, let’s have a look.

First, just to be clear, that’s the wealthy building and planting, not the poor. That is the wealthy building homes with the most expensive building materials and tending vineyards composed of the finest cultivated plants.

We too quickly pass over the benefits that flow to the wealthy and powerful as a result of their economic injustice—“Ye have built houses of hewn stone,” “Ye have planted pleasant vineyards”—in order to get to the “but ye shall not dwell in them... but ye shall not drink wine of them.” We often make this quickened pass, imaging that these “buts” represent the consequence of the wealthy’s immoral behavior. But these “buts” are not causative, but contrastive. We should not read, “Because you have been unjust, you will not enjoy your economic gains.” Rather, “Because you have been unjust, you have acquired economic gains.” That’s the consequence of the behavior. Then comes the contrast. “*But*, contrary to

your expectations, you will not long enjoy those gains.” Or, again, “The *consequence or result* of unjust economic policies is economic gain for the skilled perpetrators. *But* the perpetrators will not be permitted to long enjoy those economic gains.”

This distinction is vital. Amos is maintaining that unethical economic policy and behavior often work for the perpetrators—at least in the short term. Perpetrators of oppression are not stupid. They know that violence begets gain. They learned this lesson in the very first generation of human history.^f Wealth is not only a common *consequence* of violence, violence is *intended* to produce gain. It has long been a tool of economic trade. Acquisition, wealth, profit, they are the principle point of the injustice. The suffering engendered by such injustice, if it is even permitted to come into view, is simply so much flotsam drifting on the surface of society’s violent floodwaters.

Individuals simply cannot argue that because they are wealthy, they are just. Unfortunately, human history amply demonstrates that it is the opposite that is most often true: wealth often flows from injustice. Amos has made this same consequential point before, in chapter 3. There, he spoke of those who fill their palatial homes through theft and spoil—violence.

“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.”¹³

Again, it is not the poor building palaces through rough and tumble means. It is the wealthy who are the real gangsters—I have pointed out elsewhere that scripture hardly has a cross word to say to or about the poor, contrary to our perverted, upside-down, inside-out, topsy-turvy world view. The wealthy are not acquiring such ill-gotten gains through any form of traditional *physical* violence, but through the unethical private actions and public policies enacted and made possible by a government bought and sold by the wealthy (remember the “wheat tax” mentioned in 5.¹¹ and the bribes mentioned in 5.¹²). The injustices perpetrated against the poor are institutional. The economic immorality that the wealthy ruling classes (note “the mountains

¹³ Amos 3.⁹⁻¹⁰

of Samaria,” indicating the capitol city) perpetrate against the poor is normalized, deemed “legal.” And if, by some chance, the privileged go a little too far, they have the resources to buy their way out of any potential trials and convictions.

“They afflict the just, they take a bribe...”

So, the wealthy build, purchase, and decorate their palaces through robbery. Life is good. The wealthy, having built for themselves a “winter house,” and a “summer house”—“houses of ivory,”¹⁴

“...lie upon beds of ivory,
and stretch themselves upon their couches,
and eat the lambs out of the flock,
and the calves out of the midst of the stall;
⁵That chant to the sound of the viol,
and invent to themselves instruments of musick, like David;
⁶That drink wine in bowls,
and anoint themselves with the chief ointments:
but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.”¹⁵

Laying on the most expensive divans decorated with expensive ivory, they have the very best in gourmet food and drink while they listen to a live ensemble entertain them with the latest tune. And, how very nicely and expensively perfumed they are during their indulgences! Of course, the perfume is needed to cover the stench of the obscene profligacy.

“All tables are full of vomit and filthiness,
so that there is no place clean.”¹⁶

All of this brought to you by your friendly local poor, whom they have trodden under foot.

¹⁴ See Amos 3.¹⁵

¹⁵ Amos 6.⁴⁻⁶

¹⁶ See Isaiah 28.⁸ and its context.

Yep, that's right, "the lifestyles of the American rich and famous"—otherwise known today as the 1%—a 1% created and sustained by government officials elected by an assenting public.

Amos is not alone in commenting on these obscene doings. His contemporary, Isaiah, makes near identical observations.

“Woe unto them that join house to house,
that lay field to field,
till there be no place,
that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!”
“Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning,
that they may follow strong drink;
that continue until night,
till wine inflame them!
And the harp, and the viol,
the tabret, and pipe, and wine,
are in their feasts:
but they regard not the work of the LORD,
neither consider the operation of his hands.”¹⁷

If all of this sounds rather too familiar, it should. It is going on in our society today—in spades.

As just one of many examples, we could consider the housing crash of 2008-2010. How many people lost their homes—and therefore their health, their innocence, their hopes, and even their lives—because of unethical mortgage lending and selling practices that surrounded—before and after—the crash? How many of the individual perpetrators of this immorality were ever tried, let alone convicted? How many wealthy wall-street types, supported by corrupt politicians, possess half a dozen homes in every pleasant corner of the planet, paid for by profits earned by ripping off home owners who have still not recovered? How many banking and other financial institutions, in fact, became even wealthier, particularly after the tax-payer bailout? How many of these institutions, sanctioned by “oh-so-righteous deregulation,” have continued and even expanded their immoral and unethical financial practices to this day? How many of

¹⁷ Isaiah 5.8, 11-12

these con-artists have acknowledged and repented their devious and devilish ways?

As to the last question, Nada. Rather, they have a

“wonton’s forehead,
[they] refuse to be ashamed.”¹⁸

But wait. Surely those who call themselves by the name of Christ will stand up and speak up. Surely they will advocate for justice. Surely the watchmen will announce their warning cry. But alas, too often

“they that handle the law knew me not:
the pastors also transgressed against me,
and the prophets prophesied by Baal,
and walked after things that do not profit.”¹⁹

how the injustice is maintained: “they take a bribe... in the gate”

We have already alluded to the giving and taking of bribes. Just to be clear, once more, it is the wealthy, not the poor, giving and taking bribes. The poor simply do not have the resources to offer bribes. As we have seen, they are lucky if the wealthy have even left them with shelter over head and food in the pantry. In hopes of maintaining their advantages, the wealthy subvert justice and oppress the poor through the “contributions” (a.k.a. bribes) paid “at the city gate,” i.e. “to government officials.”

The bribes not only serve to secure the wealthy a “not guilty” verdict in the rare criminal case. The bribes also serve to influence law makers and have legislation passed that makes their “treading upon the poor” legal in the first place. And, of course, the government officials receiving the bribe don’t do so bad for themselves either.

¹⁸ See Jeremiah 3.³. Author’s translation

¹⁹ Jeremiah 2.⁸

“Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees,
and that write grievousness which they have prescribed;
To turn aside the needy from judgment,
and to take away the right from the poor of my people,
that widows may be their prey,
and that they may rob the fatherless!”²⁰

“How,” asks, Amos’ contemporary, Isaiah, “has the faithful city become an harlot”?²¹ He answers his own question immediately.

“Thy princes are rebellious,
and companions of thieves:
every one loveth gifts,
and followeth after rewards:
they judge not the fatherless,
neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them.”²²

Again, examples from our American society are simply too numerous to enumerate (And, perhaps, this is exactly the point. Multiply the size and number of abominations to such an extent that, one, they begin to look normal, and, two, they overwhelm those who might otherwise object).²³ How very profitable it has been for the U.S. arms makers to kill, literally, millions of the world’s innocent poor. How very profitable it has been for the big banks and other financial institutions to engage in unethical trading and mortgage practices. How very profitable it has been for U.S. senators, House Representatives, and even presidents to take money from the arms makers and financial institutions in return for making their murder and theft “legal.” How very wicked of America’s falsely named “Supreme” Court to legalize this and many other forms of bribery—calling evil, “good.”

And all the while that the monied and governing classes enrich themselves, the poor grow

²⁰ Isaiah 10.1-2

²¹ Isaiah 1.21

²² Isaiah 1.23

²³ This certainly seems to be Caligula’s strategy, so brilliantly executed, we might add, as to “deceive the very elect.”

poorer, suffer, and even die.

“How long, O Lord; how long will this plunder and pillage, and rape, and murder be allowed to continue?”

Judgement against injustice: “ye shall not dwell in them”

“Not long. This has not gone unnoticed. I will remember,” says the Lord.

“For the oppression of the poor,
for the sighing of the needy,
now will I arise,” saith the LORD;

“I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him.”²⁴

“He shall judge [advocate for] the poor of the people,
he shall save the children of the needy,
and shall break in pieces the oppressor.”²⁵

Amos seconds the Psalmist’s warning concerning the coming day of reckoning.

“Ye have built houses of hewn stone,
but ye shall not dwell in them;
ye have planted pleasant vineyards,
but ye shall not drink wine of them.
For I know your manifold transgressions
and your mighty sins...”

The wealthy’s ill-gotten gains will not long be enjoyed.

²⁴ Psalm 12.⁵

²⁵ Psalm 72.⁴

“In that day a man shall cast his idols of silver,
and his idols of gold,
which they made each one for himself to worship,
to the moles and to the bats;
To go into the clefts of the rocks,
and into the tops of the ragged rocks,
for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty,
when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth.”²⁶

Conclusion

As we said in the introduction, we do not devote all this time and effort to examining and understanding Amos’ message out of simple antiquarian or even theological interest. Rather, we wish to understand what his message means to us, and how it applies to our society. We hold Amos’ prophetic imagination concerning the just society up as a mirror, and invite America to gaze into the looking glass and gage its appearance.

And what do we see?

First, we note Amos’ prophetic witness about and against the private and public social injustices perpetrated by Israel’s wealthy and governing classes against the vulnerable poor. While his work catalogues many injustices, in Amos 5.¹⁰⁻¹² he focuses his criticism on a “wheat tax” that (disproportionately) harms the poor. In his society, this “wheat tax” represents an actual injustice perpetrated by powerful and monied individuals and institutions upon the vulnerable poor. Because wheat is a staple of life in the ancient world, the wheat tax is a grotesque denial of “the necessities of life” for the poor.

In our society, the “wheat tax” stands as an accurate metaphor, for any oppression of the poor that results in the denial of “the necessities of life.” We mentioned affordable health care as one necessity that our modern society denies millions of vulnerable people. But there are many, many other examples of America’s vulnerable poor being denied necessities—food, shelter, education, etc., etc.

²⁶ Isaiah 2.²⁰⁻²¹

American society's denial of the necessities of life to so many vulnerable populations might be forgiven if it were, as a nation, strapped for cash. But it is not. It is the wealthiest nation ever to have inhabited planet Earth. It has the resources. But it lacks the will. This lack of will is made all the more shameful when so many who call themselves "Christian" lack the will to demand and agitate for "a more perfect union" that is committed to living consistent with the most basic of Christian sayings and principles—saying such as Jesus' "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them,"²⁷ or the Apostle Paul's

"Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus..."²⁸

The second thing we note as we gaze into Amos' mirror, is the real intentions and consequences of denying vulnerable members of society the necessities of life." We have already asserted that America has more than enough resources to see that the poor are provided with the necessities of life. So, if an embarrassingly small portion of those national resources are used to provide such resources—and then, often, grudgingly—for what purposes are the greater part of those resources used? What is the anticipated reward of our national injustice?

We should say, first, that, whether intended or not, the greatest evil of denying the poor the necessities of life, such as affordable health care, is the personal hurt and pain and even death caused by the injustice. This, Amos alludes to when he speaks of Israel's having "turned justice into gall" and "hemlock—poison that kills."²⁹ But in Amos 5.¹⁰⁻¹² Amos focuses on only one of the hoped-for intentions of the monied and governing class in denying the poor the necessities of life: "houses of hewn stone" and "pleasant vineyards."

Again, we can utilize these as metaphors. The intentions of the monied and governing class' injustice, intentions that are at least temporarily realized, is to enrich themselves and their monied constituents. We see this today in America's obscene and wicked economic inequality.

²⁷ Matthew 7.¹²

²⁸ Philippians 2.⁴⁻⁵

²⁹ See Amos 6.¹²

“It is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, *wherefore the world lieth in sin.*”³⁰

The inequality we witness today is both intentional and consequential. Its intent is to put more money in the pockets of the wealthy, and its consequence is the same, more money in the pockets of the wealthy. This creates an extravagant lifestyle that is, if seen in its true light, bad for those “enjoying it.”

“They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.”³¹

Unlike those being considered in 2017, tax structures and associated spending priorities that “permit” the wealthy to “give generously” to help supply the poor with the necessities of life would not only be a benefit to the poor. They would serve to assist the rich in avoiding the many lustful temptations and snares that will lead them to take cover in bat caves,³² and, worse, lead them to perdition!

This brings us to the third thing we note as we gaze into Amos’ mirror: “they take a bribe, and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right”—we read the final word, “necessity.” Now, we use “city gate” as metaphor. It represents, as we have said before, the White House, the Capitol Building, the Supreme Court, the Pentagon, and Wall Street all rolled into one. Every day we see the corrupting influences that the wealthy’s money has upon political processes and legislation—including those associated with the caring for America’s vulnerable poor. Amos reminds us that, nearly always already wealthy, the governing class’ willingness to oppress the vulnerable poor to the point of denying them necessities of life is more than a personal and individual choice. It is public, corporate, and institutional. It is a national choice.

Of course, private acts of oppression take place in each of these locations. However, with

³⁰ DC 49.²⁰. Emphasis added

³¹ 1 Timothy 6.⁹

³² This refers to Isaiah 2.²⁰⁻²¹, quoted earlier.

increasing consistency, America's electorate shows a preference for, and a willingness to delegate the administration of their government to individuals whose principles and policies make clear their intent to act *contrary* to the interests of the vulnerable poor, and *for* those interests that will enrich themselves and their cronies. Such lining of the pockets of the wealthy rebounds upon elected officials, increasing their wealth and their ability to further manipulate public institutions for their own benefit.

The nation's oppression of its poor—planned, legislated, and perpetuated by government officials and institutions, with a wink and a nod from the electorate, is immoral. It is un-Christian, un-Islamic, un-Buddhist, un-Hindi—un-American. It is inhuman and inhumane.

Those who object to this ungodly and inhumane governance, both those with a prophetic conscience and the poor whom they defend, are hated and turned away at the gate—"the White House, the Capitol Building, the Supreme Court, the Pentagon, and Wall Street all rolled into one." Looking into Amos' mirror, we must acknowledge that all too many Americans reject all criticism of our national social injustice, and deny all calls for a more just and equitable society. Neither justice or compassion is welcome in America's city gates or village squares. In fact, many Americans seem to agree with Satan's assessment, who has the gall to speak of those who oppose him and his encouragement of the sort of economic injustice that we have catalogued here—as "molesters."^g

It is all enough to make one swear. And, as we have said before, it is enough to make God act.

"Woe to them that devise iniquity,
and work evil upon their beds!
when the morning is light, they practise it,
because it is in the power of their hand.

And they covet fields, and take them by violence;
and houses, and take them away:
so they oppress a man and his house,
even a man and his heritage.

Therefore thus saith the LORD;
Behold, against this family do I devise an evil,
from which ye shall not remove your necks;
neither shall ye go haughtily:
for this time is evil.”³³

No, what we see looking back at us in Amos’ mirror is not pretty.

“Hey, buddy, you talking smack about “America the Great,” the “city on the hill,” the “light of the world”?”

I am. You do know, don’t you, that you did not invent the myth of exceptionalism? There’s nothing very original in the assertions of exceptionalism. You stole it. While every nation has and does claim it for themselves, given your Christian heritage you likely stole it from ancient Israel. But your plagiarism doesn’t make the myth any truer today than it was then.

“Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me,
O children of Israel?
saith the LORD.

Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt?
and the Philistines from Caphtor,
and the Syrians from Kir?”³⁴

There is no safety in the false myths of exceptionalism. Safety is only to be found in this.

“If ye throughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye throughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor; if ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place...Then then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers...”³⁵

³³ Micah 2.¹⁻⁴

³⁴ Amos 9.⁷

³⁵ Jeremiah 7.⁵⁻⁷

In this “present evil world,”³⁶ the denial of the poor may land the most skilled oppressors in the biggest and nicest house on the block. They may surround themselves with all the luxuries and toys the earth has to offer. They should enjoy them while they can, because things work differently in God’s earthly and eternal world.

“If any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment.”³⁷

You can put that in the bank.

³⁶ See Galatians 1.⁴

³⁷ DC 104.¹⁸

^a Several reasons for this skepticism have been offered. Many seem to view this drive for social justice as some kind of “leftist” plot. Whether left or right, I do not know, but I do know that the call for a more just society is biblical—and Christian.

Others, perhaps sensing in this call for “effort” and “works” a challenge to their “salvation without works” paradigm, consider such Christian effort a blasphemous challenge to God’s sovereignty.

Others, pointing out that American Christianity had a period in which it was engaged in social reforms, suggest that it was that great original American sin of slavery that brought the backlash—a backlash that became habitual ever afterwards (I have long said that racism touches and perverts nearly every aspect of American life).

“In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, southern evangelicals had launched a variety of reform movements, among them the abolition of imprisonment for debt, the amelioration of prison conditions, and the expansion of suffrage. But the reform movements all lost momentum before reaching their goals. In defending slavery against hostile northern opinion, southerners began to regard the advocacy of any kind of reform as potentially threatening. As they saw it, to open any facet of the social order to challenge might bring slavery into question” (*The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*, Frances Fitzgerald).

^b See, for example, Genesis 23.¹⁰, where Abraham negotiated with Ephron the Hittite for his wife, Sarah’s burial plot, or Ruth 4 in which Boaz negotiates with the elders to take Ruth as his wife. In 1 Kings 22.¹⁰, Jehoshaphat, King of Judah and Ahab, King of Israel conduct a war council at the gate of Israel’s capitol city, Samaria. Jeremiah 38 reports how one, Ebed-melek, advocated for Jeremiah before the King who was sitting at the city gate at the time hearing complaints and cases. Later, we see Jeremiah placed in stocks that are located at the gate, obviously a legal setting (Jeremiah 20.¹⁰). Deuteronomy calls for legal cases concerning several crimes to be conducted at the gate (See Deuteronomy 21.¹⁹; 22.¹⁵; and 25.⁷ as examples).

^c As I have so often lamented, our myopic culture has no difficulty identifying as “violent”—and trying and convicting someone engaged in—a act such as robbing a corner convenience store at gun point. But they are loath to label as “violent” the robbery that the wealthy perpetrates against millions of their fellow citizens with their computer and attaché case. But this loathing is miniscule compared to the near impossibility of convicting such gangsters.

^d We have, in the past, gone thus far without much resistance. Those I taught and to whom I preached and wrote normally were in full agreement, nodding their heads in accord about those dastardly Israelites. However, since I have begun to be so bold—or rude, as you may have it—as to hold the mirror up to ourselves and our society, my audiences and readers have not always been so sure. Resistance has grown a little more than slightly.

^e Of course, the hyped up and exaggerated threat of the “terrorism” bogey man makes “conscionable” choices near impossible. As an American, I am, as others have pointed out, more likely to be struck and killed by lightning than a terrorist.

^f See Cain’s great economic discovery as found in Moses 5.31—“I am Mahan, the master of this great secret, that I may murder and get gain.”

^g Indeed, the American government has come so thoroughly under the Satanic spell (or curse) of reigning with blood and horror against the poor of this earth that one of its School of Americas’ handbooks on torture “identifies target groups as ‘religious workers, labor organizers, student groups, and *others in sympathy with the cause of the poor*’” (John W. Dower, *The Violent American Century*, Chapter 5, emphasis added). You see, the poor are not simply poor saps to be taken advantage of, they are a danger

to society. And, indeed they are. For when they are truly seen as human, they become an unquestionable indictment upon the oppressing society.