



*"...The heart of the sons of men
is full of evil,
and madness is in their heart
while they live..."
(Ecclesiastes 9.3)*

Fraudulently selling bad product at inflated prices
(part 1)

Amos 8.⁴⁻⁶

*Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before the high God?
He hath shewed thee, O man, what is
good;
and what doth the LORD require of thee,
but to do justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy God?
(Micah 6.6,8)*

⁴Hear this, those who weary^a the impoverished^b
to the end that^c they ruin^d the land's downtrodden^e—
⁵thinking:^f "when will the new moon sabbath be over
so that we can sell grain;
and the weekly sabbath
so that we can make our produce available,
while shrinking^g the size of the dry measure,^h
increasing the weight of sheqel,ⁱ
and rigging^j fraudulent scales
⁶to buy the underprivileged with money^k
and the impoverished at the cost of a pair of sandals.
We will even sell worthless debris^l mixed in with the grain!"^m (author's translation)

Introduction

In this passage, Amos criticized the business practices of 8th century Israelite wheat sellers. He leveled several accusations against them. First, he charged wheat sellers with engaging in unethical business practices by selling bad product at greatly inflated prices. Second, he claimed that the wheat sellers' unethical business practices further impoverished an already impoverished class of poor citizens. In this, they acted inhumanly. Third, he accused wheat sellers of putting business and profits before God.

In this first of two homilies that examine this passage, we will examine these three charges in their 8th century B.C. context. In the second homily, we will consider the application of Amos' criticisms of ancient Israelite business practices to the present business environment found in the United States.

inferior product...

We begin our examination of Amos' criticisms leveled against 8th century B.C. Israelite business practices with his charge that wheat sellers engaged in the unethical practice of knowingly and purposefully selling an inferior product.

In those days, after wheat was harvested it was gathered for winnowing. During this winnowing process, wheat was repeatedly thrown into the air, allowing the wind to blow away the wheat husks and other debris that had mixed with the wheat kernels during the harvesting process. While the debris was blown away, the nutritious wheat grain itself fell to the ground where it was collected and prepared for sale.

Amos informs us that wheat sellers somehow performed this winnowing process so that the wheat they sold contained husks and other debris mixed in with the wheat kernels. By either not winnowing at all or winnowing less, the seller saved money and increased profits by reducing the labor costs associated with winnowing. By mixing useless and nutrition-less debris with good nutritious wheat, wheat sellers were able to stretch their grain out over more sales and even further increase their profit margins.

Amos does not chalk such behavior up to "market forces" as if economics were a matter of natural law akin to, say, the law of gravity. This unethical behavior was a volitional choice. It could only flow out of a lust for increased profits that overrode every other consideration, including the impact their practices had on real people. Amos viewed the merchants' unethical business practices not only in economic terms but in spiritual and religious terms as well. This unethical behavior was sinful wickedness, a breach against humanity as well as rebellion against God.

... **at** inflated prices

Amos informs us that in the merchants' dedication to profit margins above all, wheat sellers

engaged in additional unethical business practices. They falsified their weights and measures and the tools they utilized in weighing and measuring. We should take a moment to consider how weights and measures were used and to visualize the unethical business practices that Amos describes. We will first describe how the transaction between a buyer and seller of wheat was conducted.

The buyer came to the seller and requested a certain measure of wheat (we will say a “pound” to make it relatable), for which she agreed to pay one shekel (in the pre-coinage era, a weight, not coin) of silver. The merchant placed a one-pound weight on the left side of a heavy-duty commercial scale used to measure dry goods. This caused the left scale to lower. He then began to add wheat to the right side of the scale. The left rose, the right side lowered until, finally, the two sides sat next to each other at equilibrium. The seller then dumped the wheat from the scale into a sack.

Now, it was time for the buyer to pay. The seller placed a weight equivalent to a shekel on one side of a second smaller, light-duty commercial scale used to weight metal. The buyer placed her silver on the other side of the scale until the two sides were at equilibrium. The buyer could then leave with her wheat. All this was acceptable business practice.

However, in the transaction as Amos describes it, the one-pound weight that the merchant used to measure the wheat was not, in fact, a full pound, but, say, $\frac{7}{8}$ a pound, thus cheating the buyer of the amount of wheat for which she paid. In addition, the merchant manipulated his scales in some way so that the two sides were slightly out of equilibrium to begin with. Therefore, our customer walked away with something even less than the already scant $\frac{7}{8}$ pounds of wheat.

But, still, the merchant had one more trick up his sleeve. The shekel weight that he used for payment was slightly heavier than the standard shekel so that when the buyer placed her silver on the money scale, she actually ended up paying slightly more than a shekel. And again, these scales were also manipulated. The buyer ended up leaving with less wheat than she paid for and paying more than she had agreed on—a double whammy for her, but a

higher profit for the seller.

Amos was not the only Hebrew prophet to observe and criticize such unethical business practices. One of his younger contemporaries, Hosea, also commented on this behavior.

“A merchant with an inaccurate scale at hand
enjoys defrauding.
And, 'Eprayim thinks, “I’m rich! I have discovered the source of power!
With all my profits,
no one will identify my abuse as sin.”¹

Micah, an even younger contemporary,

“YHWH’s voice calls out to the city—
and it is wise to reverence his power;
pay heed to the warning of the one who issues it—
‘Do they continue to exist—a house built by wicked means,
treasuries acquired through wicked means
even through fraudulent measures, which are condemned?
Should I acquit any with false balances,
acquit any with a bag of fraudulent weights,
acquit the city’s wealthy who are full of violence,
acquit its citizens who utter deception,
their tongues flapping deceptively in their mouths?’”²

Though infinite and cosmic in His outlook and existence, God, in his desire to see humans secure and progressive, involved Himself in and sought to direct even the most mundane of human affairs. In establishing the nation of Israel, God involved himself in and gave directions concerning something as mundane and, by His standards, primitive and archaic as

¹ Hosea 12.⁷⁻⁸, author’s translation.

² Micah 6.⁹⁻¹², author’s translation.

a pair of weighing scales and the weights and measure that were placed upon them.

“You are not to engage in injustice in regard to administering the measurement of length, weight, or volume. You are to possess accurate balances, accurate weights, accurate dry measures, and accurate liquid measures. I am YHWH, your God, who brought you out of Egypt.”³

So, again, Amos’ prophetic interest in seemingly secular economic matters shows that they were not, in his mind, strictly secular in nature. Buying and selling interconnected with religion and spirituality. God remained interested in and watchful about how individuals and societies conducted the business of buying, selling, renting, loaning, etc., etc.

the impoverishment of lust

Business practices, Amos understands, are also about people. They are a matter of human relationships. They are a matter of one’s humanity. While the wheat sellers’ unethical business practices that Amos describes put money in the sellers’ pockets in the short term, they took money out of the pockets of the buyer for the long term. Of special interest to the prophet, and what increased his ire, was the fact that the unethical business practices of the sellers took money out of the pockets of poor people, who were already barely living, as we say, “month to month,” “hand to mouth,” increasing their suffering, and bringing financial ruin.

Worse still, selling inferior product—wheat mixed with husks, straw, dirt, pebbles, etc. that contained no nutritional value—endangered the very health and life of the poor who already struggled to have enough food.

Could the sellers not see this? Did they not care? Were the higher profits of unethical business practices really worth the financial ruin and physical harm they brought to the poor?

³ Leviticus 19.³⁵⁻³⁷; author’s translation

Apparently, they were. The sellers' business practices showed them to be not only unethical but inhumane as well, willing to abuse and objectify others for their own financial gain. Merchants viewed others as simply means to an end, tools used for their own personal profit.

This is the meaning behind Amos' language, when he speaks of the unethical sellers who "weared" and "ruined the impoverished until they were brought to complete financial ruin. So inhumane were they, so little did they think of their fellow citizens, so obsessed were they with profit margins that they found about as much worth in their fellow citizens as they found in a pair of sandals. A new pair of sandals was worth the rumbling stomach of the malnourished and hungry poor—men, women, and children. Heck, if there was some little profit to be found in it, the business class wasn't happy until it had picked even every speck of dirt from the unkept hair of the poor!

"They sell out the innocent in order to turn a profit.

They sell out the impoverished in order to acquire a pair of sandals.

They lust after the dirt

that is found in the hair of the poor,

and make the life of those already distressed even more precarious."⁴

All of this would come back to haunt, not only the business class but the entire nation, as Amos makes clear throughout his book and particularly the passages immediately prior to and following this passage.

Profit over god

The business class was not only inhuman, but, as we have said, irreligious, rebellious, ungodly. "When," asked the merchant class, "will the new moon sabbath" or the "weekly sabbath" "be over so that we can sell grain... so we can make our produce available." God, and his commandments, not least of which was the command to keep weekly, monthly, and

⁴ See Amos 2.⁶⁻⁷, author's translation.

yearly sabbaths, were such a nuisance. Such an impediment to profit. It was maddening.

One can almost see them watch the clock, strum their fingers, twirl their thumbs as they waited for the hour hand to strike 6 p.m. (dusk is the end of the sabbath) so that they could get on with what life was really all about—selling and acquiring and profiting. Individuals so emotionally and intellectually dialed in on business and their lust for increased profits, it seems to us, were unlikely to keep their minds from wondering long enough for them to engage in meaningful spiritual activities such as meaningful prayers or insightful scripture study on the Sabbath day—if they even made the effort to begin with. Without this spiritual check on their lusts, their behavior could only deteriorate further, making them even more dangerous and harmful to those around them. If enough people so behaved, society was in deep, deep trouble.

This preoccupation with business and increasing profit margins was indicative of more, however, than spiritual distraction. More than putting profit above God. It was indicative of idolatry. Oh, to be sure, they had a god to whom they were devoted. Their god, the highest good in their life, was business and profit. Mammon. They served this false god with diligence and concentration and commitment and imagination. The only true and living God, not so much. They begrudged Him the time He asked them to take away from their most cherished business pursuits.

Conclusion

In critiquing his society, the 8th century B.C. prophet, Amos, did not limit himself to those matters traditionally labeled, “religious” or “spiritual.” Or, perhaps it is better to say that Amos had an expanded view of the “religious” or “spiritual” sphere. The religious sphere included matters traditionally thought of as “mundane,” “temporal,” and “secular.” These included matters related to the business practices of Israelite wheat merchants. Amos criticized the merchants’ unethical and inhumane distribution of an inferior product at inflated prices through the manipulation of the labor market, weights, measures, and

measurement tools of their industry.

In the wheat sellers' unethical manipulation of the labor market and the quality and quantity of their product, Amos felt justified in concluding that among the business class profit margins came before all else. Profit margins came before the health, safety, and welfare of their fellow citizens. Profit margins took priority over God. Profit margins were their god.

But, as with all idolatrous gods, their rewards would not endure.

“As the partridge sitteth on eggs,
and hatcheth them not;
so he that getteth riches,
and not by right,
shall leave them in the midst of his days,
and at his end shall be a fool.”⁵

In our next homily, we will turn our attention to 21st century America and its business environment. Though we might hope to find very different attitudes and behaviors among this business class than Amos found in his, we will be disappointed. We will find, sadly, that the old maxim, “the more things change, the more they stay the same,” holds true to form. We are truly in need of another Amos. Fifteen of them would be nice. Given the depth of depravity, many more than fifteen are necessary. “Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets”⁶ with the insight and morals of Amos.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

⁵ Jeremiah 17.¹¹

⁶ Numbers 11.²⁹

^a The word we have translated, “weary,” comes from Hebrew, *šā’ap*. Whether there is one root or two is a matter of debate among linguists. Whether one root or two, this word seems to be an onomatopoeic word, meaning that it replicates a sound as “Shh” or “puff” do in English. The word is made up of the word for nose (*’ap*) with the prefixed sibilant (*š*). It literally represents, then, the sound that emanates from the nose with a sudden and deep intake of air. Such sudden and deep intakes of air can reflect human reactions such as surprise, anger, hate, fear, weariness, and desire. The word can represent simply the act of breathing deeply: “pant” or “inhale,” for example. Or, as a secondary meaning, it can reflect the human reactions reflected in the sudden intake of air: “lust,” “be angry,” “hate,” “fear,” etc. The sudden and deep intake of air might also indicate an increased need for oxygen that comes as the result of physical exertion. Thus, the word can have a tertiary meaning: “hunt,” “pursue,” “attack,” etc.

The question arises, then, which is meant in the present passage. I would argue that the prophet meant for his audience to hear all of the above in his critique. Amos wished his audience to see the unethical merchant as being driven by his own internal desires, or lusts to exert himself in the pursuit of sales in such a way as to weary and endanger the poor.

Finally, we should note that the LXX translated the word with, *ektribō*, “to rub vigorously,” “to rub out,” “to wear out,” “to undermine,” “to destroy.”

^b Hebrew, *’ebyôn*.

^c Hebrew, *l^e*.

^d Hebrew, *šābat*. The word is used here in the Hiphil stem with the meaning of “cause to end, put an end to, eliminate.” Though it is sometimes the consequence of his unethical actions, Amos does not mean to say that the merchant *intends* to “eliminate” or succeeds in “putting an end to” the poor. The merchant needs customers to maintain his business. It is bad business to reduce the number of potential buyers. The fact that Amos will later speak of the merchant’s “buying” the poor shows that we should not read verse four to mean grain sellers intend to get rid the land of the poor. So, “the end” to which the merchant puts the poorer buyers is deeper financial straits—not so much decimation that the poor die or cannot purchase the merchant’s product, but enough to keep the poor from impinging upon the merchant’s profits.

^e Hebrew, *’ānāw*.

^f Literally, “saying.” But this “saying” is spoken only in their minds, as it is unlikely that they would public reveal such schemes.

^g This is the infinitive of Hebrew, *qātôn*.

^h Hebrew, *’ēpâ*. We might translate even less literally, “diminishing the amount sold.”

ⁱ Less literally, “increasing the cost.”

^j Hebrew, *’āwat*, literally, “to bend, make crooked.”

^k Literally, “silver.”

^l Hebrew, *mappāl*, traditionally, “refuse.” Also, “sweepings,” and “waste.” We all know “refuse” as “waste,” that which is “left over” and unused. It is unused because it is seen to have no value. In the context of wheat, “refuse” is usually thought of as the husk in which the wheat kernel grows. But, if the wheat producer is not winnowing the husk from the kernel, they are likely not winnowing out other debris such as straw, dirt, pebbles, etc.

^m This is far from a literal translation of the three Hebrew words found in the line, which reads, “and the fallings of the wheat we will sell.” However, it is consistent with my translation philosophy and represents, I think, the idea expressed in the three words.