



*"...The heart of the sons of men
is full of evil,
and madness is in their heart
while they live..."
(Ecclesiastes 9:3)*

*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)*

fraudulently selling bad product at inflated prices
(part 2)

amos 8.⁴⁻⁶

⁴Hear this, those who weary the impoverished
to the end that they ruin the land's downtrodden—
⁵thinking: "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 the size of the dry measure,
increasing the weight of sheqel,
and rigging fraudulent scales
⁶to buy the underprivileged with money
and the impoverished at the cost of a pair of sandals.
We will even sell worthless debris mixed in with the grain!"¹ (author's translation)

Introduction

Let me just say at the outset that I am not, I repeat, *not* a "Christian nationalist." I have not one speck of sympathy for their unhallowed goals.

In speaking and writing on religious subjects, we are warned, one is not to be political. Doing so, sets one up for the charge of "teaching the doctrine of men, mingled with scripture." But tell that to the Hebrew prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, etc.—who were both devout Yahwists and vibrant political critics.

At the same time, we are told, when one speaks or writes on modern socio-political subjects one should not bring religion into the discussion. Doing so sets one up for the charge of

¹ Critical notes for my translations can be found in the first homily devoted to this passage.

supporting religious fascism or being threatening to the liberal ideas of inclusion and diversity upon which our secular society is founded and must maintain if it to securely endure.

I am not unsympathetic to these concerns. History has categorically proven that scripture can be twisted to support any thought, however perverted, that can enter the depraved mind of human beings—those surrounding Nazism, as an extreme example. Captured by extremist right-wing ideology, current American Christianity is a clear demonstration of the dangers and harm of mixing religion and politics and the undermining of foundational and godly modern ideas of inclusion and diversity.

Let me repeat. I am not a “Christian nationalist.” I have no sympathy for them. Nevertheless, I continue to believe that scripture can legitimately be brought into discussions about modern secular society. The Hebrew prophets, particularly, have something to contribute to modern secular society. They made observations concerning their societies and warned about the consequences of unethical behavior, practices, and policies that they observed in governance, law, and economics. Time proved them right. We can confidently establish that the destructive consequences of unethical principles, practices, and policies (private and public) about which they warned came to pass. Therefore, we can confidently conclude that their observations about the ethical deviance of those who governed and conducted business in ancient Israel were correct and accurate.

While the governing and economic particulars of their society are often very different from those of our modern society, we can draw principles from the prophets’ observations that can be applied to modern society if we are to avoid a societal collapse similar to the one that the prophets foretold and saw fulfilled.

I have spent a lifetime devoted to scripture study. Scripture influences nearly every aspect of my life and has shaped my very character and disposition. It influences the way I think, the way I speak, the way I write, the way I relate to every individual and institution around me. It influences the way I process the information and news that comes to me concerning

individuals and institutions that form a part of the society in which I live. This homily, the second of two examining the passage of scripture that heads it, presents one example of the intersectionality between scripture and current events, and the influence scripture has on my understanding of those current events.

inferior product at inflated prices

The scripture that heads this homily came easily and naturally to my mind as I considered some recent current events. We examined this scripture within its ancient context in the previous homily (“Fraudulently Selling Bad Product at Inflated Prices,” Part 1). We will begin by reviewing what we found in the previous homily and then move on to the current events that brought the scripture to mind.

Amos describes the attitudes and actions of the merchants of his day. Wheat merchants manipulated the labor market to produce and sell bad product, mixing nutritionally worthless debris with good nutritious wheat kernels so as to increase profit margins. They also manipulated weights, measures, and other tools of their trade to inflate the price of the inferior product, thus increasing their profit margins even more.

There is much to be disgusted by in the merchants’ attitudes and actions. Clearly, their business practices were fraudulent and unethical—one wonders, where were the regulators? They were an affront to all that is humane and all that is godly, doing harm to citizens already living on the edge and acting contrary to the ethical stipulations God had given to the nation’s “founding father,” Moses.

For our purposes here, we will limit our focus to these two observations.

First, the sellers of grain sold an inferior product.

“We will even sell worthless debris mixed in with the grain!”

Second, the sellers sold their inferior product at significantly inflated prices.

“... while shrinking the size of the dry measure,
increasing the weight of šeqel,
and rigging fraudulent scales.”

In addition to our previous homily, we have discussed the details of these two means of ancient fraud elsewhere.² In this homily, we turn from Amos’ descriptions of ancient Israelite fraud to modern examples of business fraud. Everyone has heard and seen the news reports.

Hundreds of thousands of passengers are stranded due to flight delays and cancellations causing such major inconveniences as missing once-in-a-lifetime scheduled tours and cruises, marriages, and funerals.

Corporations and legislators, of course, blamed pilot shortages, technical glitches, air traffic control personnel shortages, etc. While these issues may have played a role, they are, however, as often as not symptoms rather than the disease. Why, for example, were there issues with the computers? Could it be because the computers and/or software were not up to date? And why were they not up to date? It couldn’t be, could it, because excessive money had been syphoned off to pay obviously incompetent and/ or corrupt business executives and CEOs? It couldn’t be, could it, because of greedy investors and their demand for higher profits? It couldn’t be, could it, that there was no money for improvements because it had all gone to shareholders?

But, no. Hardly anyone dared even raise the possibility that greed was at least part of the explanation for the bad product travelers were forced to buy.

Unfortunately, just as the ancient seller of wheat sold inferior product to increase his profit margins by fraudulently manipulated his business practices, modern businesses fraudulently

² See, Homily: “Profit Above All” (Micah 6.⁹⁻¹²), “Biblical Weights and Measures, Modern Profit Margins, and What They Portend for Modern Society” (Leviticus 19.³⁵⁻³⁷).

manipulate their business practices to increase profit margins, often leaving the consumer with inferior product. Those who thought they were buying a ticket to fly to Paris discovered that there were husks, and straw, and pebbles in their wheat, to mix metaphors. The merchant sold bad product at inflated prices because of greed, not because computers and software aren't improving the world over at lightning speed.

This is bad product.

We could go on and on examining the bad product we are forced to buy. We could discuss, for example, the inferior internet services we buy at inflated prices because, again, rather than keep their systems up to date, companies pay executives eye popping sums of money to run the company poorly in every way except in assuring shareholders fraudulent profits. Or we could consider the many citizens of places like Texas who suffer power outages in cold and hot weather because the lone monopolistic power company has gifted huge stock buy backs to executives and passed on excessively high profits to shareholders rather than keep the grid modernized. But we will limit ourselves to one other recent and newsworthy example.

Railroad cars derail, dumping into the ground and air massive amounts of poisonous chemicals that will disrupt, endanger, and kill people, possibly for decades.

This is bad product.

The "little people," engineers and conductors, who ride the rails day in and day out have been for some time warning the executives: the system of controls, switches, and rails is old, antiquated and in need of updating. But, no, like Israel's ancient wheat sellers, railroad executives manipulated their tools. Though money was coming in hand over fist, they ignored the dangers and refused to update their systems. Rather, they lined the pockets of the CEOs and their stockholders. Profit trumped safety. Profit trumped lives. If the little people who live along the rails became sick or died because of poisonous air, water, and soil (the equivalent of selling wheat mixed with debris that lacked the nutritional value to sustain a

healthy life)... well, at least the big people had their billions of dollars, their million dollar yachts, and their four mansions in exotic locations.

This is bad product.

As of today, I hardly need to tell the reader about inflation. Those who seem to be somewhat among the economic, business, and governing classes assign blame everywhere but where it belongs. No doubt things like supply chains and monetary policies have played a role in the latest wave of inflation. It is marginally more expensive to do business. But the fact is, the companies who sell you your gasoline, your eggs, and offer you a rental in which to live are earning profits for their shareholders and their executive pay far, far, far in excess of the increased costs of doing business. If gas is costing them another penny to extract, refine, transport, and sell, they are charging you twenty-five cents more. Same with the monopolistic American egg industry.

In my biblically informed view, modern global business is manipulating their business tools to increase their profit margins just as the ancient Israelite wheat seller manipulated his weights and measures for higher profit margins. No matter that millions of Americans have to skip buying the too-expensive eggs so that they can drive back and forth to work using too-expensive gas so that they can remain in their too-expensive rented home.

But no, the cheats are not to blame. Anything and anyone but them. To blame them is blasphemy. Greed cannot even be considered as even a miniscule part of the problem. No, the titans of industry are our saviors. This idolatry is standard fare, part of America's business school and advertising curriculum. But, we should not be surprised by this sleight of hand. It has always been so.

“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."³

As tragic as is the *existence* of all this fraud, even more tragic is the fact that the fraud is legal. Has been made legal by legislators elected to represent the interest of the electorate. It is tragic that the personal greed of those who govern has allowed the wealthy, powerful, and influential to buy them through what amounts to legal bribes, campaign financing and other even more nefarious sources of money. Laws are passed to permit the sort of fraud we have discussed in this homily. The fraud and the inconveniences and danger that attend them are no accident. They are as predictable and the sun's rising.

Again, the legalization of fraud has ever been so.

"Thy princes are rebellious,
and companions of thieves:
every one loveth gifts,
and followeth after rewards..."⁴

"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!"⁵

Most tragic of all, perhaps, is that those who call themselves "Christian" not only support the idolatry of profit above all, but are at the very forefront of the heresy.

³ Hos. 12.⁷⁻⁸; author's translation

⁴ Isaiah 1.²³

⁵ Isaiah 10.¹⁻²

Conclusion

Many will complain that the economic and governmental observations made in this homily are secular and have no place in the pulpit. They are wrong. The sort of “secular” behavior that we have considered in these two homilies impact the spiritual health of individuals and societies as much as, if not more than any commonly accepted spiritual phenomenon. There may be nothing more spiritually impactful than how we earn and use the money that jingles in our pocket or the plastic that slips so easily in and out of our wallets and purses.

The Hebrew prophets saw the behaviors that we have briefly catalogued in these homilies and decried them as wicked and destructive. They represent acts of rebellion against God. They represent acts in direct opposition to God’s instruction concerning the manner in which individuals and societies should conduct themselves if they wish to endure and advance. When Israel and then Judah fell and then scattered to the four winds, they needed to look no further than the fraud they perpetrated in business and the harmful impact it had on the most vulnerable segments of society. Indeed, this passage we have examined is sandwiched between warnings of destruction due to the nation’s refusal to follow Yahweh’s directions concerning the establishment and maintenance of a just and godly society.

“The end is come upon my people of Israel... there shall be many dead bodies in every place; they shall be cast forth with silence.”⁶

“The LORD hath sworn by the excellency of Jacob, ‘Surely I will never forget any of their works.’

“‘And it shall come to pass in that day,’ saith the Lord GOD,
‘that I will cause the sun to go down at noon,
and I will darken the earth in the clear day:
And I will turn your feasts into mourning,
and all your songs into lamentation;

⁶ See verses 1-3.

and I will bring up sackcloth upon all loins,
and baldness upon every head;
and I will make it as the mourning of an only [son],
and the end thereof as a bitter day.”⁷

Like it or not, business and legislative practices and policies are spiritual in nature and have direct bearing on the spiritual wellbeing of individual citizens and society as a whole. The sorts of unethical business practices we have briefly examined contribute to the spiritual malaise of our nation as much as any other sin—including American Christianity’s favorite whipping boy, sex. If we do not repent and demand more of our business and industry leaders, we will fall. And great will be the fall thereof.

“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?”⁸

No. No, He should not. Yes, He is merciful. He freely and happily forgives those who acknowledge their lack, want to be better, strive to be better. But, those who refuse to acknowledge their sin and go on in the ways of sin... no, their sin should not be forgotten or forgiven. They have dug a pit for their fellow beings, and it is only right, a matter of the law of restoration, that they should fall into the very pit they have dug for others.

⁷ Verses 7, 9-10.

⁸ Micah 6.⁹⁻¹²; author’s translation

“Nations have sunk in the very pit that they themselves dug;
their feet ensnared in the trap that they themselves hid.
YHWH is known for the appropriate way he governs—
in the wicked being ensnared by their own devices.
The wicked go to Še’ôl—
even every nation that disregards ’ēlōhîm.
But know that the destitute are never forgotten,
or the hope of the downtrodden ever dashed.”⁹

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

⁹ Psalm 9.¹⁵⁻¹⁸; author’s translation