

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

THE PRIDE OF JACOB

Amos 8:4-7

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
5 saying, 'When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
6 buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.'

7 The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Author's Note: "God created time because we can't handle everything all at once." That maxim is important to keep in mind as you read Amos. As the first of the classic Old Testament prophets, his message is generally one of pure judgment—not withstanding 9:11-12. He never got around to adding the promise, at least not explicitly, probably, because the promise was so twisted by Israel into ideology of privilege before God (Israel's version of doctrine of manifest destiny) that it just could not be heard. Sound familiar? First, the "pride of Jacob"

(v. 7) needed to be broken. Of course, we should not blame Amos for this apparent incompleteness in his message. In truth, he's just the messenger. He spoke only what God "told" him to say at this time. But neither should we forget that God will in his own time add the promise through other prophets. It's just that he doesn't do it explicitly through Amos. Therefore, it is important to hear this particular word-in-time from Amos in the context of the whole history and tradition of Israel's faith (cf. Mays, p. 7) which includes the history of the Promise that comes before it (in the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) and after it (in its reintroduction through later prophets, like Isaiah, and its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ). To underscore this, I will do a play on the phrase "the pride of Jacob" (a generally pejorative term in Amos) to show how Amos actually anticipates rather than contradicts this later introduction of the Promise in the later prophets. Overall, my understanding of the context of Amos' message is indebted to two sources: James Luther Mays, *Amos* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969) and John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Second Edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

DIAGNOSIS: God's Oath of Wrath: Deeds Unforgotten and People Unforgiven

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Reaping Success at the Expense of Others

Amos begins his critique of Israel with facts that should be plain for everyone to see. Like a good social scientist he spells out exactly how Israel's newly devised political and economic system (the one they adopted from their neighbors around them—monarchy in cahoots with an economy elite) spells "success" for the few in power and misery for the multitudes of working poor. As Mays and Bright both note, Israel has been in the process of transitioning from a tribal, agrarian society into to a monarchical, commercial one, with the outcome of

degenerating into a society of the haves and the have nots, the indispensable and the disposable, the comfortable and the discontented, the exploiters and the exploited. Sound familiar?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): The Pride of Jacob as the Presumption of Election

Of course, just because these facts are plain to see does not mean that everyone sees them as such. Seeing them as true takes more than simply “hearing” the words that Amos speaks (vs 4). It would mean taking them to heart in some form of repentance. But herein lies the deeper critique that Amos has for his nation Israel which he describes as “the pride of Jacob,” the twisted presumption that they can do as they please because they are the chosen or elect people of God. That pride so rots the heart of Israel that its worship becomes rotten: mere civil religion that uses pious words about God to advance its own selfish ends. As Amos says, Israel’s heart is so rotten that it can’t wait until the Sabbath is over and it can go back to exploiting poor workers and manipulating the currency (the economy) into its favor (vv. 5 and 6). Sound familiar?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): God’s Oath of Wrath: Unforgiven, Dead in their Deeds

The depth of Amos’ critique concerns what God thinks of all of this. God is so displeased that he makes an oath “by the pride of Jacob” that he will “not forget any of their deeds” (v. 7). The “pride of Jacob” here means Israel’s presumptuous self-confidence that has displaced Yahweh as the foundation of its national existence, making self-interest the focus of its deeds. (Cf. Mays, p. 118.) God will not tolerate such pride. He will not stand by and let his promise of election be mocked for the sake of human manipulation and gain. Therefore, as long as the “pride of Jacob” exists, God “will never forget any of their deeds.” As long as the “pride of Jacob” exists, God’s wrath will not be abated and Jacob becomes the expendable one. Civil

religion will not save Jacob. It is a delusion. Israel's Exile will be seen as the consequence of this oath (3:7, 6:8-11).

PROGNOSIS: God's Oath of the Cross: Election Remembered, People Forgiven

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Oath of the Cross

It is significant that, in Amos' message, God swears his oath of wrath on the "pride of Jacob" and not on "God's self." (See Mays' cautious ponderings on this point, p. 145.) For as severe as Amos' word of judgment from God is, it is not necessarily irrevocable. (This is hinted at in 9:8b and 13-15.) That's because there is a greater irrevocable oath that not only predates this one, the oath or promise that God gave to our father Abraham, but which also proves to outlast it, evidenced in Jesus Christ, crucified and raised. We might call this the Oath of the Cross. For the active ingredient in this oath is what Christ has accomplished on the cross. For on the cross, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, confronts the Oath of Wrath upon the "pride of Jacob" in an incredible duel, making God in Christ the fulfiller of the oath made to Abraham. As a result, ironically, Jesus now becomes the new "pride of Jacob," the reason for Israel's hope, the one for whose sake sin is forgotten and forgiven, the one in whom their election is secure.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Faith in Christ, the New Pride of Jacob

The Oath of the Cross not only means the replacement of one oath for another, it also means the replacement of one degree of pride for another. The old pride of Jacob, which is nothing but self-centeredness and presumptuousness, is now replaced by the new pride of Jacob which is Christ-centered and humble. The old pride of Jacob brought wrath; it means that God would never

forget our deeds. The new pride of Jacob, faith in Christ, brings mercy; it means that God remembers our deeds, our sins, no more. This "pride" constitutes a whole new person, with a whole new outlook, and a whole new set of interests. Interests that will unquestionably delight in Sabbath keeping (understood as being sustained in the Oath of the Cross, cf. v. 5); interests that will undoubtedly be expressed outwardly in society and national life.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Success as Being for Others

Amos gives us no blueprint as to what national life grounded in the new pride of Jacob might look like. But what we do know is this: it would certainly entail a radical revaluation of the poor and the needy, the two classes of people he identifies in his diagnosis of Israel's ills. At the least, the poor and the needy would not be seen as means to the political and economic ends of a privileged few in the nation. To the contrary, they would be regarded as equal and full participants in it. At the least, the needy would not be seen as worthless trash to be discarded and trampled upon and the poor as a reservoir of cheap (undervalued) labor (cf. v. 4) to be exploited and taken advantage of. Rather, the poor and the needy would be seen as part of the "pride of Jacob" itself, those who have been forgiven and redeemed on account of the oath to Abraham accomplished in Christ. In general, success would not be measured by getting ahead of others but by being for others. As mentioned before, Amos gives no blueprint for what a national life grounded in the Oath of the Cross might look like. That's because, whatever it looks like, it would necessarily flow freely out of hearts whose pride rested in being for others. For that is what Christ, the pride of Jacob, is all about: being for others.