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Amos 6:1-14: Exegesis & Sermon

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1. Exegesis

1.1 My Hermeneutic

To call a document “scripture” is to say at least three things about it. Of course, it is to say that the document is *old*. “Scripture” is not composed by the community that hallows it. It must go through a “proving period” before it is installed as “scripture.” Amos didn’t start out one day from Tekoa and say to himself: “You know, I think I’ll write a book of the Bible today so that years from now people can study it in their Bible Studies.” No, it is crucial to remember that the Bible was a “Word of God” to *somebody else* before it was the “Word of God” to us. What that means for you and for me is that scriptural documents are “time-sensitive” documents. They were written at a particular time to particular people in particular circumstances, all of which must be analyzed and understood if the documents are to be comprehensible to us today. This means that we must know what it *meant* before we can know what it *means*. Historical analysis of biblical documents, therefore, is not optional; it’s necessary if we are to hear a “Word of God” for us today. Moreover, to call a document “scripture” is to claim it as *authoritative*. Somehow or other, in ways still fraught with mystery, when we read this document we call “scripture” we hear the voice of God addressing us. That’s why it’s not just a “text.” “Text” implies that the document is merely a curiosity, an artifact for study, but not something that makes demands of its inquirer. But to call something “scripture” means that to a greater or lesser degree it stands in *judgement* over us. Third, to call something “scripture” is to claim it for the community of faith, that is, it is the *church’s* book. The “Voice” that addresses us in scripture doesn’t just make demands on us as individuals, it calls us to responsible *community*. It is not *your* scripture or *my* scripture, it is *our* scripture. That’s why it is altogether appropriate, and perhaps even necessary, for the *study* of the scripture to culminate in the *proclamation* of the scripture, for it calls us into responsible community.

What follows will therefore attempt to set the “scripture” in *its* context by offering an exegesis of Amos 6:1-14. This we will do first by setting our passage in its *historical* context (What *in the world* was going on when Amos spoke these words?). Then we will set the text in its *literary* context (What’s the literary structure of 6:1-14, and how does Amos 6:1-14 fit into the rest of the book?). Then in an *expositional* section we’ll comment briefly on several exegetical matters of significance for interpretation and, consequently, for preaching. Finally we’ll set the text in its *theological* context (What is the “Word of God” in this text; that is, what is Amos teaching us about the way and work and will of God in the world that was true then and is true still?). It is from this last analysis (the theological context) that we will attempt to set the text in our context by isolating the gov-

erning theological theme for Amos 6:1-14 which will then serve as the theme of our sermon. It is assumed throughout that the readers have read, preferably at one sitting, the entire Book of Amos and that the text of Amos is opened before them. Unless otherwise indicated, the text of Amos cited herein is the RSV.

1.2 The Historical Context

Amos, like most prophets, tells us little about himself. There are, however, two biographical references of note in the book - Amos 1:1 and 7:14. In those two places we learn that Amos was by vocation a shepherd and a "dresser of sycamore trees" in the small Judean village of Tekoa about five miles south of Bethlehem. Following the death of Solomon, David's great monarchy split into two independent kingdoms, the southern kingdom known as Judah, and the northern kingdom known as Israel. According to Amos 1:1, the prophet prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, King of Judah, and Jeroboam, son of Joash (i.e., Jeroboam II), king of Israel. In an interesting little historical aside Amos adds "[it was] two years before the earthquake." Because Israel lies along a major fault line, earthquakes were common, and so we don't know precisely to which earthquake Amos was referring, but you can be sure his contemporaries did. Ask the people of Kobe, Japan! Everything now will, no doubt, be dated by its proximity to "the earthquake." The period in which Amos prophesied is known as Israel's "Silver Age," as distinct from its "Golden Age" when David reigned and is typically dated during the first half of the 8th century BC. Jeroboam II, king of the northern kingdom of Israel where Amos prophesied, is usually dated around 789 - 748 BC. The *terminus ad quem* (time before which Amos must have prophesied) for Amos is 745 B. C. because it was about then that Assyria under the expansionist king Tiglathpileser III began its assault on Israel and her neighbors, and Amos makes no specific reference to Assyria or to Tiglathpileser. Amos does foresee a foreign power invading Israel, but its identity remains anonymous in his prophesies.¹ Under Jeroboam II Israel enjoyed tremendous prosperity and power. Jeroboam's military conquests had expanded the frontiers of Israel to a point where they nearly rivalled the great Davidic monarchy. In the north Israel's territory extended as far as Lebo-Hamath (cf. 2 Kings 14:25), and in the south Israel laid claim to land all the way to the Arabah (cf. Am 6:14 where the phrase "from the entrance of Hamath to the Brook of the Arabah" defines Israel's territory under Jeroboam). This territorial expansion, secured through a series of alliances with foreign powers, most especially Assyria, gave rise to unparalleled trade and commerce in Israel.² This in turn resulted in the development of a small, but extremely affluent merchant class who enjoyed the "good life" at the expense of the poor, working class. Archaeological excavations in Samaria have documented the opulence and ease of the upper classes in Israel during Amos' time.

Not surprisingly, Israel's wealthy interpreted their good fortune as the blessing of God. They built lavish shrines and conducted elaborate rituals for the purpose of showing their gratitude to God for his many favors. There was no shortage of "religion" in Israel during this period (cf. Am 4 & 5), and it was all

designed to express praise to God for his "good sense" in blessing so worthy a people as Israel. How easy it is to make the transition from "praise God from whom all blessings flow" to "praise blessings in which our virtue doth show." With their military alliances firmly in place, their economic prosperity assured, and their religious "guarantors" solidly ensconced, Israel felt secure and satisfied. Into that climate of "conspicuous consumption" entered Amos the prophet hurling his defiant words in the face of the greatest power of the period. And his message was chillingly clear: security is to be found *only in God!* Israel, Amos asserts, has substituted economic and political security for the only true security - covenant faithfulness to God, and they've substituted the trappings of religion for the essence of religion - honesty, integrity, and justice. It was not just what Amos said that made his message so memorable, it was the way he said it.

1.3 The Literary Context

The Book of Amos falls largely into two major divisions: oracles against other nations, and oracles against Israel. In broad outline, the structure of the Book of Amos is as follows:

1:1-2	Introduction and Superscription
1:3-2:16	Oracles Against Foreign Nations
3:1-5:17	Oracles Against Samaria
5:18-6:14	The Two Woes
7:1-9:10	The Five Visions
9:11-15	Prophecies of Hope and Consolation. ³

Our passage, 6:1-14, falls within the larger unit, 5:18-6:14, which we have designated "The Two Woes." The first "woe" oracle (*hoy* in Hebrew) is found in 5:18-27 and deals with the concept of the "Day of the Lord" (*yom Yahweh*). Specifically, the oracle is Amos' reinterpretation of the well-known "Day of the Lord" prophecy, the prophet reversing the usual meaning of the imagery. Typically the "Day of the Lord" was understood as a day when Yahweh would punish Israel's enemies and restore Israel to its former glory.⁴ It was regarded as a great and glorious day for Israel. Amos, however, reverses that imagery and instead defines the "Day of the Lord" as a day of judgment upon Israel for exchanging ritual ceremony for faithfulness to the covenant. "Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?" (5:20)

Our passage is the second "woe" oracle, 6:1-14, in which the prophet pronounces judgment upon Israel for its garish and opulent lifestyle, a lifestyle that dishonours God and debases the poor. That these two "woe" oracles belong together is evinced by the fact that both begin with the formulaic expression "Woe to you [those] who..." followed by a description of the doomed behavior (compare 5:18 with 6:1). Also, following the "woe" oracle in each section is a "declaration of despising" in which God, speaking through the prophet, declares that he "hates" the particular behaviour which has evoked his ire (cf. 5:21: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies;" and 6:8: "I abhor the pride of Jacob, and hate his strongholds"). In short, the formal affinities between these two sections indicate that they are "companion oracles" intended to

interact with and augment each other. If one is looking for a conceptual framework with which to distinguish them, it could be said that the first "woe" (5:18-27) pronounces God's judgment upon Israel's *sacred* life, while the second "woe" (6:1-14) declares that God has cursed Israel's *secular* life. Woe (hoy) oracles were a stylized way of pronouncing a curse upon a person, a class of persons, or a nation. A "woe" is the opposite of a "blessing."⁵ As in the case of a "blessing," a "woe" both *declares* and *effects* the condition it asserts. It *does* what it *says*.⁶

As to the *internal* structure of 6:1-14, as noted above, this passage, as was the case with the first "woe" oracle (5:18-27), falls into two divisions: the "woe" oracle (6:1-7) and the companion "hate" oracle (6:8-14). There are also several other tell-tale indications that 6:1-14 forms a distinctive literary unit. For example, Amos will employ a device known as "inclusio" to delineate, as it were, the literary boundaries of an oracle and to instruct the reader/hearer that the material contained within should be interpreted as a unit. Inclusio is the practice of repeating a word or an idea at the beginning and ending of literary unit in order to tip off the reader that it should be treated as a whole. For example, in 6:1 Amos pronounces a woe on the "notable men of the *first* of the nations." The key word is "first" (*rosh*), a reference to Israel's false pride over its international status at the time. Then, in verse 7, Amos will again mention his key word "first," only this time, he declares that Israel, which wanted to be considered "first" among the nations, will indeed be "first" - "They shall now be the *first* of those to go into the exile." The two references to "first" (*rosh*) delineate the boundaries of the "woe" oracle and indicate that everything in between these two verses should be taken as God's "curse" (woe) upon Israel's false pride and false sense of security. The same thing can be observed in the "hate" oracle (6:8-14). This time instead of the word "first" Amos employs the formulaic phrase "says the Lord, the God of hosts." In 6:8 Yahweh declares that he "hates" Jacob's pride swearing an oath by himself (the highest thing God knows to swear by) to punish Israel for its arrogance. Then, to add solemnity to the oath, Amos adds the formula: "says the Lord, the God of hosts." At the end of the "hate" oracle, Amos brackets the entire oath of promised punishment together by means of the repeated formula: "says the Lord, the God of hosts" (6:14), indicating that everything that falls in between should be "included" (cf. "inclusio") together as comprising a single literary unit. Therefore, we feel justified in treating Amos 6:1-14 as a unit. The passage can be characterized as a "woe" oracle with its accompanying "hate" oracle which is in the form of an oath that Yahweh swears by himself, and in which he declares his intention to punish Israel, especially Israel's elite upper-class, for its pride, its callous treatment of the poor, and its false sense of security.

1.4 Exposition

There are many excellent commentaries on the Book of Amos whose purpose it is to provide the reader with a verse-by-verse commentary on the text. That kind of analysis is neither necessary nor particularly useful for our purposes. The purpose of this study, it will be remembered, is to understand the message of the

text in its context and then to bring that forward and say it again sermonically here in our context. However, there are a few issues in chapter 6 which do require some comment if we are to understand Amos' message.

Verse 1. "At ease in Zion." Some scholars have suggested that because Amos' prophetic commission was to prophesy in the north (Israel) this reference to "Zion" is secondary, added later to make the Book of Amos more "inclusive" of Israel as a whole, including the southern kingdom of Judah.⁷ It is to be remembered, however, that Amos was himself from the south, and so it is not surprising that he would address some of his prophetic preachments to his own people. In the eighth-century B. C., moreover, Samaria, not "Zion" (Jerusalem) was the centre of religious and political life in Israel, and so Amos, a Judean, utters his prophecies in Samaria. But because *all* Israel, north and south, stand together in the judgement of God, Amos includes "Zion" in his indictment. Also in verse 1 is the issue of who the "notable men of the first of the nations" are. Specifically, are there three different groups mentioned here or just one inclusive group of all Israelites? In Hebrew thought, a phenomenon called *parallelism* is crucial to the interpretation of a poetic or prophetic message. Parallelism is of three types: (1) "regular" parallelism is a poetic way of stating something and then *re*-stating it with slightly different language; (2) "antithetical" parallelism which states something and then states the exact *opposite* of it; and (3) "synthetic" parallelism which states something and then seeks to build upon or enlarge the earlier statement by adding to it another statement that furthers its meaning. When Amos employs his three statements in verse 1: (1) "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion;" (2) "and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria;" (3) "the notable men of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel come;" is he employing "regular" parallelism or "synthetic" parallelism? Is there only one group in view (Israelites, north and south), or are there three groups in view (Judeans, Israelites, and "the notables")? If it is the former, then the "notable men" are the leading officials of Samaria, just as are those "at ease in Zion" and "secure in Samaria" to whom the "house of Israel come" to beg favours and to secure their meager subsistence. If it is the latter, the "notable men" are probably the Assyrians "to whom the house of Israel come" in order to secure themselves with military alliances. Both are plausible, but the former has in its favor one overriding factor - the inclusio with verse 7. If the "notables" are the Assyrians, then the ironic inclusio of verse 7 is lost: "You wanted to be first? Well, you can be first all right, first to go into *exile!*" But if the "notable men of the *first* of the nations" is a further reference to Israelites, then the irony is intact.

Verse 2. "Calneh," "Hamath the Great," and "Gath of the Philistines" are references to victorious military campaigns under Shalmaneser III of Assyria, mentioned here because they had become legendary by this time. Amos sarcastically derides Israel's false pride by suggesting that Israel's meager military might is no match for Assyria's, and so Israel is foolish to put its trust in armies and military hubris.

Verse 3. "The evil day" is a reference to the "Day of the Lord" which was the subject of the first "woe" (5:18-27). Amos again turns the image of the "Day of the Lord" from one of jubilation to one of judgement. Note also the ironic use of language in the antithetical use of the verbs "put away" and "bring near." They hope to "put away" the evil day of judgment, when in fact they are only "bringing near" the time of violence.

Verses 4 - 6. What follows here is a "mini-woe" detailing the opulent, carefree lifestyle of Samaria's powerful and wealthy. It is a satirical exposé of the "conspicuous consumption" that had so corrupted Israel's upper class. Amos, with sardonic delight, details their insatiable taste for "the finer things," everything from ivory in-laid bedding to gourmet gorgings of chateaubriand. One of the most interesting references is in verse 6. Amos chastises the elite for drinking wine in bowls and anointing themselves with the finest (literally "first," *rosh*) oils. Wine and oil were widely regarded as the two most pleasure-bringing commodities, reserved exclusively for the wealthy. In Israel's Wisdom literature, oil and wine are routinely paired as descriptions of the "good life." Similarly, the abstinence from joy and revelry during periods of mourning is characterized by refraining from the use of oil and wine. This association was, no doubt, the background for John's enigmatic reference to these two commodities in Revelation 6:6, when one of the Four Horsemen, specifically the one who brings famine, declares: "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; but do not harm the oil and wine." Like Amos before him, John also recognized that in difficult times, the poor grope for subsistence while the rich enjoy their luxuries.

Verse 7. "...and the revelry of those who stretch themselves shall pass away." After describing the depraved debauchery of the wealthy in terms of a banquet at which the participants luxuriate on ivory couches, drink wine from bowls, cover themselves with fine oil, and sing idle songs for their own amusement, Amos in verse 7 gives the image a macabre twist. The word he uses in verse 7 translated by the RSV as "revelry" is actually *mirzach* in Hebrew. The *mirzach* was a funeral feast at which the participants, through eating and drinking dedicated to a god, insured the security of the deceased loved one after their death.⁸ In excavations at Palmyra, the *mirzach* was actually performed with the very kinds of activities Amos depicts here - reclining on couches, eating, drinking, and anointing with oil.⁹ With macabre irony Amos declares that in the wealthy's endless banqueting they were unwittingly participating in their own *mirzach*!

Verse 8. The "hate" oracle begins with an oath formula that employs the phrase "says the Lord, the God of hosts" which is repeated at verse 14 to form an inclusio. The use of the oath stresses the certainty of the coming judgment and punishment upon Israel.¹⁰ The phrase "pride of Jacob" encapsulates the essential nature of Israel's sin, that it attempted to secure itself through its own devices, apart from the trust in God that had created Israel as a nation and sustained it as a people. It also probably repeats a slogan current at the time that captured in a phrase Israel's national hubris.

The "city" that will be delivered up is Samaria.

Verses 9 - 11. From the "macro-visioned" perspective of the destruction of Samaria, Amos now moves in to give the judgement a human face. We are taken inside a "typical Samaritan house" to view "up-close and personal" what God's punishment of Israel will mean.

Verses 12-13. By means of two rhetorical questions that demand the answer "no" Amos drives home the folly of Israel's pride. "Do horses run upon rocks?" he asks. The answer, of course, is "no," for to do so would ruin their hooves. "Does one plow the sea with oxen?" Of course not. The question itself is absurd, and so is Israel's current course of action. They have tried to secure themselves through economic privilege, military achievements, and foreign alliances, and yet Amos describes all their so-called "achievements" to be "nothing" ("you who rejoice in *Lo-debar*;" cf. *Lo-debar* in Hebrew literally means "no thing"). The specific historical references of "Lo-debar" and Karnaim" are to military excursions into the Transjordan during the reign of Jeroboam II. The Israelites apparently took great pride in conquering these two cities. Amos' sarcasm is biting when he suggests that Israel's military achievements are well named - *Lo-debar*, "no-thing." In a marvelous alliteration, Shalom Paul describes Amos' indictment of Israel's hubris with the sentence: "For Amos their panegyric preening pride pompously precedes their precipitous fall."¹¹

Verse 14. The RSV accurately translates the form of verse 14 but not the force. The Hebrew delays the impact of Amos' words until the last possible moment. Actually, it says: "But lo, I am raising up, says the Lord, the God of hosts, against you a nation." Amos allows the hearer/reader to ponder whether the verb "raising up" is positive or negative until the moment when he lets the other shoe drop... "a nation."¹² Though Amos never divulges the identity of that "nation" by means of which God will punish Israel for its false pride and false security, we know that nation was Assyria whose eventual domination of Israel was total and complete, "from the entrance of Hamath to the Brook of the Arabah."

1.5 The Theological Context

The difficulty in reading Amos and trying to bring his message forward and say it here is to avoid the temptation of using the text merely as a jeremiad (perhaps I should say "amosiad") against wealth *per se* and allowing the sermon to degenerate into a diatribe against the rich. Such an approach misses the point on two counts. First, it is inappropriate because nowhere in the scriptures is wealth treated as evil *intrinsically*. As CS Lewis said: "Evil is a parasite." That is to say, evil has no *independent* life. Everything bad is something good that has been bent, misshapen, twisted toward some inappropriate end. The biblical perspective is that God created all things and pronounced them "good." Evil, then, is the result of misdirecting or twisting God's essentially good creation toward some end not originally envisioned by the Creator. That, of course, is true of wealth. It is not wealth *per se* that is evil; rather, it is treating what was originally intended by God to be a *means* as an *end* that constitutes the evil. It is also inap-

propriate merely to vilify the wealthy in this text because to do so would be to settle for a shallow, surface reading of Amos. It is not wealth *per se* that concerns Amos. People of wealth (or poverty, for that matter) can be either saints or sinners, but there is nothing in either wealth or poverty that necessarily makes them so. No, Amos is after "bigger fish" than that! His concern is the idolatry that reliance upon wealth can degenerate into when the people of God forget that they are God's people and instead put their trust and find their security apart from him. Robin Scroggs is right on target when, in his book on Pauline theology, he defines sin as *the attempt to secure the self apart from God*.¹³

The real issue for Amos, as the preceding analysis has made clear, is the deeper issue of security - "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountains of Samaria." Amos opposes all illegitimate attempts to secure the self apart from relationship with the God who *alone* secures us. Amos takes no pleasure in the persecution and humiliation of Israel or its wealthy upper class. He is rather issuing a "wake-up call."¹⁴ Charles Talbert rightly understands the redemptive role persecution and suffering can have when he says:

The importance of rejection, persecution, suffering, and the threat of death in the process of spiritual growth is that each entails the possibility of the loss of something which the self either holds dear or is tempted to grasp: one is threatened with the loss of economic security, of status, reputation, or life itself. Circumstances remove the possibility of one's holding to any of these real or potential false gods...Rejection or persecution shatter real or potential idols and allows God to draw one to himself alone.¹⁵

And so we must resist the temptation to bring this text forward merely as a diatribe against wealth. Instead I choose to address the more substantive issue of the Book of Amos and the real issue lurking behind the doom and gloom of chapter 6, a question which hovers over all he says - *where do we find our ultimate security?* In the nearly 2800 intervening years, not much has changed, really. It is our question too. Whatever distances obtain between Amos' world and ours, here is a question that can still be posed with profit to a contemporary audience. The governing theological theme of the sermon, then, will be: Because we were made not just *by* God but *for* God, our ultimate security is found only in relationship with him. We'll call the sermon "The Search."

2. Sermon: "The Search" Amos 6:1-14

Shel Silverstein has written a haunting little poem in his book *Where The Sidewalk Ends* which he calls "The Search." It goes like this:

I went to find the pot of gold
That's waiting where the rainbow ends.
I searched and searched and searched and searched
And searched and searched, and then -
There it was, deep in the grass,
Under an old and twisty bough.
It's mine, it's mine, it's mine at last...
What do I search for now?

Now, I understand this man! The lure of the discovery of that which will finally make one "secure," the proverbial "pot of gold" at the end of the rainbow, the feeling that one has finally "arrived" - arrived *where* we're not sure, but we know we're not "there" now - can be consuming, literally. Indeed, in antiquity this search is often pictured as a gnawing, insatiable appetite, a "hunger" that cannot be sated.

There's an old, old story, widely traveled, about a hermit who stumbled onto a cave in which there was hidden an enormous treasure. The hermit, being old and wise of years, realized what he had discovered and immediately took to his heels and ran from the cave as fast as he could. But as he was running, he came upon three brigands who stopped him and inquired as to what he was fleeing.

"I'm fleeing the Devil!" he said.

Curious, they said: "Show us."

Protesting all the way, he took them to the cave where he had found the treasure.

"Here," said the hermit, "is death which was running after me."

Well, the three thought the old man was mentally touched and sent him on his way. Gleefully revelling in their new-found treasure, they determined that one of them should be dispatched to bring back provisions, lest they leave their treasure to others. One volunteered, thinking to himself that while in town, he'd poison the food and kill his rivals possessing the treasure for himself. While he was away, however, the other two had also been thinking! They decided to kill their comrade when he returned and divide the spoils between them. This they did and settled down to eat their food and celebrate their successful cabal. Their banquet, of course, turned out to be a funeral feast, for when the poison hit their stomachs, they too expired leaving the treasure as they had found it.

That's one of the oldest pictures of greed we have. It lurks in caves; it deals in death.

The search, however, goes on and the hunger is unabated, and like a man looking for the market where life is sold, we run all over town with a fist full of money saying, "Hey, could I buy a..."

"No, sorry, we don't sell homes here. We can sell you a *house*."

"No, sorry, we don't sell love here. We can sell you a *companion* for the night."

"No, sorry, we don't sell any time. I have a good clock here, but not a *tick of time*."

The lure of the "search" can be consuming. That elusive goal of "financial independence" drew millions to watch the halftime of the Super Bowl recently. No, Elvis was not performing. Rather, the draw was Ed McMahon and Dick Clark cruising America in the Publisher's Clearing House Prize Patrol van looking for the house where they would make someone an instant millionaire. The prize would be awarded on live TV during halftime of the Super Bowl, and millions of Americans were peering out their windows saying: "Is that a van I see coming down our street?"

It's not a new phenomenon. Israel was engaged in such a "search" in the 8th century BC. when the prophet Amos came along and called the whole enterprise into question. It was the "Silver Age" of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II when the "search" began in earnest. Under Jeroboam Israel enjoyed

nearly unparalleled prosperity, power, and prestige. Jeroboam's military conquests had expanded the frontiers to a point where Israel's holdings nearly rivaled those of the great Davidic monarchy. "From the entrance of Hamath to the Brook of the Arabah" was the proud slogan of the day. Here in North Carolina we say "from Manteo to Murphy." You get the idea. In order to further secure this new expansionism, Jeroboam negotiated a series of alliances with foreign powers, chiefly Assyria, and the resulting *pax Jeroboam* gave rise to unparalleled trade and commerce in Israel. Israel enjoyed "the good life" under Jeroboam, and the affluent upper class who were the chief beneficiaries of this unprecedented economic and military security celebrated their good fortune with "conspicuous consumption" flaunting an opulent lifestyle that included garish banquets and endless revelry. Under Jeroboam Israel had "arrived," there was "ease in Zion" and "security in Samaria," but not for everyone. Israel's poor, "working class" did not share in the blessings of the rich, and the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" grinned ghoulishly. Enter Amos. Railing at the injustice and exploitation of Israel's wealthy against the poor, Amos hurled defiant words in the face of the "notable men of the first of the nations." "You who trample the poor and take from him exactions of wheat...who afflict the righteous, who take bribes, and turn aside the needy in the gate...Thus saith the LORD, the God of hosts, I will pass through your midst and it's not for a social call" ...or words to that effect!

However, it's not merely a "redistribution of wealth" Amos is after. Israel's problem is more basic than that. "Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria...for you shall be first to go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves [on banquet couches] shall pass away." Israel's problem is not just greed or even exploitation of their fellow Israelites, as bad as that is; it's the fact that they've attempted to secure themselves *apart from God!* It is not wealth *per se* that's the problem. If it were, then merely redistributing the wealth from the rich to the poor would solve nothing and would, in fact, work to the detriment of the poor, making them the new recipients of the "evil stuff." There is nothing necessarily or intrinsically evil in wealth anymore than there is anything necessarily or intrinsically virtuous in poverty. People of wealth or poverty can be either saints or sinners, but there's nothing in their economic status *per se* that makes them so. As CS Lewis has put it: "Evil is a parasite." That is, evil has no *independent* life. Everything bad is something *essentially* good that has been bent, misshapen, twisted toward some inappropriate end. The biblical perspective is that God created all things and pronounced them "good." No, it's not merely a redistribution of wealth that Amos is concerned with. He has "bigger fish to fry" than that!

Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that "rich" and "poor" are the same, only *relative*. I remind you, by the world's standards everyone reading this page is "rich." The vast majority of the citizens of the USA step on scales every day. The biggest single "party affiliation" in this country is neither Democrat nor Republican; it's "weight watchers," a problem most of the world couldn't

understand. Amos never in his wildest dreams envisioned a world where the quality of life even remotely approached the one you and I enjoy. That's not what he meant. Nor am I saying that we shouldn't care about *economic* justice. In a "world without borders" anyone anywhere starving is my neighbour starving! But a jeremiad (perhaps I should say "amosiad") against the "rich," always careful to define "rich" as someone other than me, hardly does justice to the prophet's words. No, it's the idolatry of treating as an end that which was originally intended to be merely a means that Amos has in mind - "Woe to those at ease in Zion and secure in Samaria." St. Augustine once put it this way: "We enjoy those things that were meant only to be used, and we use those things that were meant to be enjoyed." And so we go through life getting our advanced degrees, earning our salaries, driving our cars, paying our mortgages, believing all the while that this establishes who we *really* are only to be reminded when we least expect it what we've always really known - that we're all just a stroke or a tumour away from finding out who we *really* are.

One of my favourite movies was a story simply called *Julia*. It was the story about a friendship between a woman named Julia and the famous playwright Lillian Hellman. The most memorable scene in the movie occurred one night when Lillian Hellman, played by Jane Fonda in the movie, was sitting out by the fire on the beach talking with her literary mentor, Dashiell Hammett, creator of the "Sam Spade" character and author of such mystery novels as *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man*, played by Jason Robards in the movie. Lillian had just published her first play, her famous *The Little Foxes*, and was for the first time realizing some fame and financial independence. Sitting there by the fire light, thoughts of greatness fluttered up in her head, and she turned to Dashiell Hammett and said: "Dash, do you think it would be frivolous of me to buy a mink coat with some of the money from my play? You know, I've never had much money and I've always wanted a mink coat. I can just imagine walking into one of those posh New York writers' parties, all the big names there, wearing my new mink and having everyone in the place turn in chorus, look at me and say: 'Why, that's Lillian Hellman. She's somebody!'"

Then Hammett, stirring around in the coals, never looking at her, says: "Lilly, if you want a coat, buy a coat. God knows you've got the money now. But don't think for a moment that it has anything to do with writing. It's just a coat, Lilly. That's all. Just a coat."

The problem with wealth is not that it's *intrinsically* evil, it's that it seduces us into thinking that it can give what only God can give - security.

"It's mine, it's mine, it's mine at last...what do I search for now?"

That was Israel's problem, and in the nearly 2800 intervening years it's surprising how little has changed. We still think that it's possible to secure ourselves apart from God, but just like Israel's hollow hubris in its economic and political and military clout all our efforts at "independence" from God only serve to demonstrate just how impotent we really are outside of our relationship with him. And the reason is not difficult to see - we were made not just by God but for

God. He's the "fuel" on which we were designed to run, and should we try to run our lives on anything else, like Israel we discover that it'll never work. "Do horses run upon rocks? Does one plow the sea with oxen?" To reject our absolute dependence on God in the search for security is to cut the cord that alone gives us our very lives. To find our security in anything other than our trust in God is not "salvation," it's "damnation!"

Can you imagine Shakespeare's character Hamlet stopping in the middle of Shakespeare's famous play and saying: "Alright, alright, Will. I get the idea. I'll take it from here. I don't need you to write lines for me anymore." Would Hamlet have thereby discovered his "true selfhood?" Of course not! That would not be Hamlet's "salvation," it would be his "destruction." For Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, only exists in the creative imagination of William Shakespeare, and to seek to find his identity outside of and apart from that relationship is self-destruction. So it is with you and me. *We were made for God*. He "thought us up" like characters in a play. There is no life; there is no security outside of that life-giving relationship with him! In the Old Testament we call that "covenant." In the New Testament we call it "gospel." Call it what you will, it's a "wake-up call."

Hear Amos: "Nothing - not wealth, not power, not position - *Lo-debar*, no-thing can supply what you really seek. This is because what you want, what you *really* want only God can give."

I searched and searched and searched and searched
And searched and searched, and then,
There it was, deep in the grass,
Under an old and twisty bough.
It's mine, it's mine, it's mine at last...
What do I search for now?

Fred Craddock, retired professor of preaching at Emory University, tells a story about playing "Hide and Seek" as a child. They lived on a farm, and didn't have much money. "Hide and Seek" didn't cost anything, and it was something the kids could play. You know how the game goes. Someone is "It." Whoever is "It" has to hide their eyes and count to one hundred while everyone else runs and hides. When they get to one hundred, they say, "Here I come, ready or not." Then the person who is "It" looks high and low for those who have hidden. Then when he finds one, he says, "I found you!" and then races back to the "home base," usually a tree or something, tags it three times, and then that one becomes "It" and the game starts all over again. Simple. When Craddock's sister was "It," she cheated. Oh, she'd start out honest enough, "One, two, three, four." Then, when she thought no one was watching, she'd skip a bunch of numbers: "ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred. Here I come, ready or not!" Craddock, however, had a way to beat her. He was much younger and smaller, and so he had a favourite place to hide where she couldn't find him. It was under the front porch steps. It was such a tight squeeze no one else would even try it, but because he was so little, he could do it. "Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred; here I come, ready or not!" And out she went

across the yard, out in the back, in the barn, out of the barn, in the corn crib, she couldn't find him! She looked everywhere! Once, she got close to the steps. Craddock thought she'd found him, but she just sat down on the steps to rest, right over the top of where he was hiding. He started giggling; thought he'd give it away, but he didn't.

He thought to himself: "She'll never find me. She'll never find me." Then it occurred to him: "She'll *never* find me!" So he stuck out a toe. She came by the steps, saw his toe and said: "Uh oh, I found you!", ran back to the tree, touched it three times and said: "You're it!" And Craddock came out from under the steps, brushed off his clothes, and said: "Ah shucks! You *found* me!" Now, why would he do that? What did he want? What did he *really* want? The very same thing as *you*. Isn't that true...?

3. Notes

- ¹ Shalom M. Paul, *Amos*, "Hermeneia," ed. Frank Moore Cross (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991), p. 1.
- ² Jeroboam II was a member of the royal house of Jehu, the same Jehu who is depicted on the famous Black Obelisk as paying tribute to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III. An inscription on the Obelisk says that Jehu presented Shalmaneser with tribute gifts and *a staff of the king's hand*. It is thought by most scholars that this "staff" symbolized Jehu's placing of Israel under the aegis and protection of the Assyrian monarch, thus insuring Jehu and his descendants of Assyria's protection should a foreign nation ever attempt to invade. It is one of history's great ironies that it would be Assyria itself which would invade Israel, Samaria falling to its former ally in 722 B. C. See John H. Hayes, *Amos, The Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), pp. 17ff.
- ³ Though most scholars would regard this structural division as defensible, some would divide the book differently. In the main, however, these six divisions are widely recognized.
- ⁴ Cf. Isaiah chapters 34 & 35 constitute a classic statement of this theme.
- ⁵ For another example of a prophetic "woe" oracle, see Isaiah 5:11-13 wherein the "woe" oracles are similar both in form and content to the "woes" of Amos.
- ⁶ This is the background for Jesus' use of the "woe" oracle in his so-called "Sermon on the Level Plain" in Luke 6 where, in good prophetic fashion, he declares: "Woe to you rich, for you have been paid in full" (writer's translation).
- ⁷ This approach of dividing the text of Amos into strata identified with different writers dating from different periods and only later compiled in our canonical form is characteristic of the form-critical approach of scholars such as H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (tr. W. Janzen, S. Dean McBride, Jr., and C. A. Muenchow; ed. S. Dean McBride; *Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), *passim*. Fortunately, this kind of "scissors-and-paste approach" to biblical scholarship has largely fallen into disrepute.
- ⁸ Cf. Paul, *Amos*, pp. 210ff.
- ⁹ Cf. Paul, p. 212.
- ¹⁰ Oaths were taken very seriously in the ancient near east; indeed, even rash statements and ill-considered oaths carried obligation; cf. Lev. 5:1-4; Judg. 11:29ff. Gary V. Smith, *Amos: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), p. 194.

¹¹ Cf. Paul, *Amos*, p. 220.

¹² Paul, *Amos*, p. 220.

¹³ *Paul for a New Day* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 5ff. Though Scroggs never uses this exact phrase he should have. It accurately gathers up his emphasis and is, I would suggest, at the heart of the biblical view of sin.

¹⁴ Cf. Amos 9:11-15 in which the prophet foresees a new day of salvation and redemption for Israel. I recognize that this oracle has been widely regarded as a later addition to Amos. However, taken on internal evidence alone, apart from any preconceived biases as to what Amos "could" or "could not" have said, nothing in this oracle necessarily precludes its authenticity. For a strong defence of the integrity of Amos, see S. M. Paul, *Amos*, pp. 5ff.

¹⁵ *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroads, 1986), p. 107.