

Scripture *from* Scratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible



Illustrations by Vicki Shuck

Amos *and* James

Outspoken Advocates for God

By Virginia Smith

Somewhere in the vast dominion of God, two kindred spirits, no longer hampered by technicalities of time and space, have almost certainly found one another and forged a firm bond of friendship. While that may be a flight of fancy on my part, I doubt it.

These two men, Amos from the First Testament and James from the Second, inextricably joined at the philosophical lip in life, are surely neighbors in eternity. Understated they were not. When

these gentlemen spoke in the name of God, there was little need for interpreters. Their respective audiences knew precisely what was meant—whether or not they found it especially appealing. Long before “tell it like it is” became a catch phrase, Amos and James were laying it on the line. So blunt was their approach that it’s nearly impossible not to laugh at their audacity. If you’ve never really gotten acquainted with these diplomatic corps rejects, it’s safe to say you’ve never encountered anyone quite like them.

Amos lived some eight centuries before James in a time of acute political and religious unrest. The nation of Israel, united under the illustrious kings David and Solomon, broke up during the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam (922-915 B.C.E.).

The northern kingdom retained the name Israel, but that's about all it managed to keep. Within the borders of the smaller southern kingdom, Judah, lay the center of the Jewish religious universe, Jerusalem, with its magnificent temple, its dynasty of Davidic kings, and its high priesthood descended from Moses' brother, Aaron. All of these were one-of-a-kind commodities to the Jewish mind, impossible to replicate. Any attempt to create facsimiles was considered heretical.

Still, what was Israel to do? What it did do was establish a new religious center for itself at Mount Gerizim, set up a new national capital at Samaria, place a new king on a new throne, and institute new religious leaders. All of these moves were both galling and appalling to the Judahites in the south and, in the decades that followed, led to a deepening rift between them and those who came eventually to be known as Samaritans.

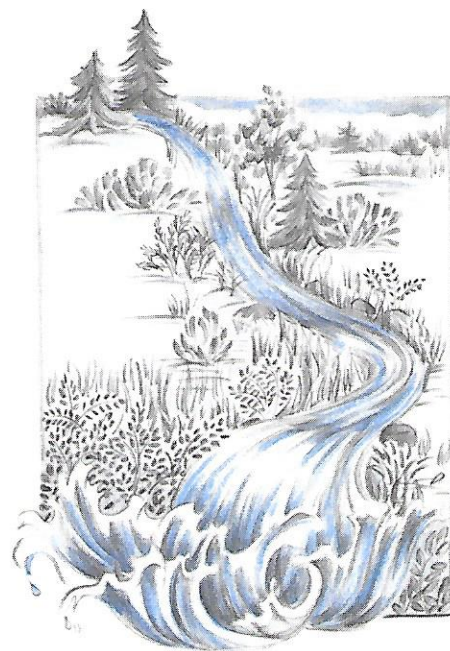
Amos was born a Judahite, but just barely. He grew up in the small Judean town of Tekoa, a mere stone's throw from the border with Israel. Whatever his ambitions might have been (and in his culture, they would doubtless have mirrored his father's), a career as a prophet doesn't seem to have been among them. "I am no prophet nor a prophet's son, but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (Amos 7:14b-15). Heed that last word carefully. Israel! The reluctant herdsman/tree trimmer is being dispatched, not to his own people, but to those annoying neighbors on the wrong side of the border. This can't be good.



Praying With Scripture

- **Since Vatican II, Catholicism's long tradition of commitment to social justice issues has been reawakened, a move both Amos and James would certainly applaud. But in all that activity, what happens to prayer? Is there a danger that the devotional life of an individual or a faith community might suffer as a result of its social action? If so, how might that be brought into balance?**

We have seen similar scenarios played out again and again on the contemporary world stage: North and South Korea, mainline China and Taiwan, East and West Germany, North and South Vietnam. Family feuds are invariably uglier than those between relative strangers. Tempers run hotter; animosities, deeper. Connection, let alone correction, originating from the rival faction is sure to be, shall we say, unappreciated. Yet such was Amos' assignment. Faced with such a daunting mission, the wisest approach would seem to involve dusting off one's diplomatic skills and summoning every ounce of sensitivity and tact in one's personal arsenal.



The Downtown Samaria Ladies' Club

Not Amos! Upon arriving in the opulent city of Samaria whose imposing structures would dishearten a lesser man, Amos announced himself by declaring, "I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end, says the Lord" (3:15).

Israel's excesses would be its downfall. Amos then visited a gathering of the wives of Samaria's most powerful men. Surely he would take a softer approach with them. "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who

crush the needy, who say to their husbands, 'Bring something to drink!' The Lord God has sworn by his holiness. The time is surely coming upon you when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fish-hooks" (4:1-2). Evidently not!

The heart of the problem as expressed in that outspoken reprimand was the yawning abyss separating the haves from the have nots. Amos' censure lay not so much with the luxurious lifestyle of the Samaritans as with the inadmissible knowledge that it existed at the expense of the poor and needy. If Amos' call were reduced to a single word, that word would be justice—actually, JUSTICE...well, might as well make it JUSTICE!!! This prophetic voice was loud and exceedingly clear.

"Seek the Lord and live, or he will

break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel with no one to quench it. Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground" (5:6-7).

"Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph" (5:15).

"But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24).

"Do horses run on rocks? Does one plow the sea with oxen? But you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood" (6:12). The sarcasm fairly drips from every graphic phrase. "Hear this, you that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land..." (8:4).

The people of Samaria heard, all right. How could they not? That does not mean they liked it. None of us enjoys being forcefully yanked to attention, especially by a despised outsider. "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah; earn your bread there and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel..." (7:12b).

But, as mentioned earlier, Amos, an immovable if reluctant prophet, stood firm: "...and the Lord said to me, 'Go prophesy to my people Israel.'" (7:15b) The remainder of Amos' story is left untold, but his words lash across time to confront our own society. Do we find them any more welcome than the Israelites of antiquity?

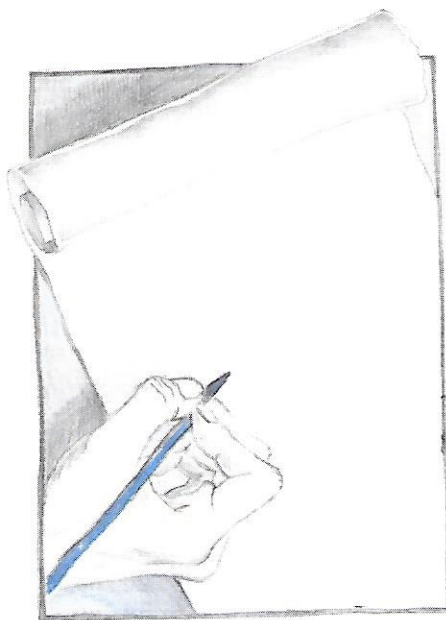
Amos Passes the Baton to James

In a meeting of the minds that bridged eight centuries, the Letter of James takes up Amos' campaign for honesty, integrity, fairness...in a word, justice. By the first century C.E., the Jews were so renowned for their devotion to their Scriptures that they were dubbed by observers the People of the Book.

In such a climate, it's fair to surmise that James knew Amos' writings well, especially since the James in question

was in all probability the man we know as the first leader of the infant church in Jerusalem (See Acts 12:17; 15; and 21:18). This would not be either of the apostles named James, but rather the man known as "James, the Lord's brother" (Gal 1:19b). When it comes right down to it, it may not have been that James either, but instead someone writing in his name (pseudonomously). No matter. It's the content that counts. If the document in question didn't come from James' own hand, it certainly came from his teaching and preaching.

Its intended audience would have been Jewish Christians in the closing years of the first century C.E. Much had changed since Amos' day, but perhaps not surprisingly, much would have seemed all too familiar to him. Not surprisingly because human nature seems to be maddeningly consistent



over time. It's a wonder God didn't throw in the towel on this ornery race long ago. Thank God for God!

So, perhaps with a hefty sigh, James sets out to plow much of the same soil Amos turned over centuries earlier. He may not use the word justice as his predecessor did, but he's every bit as committed to the concept: "Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field" (1:9-10).

"But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like" (1:22-24).

"My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly and if a poor person in dirty clothes also come in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" (2:1-4).

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to



Living the Scriptures

- **Proclaiming belief is insufficient, according to Amos and James, if we aren't backing up our faith with an honest effort to address the critical issues of our society. Do you put in any "sweat equity"? Does your parish or diocese have an active social justice commission? To paraphrase James, if you have faith but no works, what good is that?**

them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply these bodily needs, what is the good of that?" (2:14-16).

"Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one who does not resist you" (5:1-6).

In the tradition of Amos, James takes on the establishment, the powerful and wealthy elite, calling them to change their ways for no one is exempt from the laws of the God of the universe. Also, like Amos before him, James makes his case in unambiguous terms. Quite obviously, neither man intended to leave much wiggle room.

It was just such forthrightness that made the Letter of James unpopular



with Reformation leaders such as Martin Luther, who deleted the book from his canon of Christian scriptural writings on the grounds that it placed far too much emphasis on the importance of good works and too little on necessity of faith.

Clearly, James is a staunch believer in the value of rolling up one's sleeves and setting about the business of God. What's more, his position is strengthened by Jesus' own words, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21).

In the end, James was restored to the Protestant canon, and the long dispute pitting Catholics and works against Protestants and faith faded away as both sides realized it was never a question of either/or but of both/and, and neither group had ever been so intran-

sigent as the other imagined. James was equally candid on topics other than justice. Read his tirade on the tongue in Chapter 3 and his diatribe against divisions in Chapter 4.

Both Amos and James are short books, but within them these men of few words each packed a mighty wallop, one intended not only for the People of God in their particular eras, but in our own as well. That's why they're considered inspired and integral to the Bible. Their upfront, in your face wisdom has stood the test of time. What are these great friends of God telling us now? ■

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Talking About Scripture

- **The gulf separating rich and poor disturbed Amos and James. What do you think these plain-spoken men would have to say to Christians living in a contemporary American culture? Have attempts been made to narrow the chasm between the two groups? How successful have they been? What is the highest priority facing us today?**



Reading About Scripture

- **Brown, Raymond E., S.S.; Fitzmyer, Joseph A., S.J.; Murphy, Roland E., O.Carm., eds., *The New Jerome Bible Handbook*. Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992.**
- **Smith, Virginia. *God for Grownups*. Allen, Tex.: Thomas More Publishing, 2002.**
- **Witherup, Ronald D., S.S. *The Bible Companion: A Handbook for Beginners*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998.**