

November 7, 2010

Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the mid-eighth century before Christ there suddenly sprang forth in Israel--- with no antecedent that would have prepared men to expect it---a completely new form of literature: the Bible's prophetic books. Because we are long accustomed to their inclusion in the canon, a special effort of historical analysis may be necessary for us to appreciate how truly revolutionary those writings must have seemed, almost three thousand years ago.

Indeed, "revolutionary" is exactly the adjective that comes to mind with respect to the earliest of the prophetic authors---Amos. So unique and extraordinary was the phenomenon of Amos that literary historians, to the present day, are still bewildered by him.

For starts, it is not easy to conceive how such an obscure man---not otherwise mentioned in Holy Scripture---a Judean shepherd from a small town six miles south of Bethlehem (Amos 1: 1), was so well informed on the geopolitics of his day (1:3-2: 16), so familiar with the major cities of foreign countries (1:5,8,12,14; 2:2), and so conversant on a range of subjects that included economics (2:6-8; 3:9-10; 4:1; 5:11), traditional hymnography (4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6), military exploits (1:3,13; 2:1), wisdom themes (3:3-6; 6:12), legal and cultic prescriptions (2:6-8; 3:12; 4:4-5; 5:10,12,21-24; 8:5-6,14; 9:7), and ancient history (1:5; 9:7). In an age when the literacy rate was low, the opportunity for travel slight, and the availability of "news" both rare and rather tardy, how did this information on so many subjects come to a small town citizen who described himself as "a sheep-breeder and a tender of sycamore fruit" (7:14)?

Then there was Amos's considerable literary style, which included interrogatory couplets (3:4-8), funereal dirges (5:1-27; 6:1-7), parallel conditional clauses (9:2-4), sarcasm (4:4-5), accounts of visions (7:1-8:14), and rational disputation (3:1-8; 7:10-17; 9:7-10). Amos mastered this complex style while sheering sheep and trimming trees? It is no wonder some Bible readers speculate that there had to be more than one Amos!

In fact, these speculations are sometimes more complex than the book itself. For example, some commentators argue for as many as six different "layers" in the Book of Amos. They contend that the canonical text was developed by sundry editors, who put their hands to the task during various periods of biblical history, the last being post-exilic.

Let me mention that these speculations leave me cold, chiefly because they corrode what I take to be solid and obvious: the book's coherence in structure, tone, style, and message. It is easier to believe this text came from the same hand in a single historical setting than from many hands over several centuries. The real mystery is not literary but historical: the phenomenon of Amos himself.

Amos was---like Hesiod, his contemporary in Greece, and Elijah a century earlier---a social critic. He was preoccupied with the extensive oppression and injustice of the region, especially as it was sponsored by the collusion of the wealthier merchant families with Israel's royal house (Jeroboam II, 789-749). While the widespread idolatry of the time chiefly incensed Hosea, the slightly younger contemporary of Amos, the attention of the latter was directed almost entirely to matters of social, political, and economic justice. Nearly all his 146 verses were devoted to that concern.

It is not difficult to date the composition of Amos. We know that he prophesied "in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake" (1:1). Here we have an almost exact fix: The sixth stratum of the excavations at Hazor testifies to a severe earthquake, which archeologists date between 765 and 760. Thus, Amos had a two-decade jump on Isaiah, who received his prophetic call in 742, "the year King Uzziah died" (Isaiah 6:1).

Historians estimate that the ministry of Amos---conducted mainly in the capital city of Samaria (Amos 3:9; 4:1; 6:1) and at the shrine of Bethel (7:10-17)---may have lasted less than a year. Coming up from a southern town, he was resented as an intruding malcontent by those northerners he obliged to listen to him. Having traveled there solely in response to a divine call---"Go, prophesy to My people Israel"---Amos was doubtless happy to get back to his groves and flocks.

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