Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Amos: Let Justice Roll Down Like Water

St. Augustine's principle of biblical interpretation is that Scripture must be understood through the twofold commandment of **love of God and neighbor**. Any interpretation that fails to cultivate that love represents a failure to understand Scripture.[1] To make it plain, if the Bible causes you to love your neighbor, take it literally. If not, don't.

Jeremiah 8:7b-8 "but my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord. **8** How can you say, "We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us," when, in fact, **the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie**?"
-Although the Hebrew expression is difficult and has generated considerable scholarly discussion, these verses can be understood as a charge that the scribes have dealt falsely with the law through their writing or interpretation. So, how should we interpret the Bible?
-First, be aware we don't read the Bible to teach us how to love, we allow love to teach us how to read the Bible. Second, the book of Amos can serve as an ethical filter for biblical interpretation, reminding us that any interpretation of Scripture that legitimizes oppression, economic exploitation, or injustice contradicts God's demands for righteousness, mercy, and justice.

World BEHIND the Text
Mesopotamia: *The Code of Hammurabi* (approximately 1750 BCE) The Babylonian king Hammurabi established a famous collection of laws concerning: lending and interest, debt and repayment, agricultural labor, and the treatment of vulnerable people.
Egypt: *Instruction of Amenemope* (1100–900 BCE) warns against exploiting the poor and moving boundary markers belonging to vulnerable people.

World OF the Text
Amos reflects a pattern in the Hebrew Bible of God's prohibition of oppressing the poor. **Amos 2:6–7** condemns those who sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and trample on the heads of the poor. **Amos 8:4–6** condemns merchants who manipulate measurements, inflate prices, and exploit the poor for financial gain. **Proverbs 22:22–23** warns against robbing the poor, the Lord will defend their cause. **Isaiah 10:1–2** condemns unjust laws that deprive the poor of their rights

World IN FRONT of the Text
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Dream Speech" quotes Amos (5:24 "**But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream").**

I. Overview – Like much of the Bible, Amos is crisis literature. Amos is foretelling of a coming crisis (as Israel is experiencing a time of great prosperity – at least among the elite). Amos can be seen as an attempt to explain and justify the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom (Israel). In essence, God is not weak, but God uses the Assyrians to punish Israel for injustice (**Amos 3:11, 5:27, 6:14, 7:17).** Amos is earliest among the prophetic literature – (8th c BCE, 760-750, during the Monarchic or post-Monarchic period, ref. to **Amos 9:11-15**). Amos's original core was a collection of oracles from 8th c. BCE, but the

[1] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.36.40.

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core was reworked and supplement over several centuries.[2] Amos was a sheep breeder and fruit farmer (figs), which places him among the poor he is advocating for. Amos can also be considered judgment literature; the focus of Amos is warnings of punishment due to the presence of unjust social, economic structures in Israel.[3] Amos (who lives in a rural, impoverished area of Judah) prophesies mainly to the Northern Kingdom (Israel) that they are "arrogant oppressors of the poor, a plunderer of the ordinary people. The priests have turned (Bethel) into a profitable concern to maintain their own wealth and power rather than to maintain the divine presence.."[4]

II. Worship Without Justice

Amos 5:21-24 **21** I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them,
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.
23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
24 **But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**

Comparative overview of the prophetic tradition:
Amos 5:21–24 — Worship without justice.
Isaiah 1:11–17 — Sacrifice without righteousness.
Micah 6:6–8 — Offerings without ethical responsibility.
Jeremiah 7:1–23 — Temple confidence without obedience.
Hosea 6:6 — Sacrifice without steadfast love.
Zechariah 7:4–10 — Fasting without compassion.

III. The sheep breeder must confront the priest and the king (**Amos 7:10-17**)
Amaziah is identified as the priest of Bethel. He confronts Amos, reports his prophecies to King Jeroboam II, and tells Amos to leave Israel and return to Judah. Amaziah represents the religious establishment at Bethel, which was closely connected to the Northern Kingdom's royal authority. **The significance**: A shepherd has to speak because a priest is missing the point. Amaziah's confrontation with Amos illustrates the tension between institutional religious authority and prophetic accountability.

IV. Problematic

Patriarchy
Amos 7:17 is deeply problematic because judgment against Amaziah falls upon his wife and children, raising questions about patriarchal assumptions that treat women and family members as extensions of male authority and punish them for the actions of a man.

Special or Common?
Amos 3:2a You only have I known of all the families of the earth;

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[2] [1] Steven L. McKenzie, Kristin De Troyer, and F. Scott Spencer, eds., *The SBL Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2023).
[3] Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., 20th anniversary ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), Amy Erickson, 312.
[4] Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache, eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 2006), Michael Carden, 459-461.

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Amos 9:7 Are you not like the Cushites (Ethiopians) to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?

Co-Opting Justice
Amos's Judahite origins invite a critical question: could his condemnation of Israel's injustice also serve Judah's religious and political interests by delegitimizing the Northern kingdom and providing a divine rationale for reclaiming its territory under the guise of justice? "Amos warns us to be wary of those who use the rhetoric of justice and liberation to advance their own expansion and power. Such imperial power players do not invalidate the principles of justice and humanity, but co-opt them. This co-option is a two edged sword. While an empire might claim the moral high ground in asserting and expanding its power, it acts only in its own power interest, and not in the cause of justice."[5]

Collective Divine Punishment
Amos's language of collective divine punishment (**Amos 3:1** – "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt") is problematic because judgment against the entire community **may include the very poor and vulnerable whom Amos seeks to defend**, raising questions about the justice of collective punishment and the disproportionate suffering of those without power.

V. Justice Matters

Amos 5:10–11 condemns the corruption of justice at the city gate, where legal proceedings were manipulated against the poor, exposing how institutions meant to protect the vulnerable had become instruments of wealth and power.
-This speaks powerfully to modern injustices where wealth and influence can distort legal outcomes, allowing the wealthy to purchase advantages while the poor struggle to access equal justice.

Heavy Interest keeps people in poverty
Biblical prohibitions against usury (charging interest): Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35–37; Deuteronomy 23:19–20; Psalm 15:5; Nehemiah 5:1–13; Ezekiel 18:8, 13.

Trickle Down Economy
Israel's prosperity under Jeroboam II mirrors the tension behind current trickle-down economics: wealth accumulates among elites while the benefits fail to reach the economically vulnerable, exposing the danger of assuming that prosperity at the top automatically produces justice and well-being for everyone (**Amos 4:1; 5:11; 6:4–6**).

VI. If Divine Punishment is not Transformative it is NOT Justice.
Israel will be transformed – "The images of the future break with those of Israel's past suggesting that God will not restore Israel to what it was before, but that God will rebuild an Israel transformed. Therefore, the poet does not imagine the restoration of the government with images of strongholds and

[5] Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache, eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 2006), Michael Carden, 459-461.

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fortresses rebuilt. Rather than David's dynasty or house, it is David's 'booth' (9:1) an insubstantial and impermanent structure that God raises up."[6]

VII. What I LIKE about Amos

Divine punishment in much of the Hebrew Bible is often connected to the worship of other gods. However, Divine punishment in Amos is connected to social injustice. Amos's God is less concerned with denouncing "other gods" than with demanding human justice. Real idolatry is worship that tolerates oppression! I prefer Amos's God, who is consumed by justice, not jealousy.

[6] Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., 20th anniversary ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), Amy Erickson, 317.

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