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Charisa Hunter-Crump
ccrump@acu.edu

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Assumptions About Amos: Prophetic Ministry Re-imagined

CHARISA HUNTER-CRUMP

AMOS: HERO AND ROLE MODEL

I entered ministry believing that being prophetic was my primary responsibility. Amos was my hero. A shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees, Amos was called to condemn the systemic injustice corrupting his religion and his nation; an ordinary person, called to do extraordinary things. I was certain that I, too, was called to do extraordinary things. I knew there was a prophet in me; and when I felt small, inept, or painfully shy, ordinary Amos gave me courage.

Growing up in Britain's Thatcher era, as part of a small Labour-leaning Christian community in London, we saw systemic injustice all around us. We fed and clothed the homeless, worked with social services, joined protest marches for CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), defended striking miners, and studied and supported the efforts of Christian Aid and Oxfam in South Africa and Latin America, where white, western imperialism crushed the poor and marginalized. I knew who God's enemies were. Amos helped me to know. God's enemies were those that would "sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way" (Amos 2.6b-7a). God's enemies were "the cows of Bashan...who oppress the poor, who crush the needy," "those who take a bribe," "who lie on beds of ivory," and "practice deceit with false balances" (Amos 4.1; 5.12; 6.4; 8.5). Power, opulence, greed, and indifference were God's enemies, I knew. Amos helped me to know. And my 1980s did not seem so different from Amos' 8th century BCE. The world still needed Amos. He spoke truth to power, and so would I.

It was Amos 5.21-24 that became my mantra. "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." I loved worship, and with Amos I saw the hypocrisy of religious people who went through the motions of the liturgy just to return to the "real world" of commerce, competition, and corruption, a world devoid of justice and righteousness. In the 8th century BCE as in the '80s, religious people separated faith from culture, spirituality from lifestyle, God from politics, liturgy from living. I loathed the impoverishment, impotence, and abuse of worship. If speaking a prophetic word about injustice was my end, liturgy became my means. I would create liturgy that would allow justice and righteousness to flow in, through, and beyond the worship life of God's people and end the piety of the corrupt and the corruption of the pious.

BECOMING DISENCHANTED: FAULTY ROLE MODEL, TARNISHED HERO

Being Amos was harder than I thought it would be. To begin with, I had no audience with the President, the Queen, or the Prime Minister, as Amos had an audience with King Jeroboam II—through Amaziah, the priest of Bethel. No audience with Ronnie, Elizabeth, or Margaret. No audience with Billy Graham, James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, or the Archbishop of Anywhere. Not that having the ear of Amaziah and Jeroboam seemed to help Amos. Speaking truth to power meant having it fall largely on deaf ears. They were, after all, complicit beneficiaries in the whole economic and religious scandal and hypocrisy. And ordinary Amos

was an inconvenience but not a threat; an idealist who did not understand the complexities of *realpolitik*. I decided my lack of connections did not really matter. My audience would be the local church. I had smaller fish to fry. Grassroots—that’s where the action was.

Unfortunately, this didn’t make things any easier. I preached, taught, and prayed about every subject that I thought contributed to systemic injustice. Racism. Sexism. Homophobia. Consumerism. The American Dream. “Third world” debt. Sweat shops. Nike. Diamonds. Chocolate. Child slavery. Technology. Energy consumption. Columbine. Gun control. The cruel segregation among American high school students. Our nonchalant acceptance of gratuitous violence. 9/11. Afghanistan and Iraq. Just war theory. An eye for an eye. Patriotism. Separation of church and state. Prayer in public schools. Pluralism. The American flag in the sanctuary. American imperialism. The root causes of terrorism. Palestinian displacement. And so on and so on and so on. Fiery. Passionate. Pleading. But these were ordinary, hard working, blue collar English and American Christians, with problems of their own, who did not want to hear about their complicity, our national and religious complicity, the injustices of the world; especially since they knew I was a misguided idealist who, like Amos, did not understand the complexities of *realpolitik* (or the true nature of pastoral work). Blame it on my youth. Blame it on my gender. Frustrations bubbled beneath the surface, occasionally erupting.

I had heard that if, as a pastor, you first loved a congregation, earned its trust and respect, settled in and became like one of the family, then as a preacher you could speak a prophetic word. Yet Jesus said that no prophet is accepted in his or her own hometown. Once my congregations became “home,” my prophetic words felt to some like condescension and betrayal. On the other hand, Amos left his home in Judah and went to the northern kingdom of Israel, and he was not welcome there either. The prophetic word seemed to be unpopular no matter where it was preached. Fine. If Jesus and Amos could be kicked out of Nazareth and Bethel, I could risk it in Leigh-on-Sea or Federal Heights. Rarely is anything straightforward. My skin was not very thick. And most of my pain came from knowing that I had hurt members I had grown to love.

I began to question my choice of Amos as my role model. His circumstances could not have been more different from those of a parish preacher: itinerant, alone, unsalaried, unemployed, institution-less. He had no responsibilities to or for anyone else. Where he could challenge, I had also to comfort. Where he could

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afford to offend, I had a salary to defend. Where he could speak in broad, simple, stark generalizations, I was immersed with specific, complex, loving persons. Where he could proclaim God’s infinite love by demanding social justice, my people needed to hear of God’s personal love for them. Where he spoke to the oppressor about the oppressed, my congregations fell into neither category. They were certainly not the “cows of Bashan.” They were the satisfied, the settled, the comfortable; too at ease to question the culture that lavished them with

basic luxuries; too powerless to deserve the tirade of a prophet on a mission to change society. There was one other problem with my hero—his God. Amos’ God was powerful, ruthless, violent, vengeful, and self-absorbed. Amos’ God would not hesitate to use nature or history to send fire, murder, starvation, drought, exile, war, rape, flood, genocide. Soothed by the peaceful imagery of letting “justice roll down like waters,” I had overlooked the divine horror lurking on every page.

My role model for prophetic ministry could not be Amos as he preached about his vengeful and violent God. It could not be Amos as he pronounced national punishment for the injustices of a few. Nor could I appropriate the fiery prophetic style of the Amos I had so idealized. I had witnessed these dangerous theo-

logical weapons, lifted from a primitive culture, wielded menacingly by too many American Christian zealots. I gladly relieved myself of their burden. I did not believe in national retribution, or for that matter national blessing, by a vengeful God. How could this prophet, whose circumstances, audience, and image of God were so different from mine, remain a role model for prophetic ministry?

REDISCOVERING AMOS: QUESTIONING ISRAEL'S MORAL FRAMEWORK

I had always assumed that Amos' message of a just society was an already accepted moral norm that had been forsaken by Israel. As I searched for answers about my tarnished hero, I learned that he was in fact teaching a new moral norm, reshaping the conventional wisdom of 8th century Israel. Israel's conventional wisdom centered on their historical, mythical, theological identity as God's chosen and blessed people, liberated from slavery in Egypt to occupy a promised land, for whom right behavior would bring reward and wrong behavior would bring punishment. Obedience to this vengeful God was largely interpreted as participation in the national worship life of feasts, festivals, and sacrifices. In the 8th century, Israel interpreted their economic prosperity and political security as God's blessing for their right behavior, and the people reveled in their self-congratulatory worship life.

Amos saw things differently. Underlying Israel's prosperity he saw corruption and deceit. Alongside her rituals he saw oppression and poverty. Belying her security he saw Assyria as a threat looming on the horizon. These things could not be interpreted as blessings. In light of this, Amos rejected Israel's moral framework of right behavior as obedience through *rituals*. God demanded obedience through *justice*. This was the new moral norm, the new moral framework, the new right behavior that Amos preached. Ignoring Amos' warnings about national systemic injustice would force God to punish Israel through exile. Only some 30 years later, in 722 BCE, large portions of Israel's population were deported by Assyria. Amos was vindicated and Israel and Judah entered the exilic period.

DISCOVERING THE AMOS TRADITION: QUESTIONERS OF CONVENTION

This change of fortune forced these nations to grapple with the moral issue raised by Amos, but also to struggle with the broader theological framework of reward and punishment that Amos failed to challenge. If we are the chosen people of a powerful, liberating God, why are we continuously crushed? The majority tried to gird up the conventional wisdom of reward and punishment by reinterpreting the traditional moral framework. The Priestly tradition, as championed by Ezra and Nehemiah, turned attention towards the national abomination of intermarriage and the need for ethnic purity. The Wisdom tradition, championed by Ezekiel, turned attention towards the moral responsibility of the individual, as opposed to the tribe or nation. The Apocalyptic tradition, championed by Daniel, elevated the system of reward and punishment to a cosmic, other-worldly battle between God/good and Satan/evil.¹

Conversely, following on Amos' heels, there was a series of protests against the conventional wisdom—the beautifully crafted sagas of Job, Ruth, and Jonah; the complaint of Psalm 44; and the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Unlike Amos, these were protests against the theological framework, not just the moral framework. Each one claimed that all the right behavior in the world, however you defined it—worship, justice, purity, belief—would not necessarily lead to reward, whether personal, national, or apocalyptic. Jesus went even further, claiming that conventional definitions of right behavior usually favored the wealthy and the powerful. These underground voices of protest seeped to the surface, infiltrating, reinterpreting, and subverting conventional wisdom. Some even achieved the status of Holy Scripture.

Humanity has always gravitated in herds towards the easy answers of conventional wisdom. In the 8th century BCE the easy answer was that God had blessed Israel with lavish lifestyles and security in return for

1. See *Jesus against Christianity* by Jack Nelson-Pall Meyer (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001) and *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* by John Shelby Spong (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) for fuller discussions of these theological developments and their protestors.

her robust worship life. There is not much difference between the conventional wisdom of Amos' day and of our day. The easy answers of conventional wisdom play to our conceit, our pride, our desires, our hopes, and our fears. They say life is fair, happiness is earned, prosperity is blessing, God is on our side, evil is out there, truth will be vindicated and righteousness will be validated. The mystery of God and the complexity of living cannot be captured by these easy answers. They seem benign, but they often leave a trail of misery, and eventually confusion, in their wake. The trail of misery in Israel was a hidden poverty. The confusion came when their blessings were unfathomably snatched away. Again, the comparisons with our own circumstances are vivid.

Here, at last, was my role model for prophetic ministry—Amos' resistance to the easy answers of conventional wisdom and the tradition it spawned. Amos challenged Israel's moral framework. Others took up the task and also challenged the theological framework. Resistance to conventional wisdom became a process ever continuing. The prophecy of Amos, like the Bible that contains his protest, is not a book of timeless truths, useful in tackling a slew of new and changing problems. It is an example of how new and changing truths emerge in our relentless human struggle with the one enduring problem—suffering. In my ordinary way, I hope to be part of this great prophetic tradition. I hope not to be lulled, cajoled, co-opted, or conscripted by 21st century conventional wisdom—whether political, economic, theological, or cultural. I hope to see what literal and metaphorical feasts and festivals we are hiding behind. I hope to disturb the calm waters of our easy answers, to reveal the injustices and the uncertainties that lurk beneath, and to live in the chaotic roll and flow of this messy and beautiful life.

Charisa Hunter-Crump has served congregations in the United Reformed Church in England and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Denver, Colorado. She is currently on extended maternity leave and working on a book about liturgy.

