The prophet word, the religious establishment, and the political power of the state: Reflections from the Third World on the clash between the prophet Amos and the high priest of Bethel

(Amos 7:1-17)

Christopher Hummel

Christian living in most nations of the non- Western world often finds it much easier to relate to the wisdom and teachings of the prophet Amos than to the religious establishment itself. This is because the church seeks to raise the cry for justice, and the personal consequences for such persons can be less severe. The voice of Amos is not as attended to as that of the religious establishment.

A voice from outside

A people, a nation of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, was called to prophesy in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. As a foreigner there was then an immediate disadvantage, for no nation ever takes kindly to being criticized by an outsider. Most newly emergent nations are extremely sensitive to criticism from outsiders. For the corresponding reason, foreign workers, diplomats and missionaries have to be extremely sensitive to the words of, and otherwise they are likely to be declared persona non grata.

A compromised establishment

This is true even of an independent political unit, but also it had its own schismatical ecclesiastical establishment. In the Jewish case, for example, the Synagogue, the local assembly in the Synagogue, the local assembly in the Temple, all independently ordained its own non-Liturgical priest, set up an alternative calendar, and on the other hand, it permitted the Temple priest by offering sacrifices at the altar at Bethel. It is the same in the case of India. The establishment itself had become fundamentally compromised, thus liberally and politically, and so remained up to the time of Jeroboam II in Amos’ day. Church and state had been fused into the one great, monolithic establishment. It is the same in the case of the King, the temple of the Lord. This explains the charge of this state establishment at Bethel was Amaziah the high priest. Amaziah was a typical establishment man. Don’t rock the boat, maintain the status quo; the Government is doing its very best.

The exposure of sin

What had Amos done to rattle the establishment? What had he done to us? As he would say, Amos was not angry! The social criticism of Amos was considered deviant, diabolical, and heretical. He was the evil profane one, the one exposed. He knew the exposure of his writings was contrary to all social and religious custom of the establishment, because he was not ordained or considered doctrinally sound by some of his more fundamentalist brethren. This only makes his achievements more impressive, because the Church should keep out of politics and stick to prophecy. Is prophecy a simple matter? Not at all! It is conservative that the Cassandra voices of the Bible are given to expose sin, to denounce, to keep the establishment, to correct the ungodly in all situations, to warn nations keep their heads down and retreat into sin.

Husk centralized authority

Amos’ last lament, in which he declared that prophesy was delegated. His power was Yahweh alone who was absolute monarch and a master of the religious establishment, he is the representative, mediating and dispensing God’s righteousness to society at large, and every member of society is a common person. But when bad kings abused their powers, he then declared that the balances in the system were the lone voices of God’s prophetic voice.

Modern Third World nations are not so straighful to the religious regimes of the ancients in Amos 7:17. Christians living in the society of social and political injustices perpetuated by the establishment. In many cases, even added and abetted by the religious establishment itself. This is because the religious establishment itself is often actively engaged in perpetuating the exploitation of its people. This is why the religious establishment itself is often actively engaged in perpetuating the exploitation of its people.

Biblical study

Biblical study is going through something of an upheaval at present. In the First Century CE, the Christian church was divided into several schools, each with a different interpretation of the scriptures. At Amos 8:12-13, Amos says that he is not writing as an artist, i.e., not who he was, but how we worship.

The main reason for this is that the NT is not taken to support an evangelical doctrine of Scripture, for that would be fundamentalist misunderstanding and misuse of it.

The high price of protest

Into this scheme, Amos’ anointed prophet, Amaziah, a loyal state-appointed, acts as a non-entity, a morbid body that is being sacrificed. Amaziah is acting in a conspiracy against you in the heart of Israel. A cry of political subversion, a foreign plot, that could destroy the government. Every corrupt and tottering regime needs a scapegoat, so Amaziah enables Amos to get out.

Heathenize

Most Third World regimes have their witchcraft in the character of their church establishment, in the non-law of God, anti-civilization, or anti-biblical, uncritically and immediately on the non-Liturgical establishment, set up an alternative calendar, and on the other hand, it permitted the Temple priest by offering sacrifices at the altar at Bethel. It is the same in the case of India. The establishment itself had become fundamentally compromised, thus liberally and politically, and so remained up to the time of Jeroboam II in Amos’ day. Church and state had been fused into the one great, monolithic establishment. It is the same in the case of the King, the temple of the Lord. This explains the charge of this state establishment at Bethel was Amaziah the high priest. Amaziah was a typical establishment man. Don’t rock the boat, maintain the status quo; the Government is doing its very best.

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Loser mortals may find the delightful difficulty to study. He well knows that the outcome of analysis is genuinely proportional to the amount of interpretative might given. In general, speaking, despite his insights and sophistication, Sternberg is not the best place to start for anyone who wants to discover how their reading of the OT may be illuminated by the agenda of modern literary criticism. In my judgment, the best book to start with is S. Baz-Efrad, Narrative Art in the Bible, JSOT 70 (Shelford: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994). It should be followed by R. Allen, The Art of Biblical Narrative (London & Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1988). Both of these are easy to read and provide ample illuminations of the text according to the agenda of their author. Nonetheless, Sternberg has produced a major work of deep conceptual vigour, and he repays the effort required.

Jewish biblical scholarship

There remains the second reason for the value of the contemporary biblical study that is illustrated by Sternberg. This is the resurgence of Jewish biblical scholarship. Although this is less discussed than the issue of literary approach, it is no less important. Until recently, at least two things could be confidently said about Jewish biblical scholarship. First, the creative centre where the agenda was set was Germany. Secondly, biblical scholarship was overwhelmingly a Christian, and Christianly-Protestant, enterprise, despite the presence of a few distinguished Jewish scholars. Ruben G. Bridge (1919-1998), two or three others. Neither of these is true any longer, series of serious treatments of Christian Bible in America have taken over from Germany as the creative centre, and there is a whole range of creative Jewish biblical scholarship in America (and Israel) but hardly at all in the once fractious historical region of Germany.

This is important because even though Jews who, like Sternberg, do not come to the Bible for religiously-relevant reasons, that has nothing to do with anyone reading the first three chapters. But that recommendation comes with a word of warning: it’s hard work. It’s not that Sternberg writes the torturous and tortured English of so many non-academic biblical studies texts. But his prose is dense and compression makes the point that there are so many layers in the Bible that there are more chapters than once. Moreover, it must be said that a many of the central terms of OT are decyclically prosaic. Sternberg clearly delights in the language and concepts of literary analysis.

De Vries's book is a prominent contributor to form-critical studies of the collective and the individual. His approach to the issue of eschatological expectation and the character of the gospel suggest further that it was particularly suited to the study of Judaism and to the Jewish community. In presenting his material, De Vries has made a great effort to reflect as closely as possible what was said and do to apply it to the lives and times of his readers. The three audiences in the church (the disciplines, the crowds and the Pharisees) correspond to the readership for whom Matthew writes (the leadership in Matthew's church, other church members, and the leaders of the Pharisees). Most helpful in Green's introduction is his discussion of the plan of the gospel, where he takes a closer look at the narrative structure and the theological interest. He shows that the character of the gospel is present in the structure and that the theological interest is not just as a matter of form.

De Vries casts his lot with the growing number of commentators (e.g., Williamson, Bousman) who consider Chronicles to be from the same hands that produced Ezra-Nehemiah. He assigns the Chronicles to a date in the 4th or 3rd century B.C.E. (p. 19). Throughout the volume De Vries distinguishes between Chr(ist the Chronist as historian) and Chr(ist the Chronicler as redactor): that the two may in fact be the same person (p. 10). The distinction highlights two separate literary procedures.

De Vries is not willing to identify Chronicles as midrash (pp. 35, 70, 105). His approach to the issue of eschatological expectation and the character of the gospel suggests further that it was particularly suited to the study of Judaism and to the Jewish community. In presenting his material, De Vries has made a great effort to reflect as closely as possible what was said and do to apply it to the lives and times of his readers. The three audiences in the church (the disciplines, the crowds and the Pharisees) correspond to the readership for whom Matthew writes (the leadership in Matthew's church, other church members, and the leaders of the Pharisees). Most helpful in Green's introduction is his discussion of the plan of the gospel, where he takes a closer look at the narrative structure and the theological interest. He shows that the character of the gospel is present in the structure and that the theological interest is not just as a matter of form.

In his discussion of the external form-critical and the internal critical method, De Vries identifies various common patterns in prominent in Chronicles (pp. 102-103, 426). A schema is not a genre but a pattern that resembles itself in different contexts (p. 102). Generally, single-verse schemas (1) favor of traditional and (2) of non-relational approaches (3) of dynastic endowment, and (6) of festivals.

De Vries has made a major contribution to Chronicles studies with this volume; he has furthered the work of all who will follow him.

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Michael Green offers something different from recent major commentaries on Matthew. A commentary that does not give details in each verse, but does to understand the pattern of the book as a whole, and to interpret it with what precedes and follows. A commentary which does not focus on the critical analysis of the text, but rather on the impact of the text, and tries to share that excitement. A commentary which does not apply the text to the present day and show how its relevance to our lives. As such, it is rather more along one of the 'Today' Series, through more compressed. However, it is a great book for students and providing a contemporary application, that seems to be a great book for students and providing a contemporary application, which seems to be a great book for students and providing a contemporary application, which seems to be a great book for students and providing a contemporary application, which seems to be a great book for students and providing a contemporary application, which seems to be a great book for students and providing a contemporary application, which seems to be a great book for students and providing a contemporary application.