

Fuller Theological Seminary

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FTS Box #466

2 March, 2003

Idolatry then and now

A contemporary application of the message from
Amos 5:1-10

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Introduction for the Reader

The following Message is a Sermon to be held in a normal church context. Usually the Sermon will be surrounded by selected Songs from the Hymnbook.

This Sermon is largely based on my exegetical paper on the same passage from Amos Chapter 5. A Bibliography at the end can be used to further pursue the mentioned subjects. Some ideas are taken from them.

The text is written down, not to be preached as read, but to have a framework with enough ingredients to work out the message according to the audience.

The supposed audience is a typical mixture of all ages. Therefore the Sermon has to require no higher education to be understood.

Amos and his Message

Introduction: Who was Amos? Circumstances of Amos message

Let us go around 2800 years back to the time of the Kings in Israel. Israel was divided at that time into the northern part called by the former name for the whole country "Israel" with King Jeroboam reigning and the southern part called "Judah" with King Uzziah as the head of state.

This was a time of great prosperity. Israel and Judah were able to almost reestablish the boundaries of good old King David and his son Solomon. There was national pride in their accomplishment.

International trade had developed and brought prosperity to them. The rich had their summer and their winter houses. Sometimes they even were build of ivory and usually lavishly equipped with couches. The wealthy owned vineyards and precious oils. In short it was a time of great luxury. Generally the people were feeling quite safe. Everything seemed to be under control.

The people were firmly sure that they were on a way to the great future. After all Yahweh their God had made them prosperous.

In this time a prophet, Amos, from Judah went up to the northern Kingdom of Israel to the town of Bethel -- a sanctuary place of the King -- and delivered the following message. After each verse we will hear a response of a typical citizen of the land:

Reading of Amos 5:1-10 with comment after each verse

(Alter voice or speaking style according to the part read)

(1) Listen, people of Israel to this funeral song which I sing over you:

A funeral song! Is someone dead? Us! Everything is going fine, we are very much alive! Who is this crazy guy? This is just ridiculous.

(2) Virgin Israel has fallen, Never to rise again! She lies fallen on the ground, and no one helps her up. We should fall? And need help from others? We have many friends. How can we fail, we and our great king have just conquered Karnaim and the town of Lodebar!

(3) The Sovereign LORD says, "A City in Israel sends out a thousand soldiers, but only a hundred return; another city sends out a hundred, but only ten come back."

This guy surely is contradicting the words of our religion. Did Moses not say that one of us should pursue one thousand? What kind of religion is this? We perfectly know our God, otherwise we would not have had so much success. What kind of God is he talking about?

(4) Yahweh says to the people of Israel "Seek me and you will live!"

This surely is our God Yahweh who has blessed us so much. Why should we seek him? We have him forever and are we not alive?

(5) Do not go to Beersheba to worship. Do not try to find me at Bethel - Bethel will come to nothing. Do not go to Gilgal -- her people are doomed to exile.

Aha, he is complaining about our worship-centers here in the North. Probably putting up the old claim that you are only supposed to worship in Jerusalem and -- of course -- objecting to our golden calves. This guy does understand nothing. Some of our scholars should explain to him that Moses never commanded to only worship at Jerusalem. And we had so much trouble with these guys from the South in the past Yeah and of course he needs to understand that these calves do not represent idols for us. This

is just a place for Yahweh to sit. His presence is between the horns of the calf. This guy desperately needs some education! We would never worship idols!

Naturally, we have the peasants believing in all sorts of Gods. You cannot condemn them. This would just cause trouble, better comfort them so they do not cause trouble. We had enough riots lately of people complaining about our judicial system! And yes we had to bring in some statutes of Gods because some have married women from other countries and they need their familiar gods. It just takes them awhile to get used to our system. And they have interesting customs! Have you ever attended one of their fertility rites! Vow, you just have to experience this!

(6) Go to the Lord, you will live. If you do not go, he will sweep down like fire on the people of Israel. The fire will burn up the people of Bethel, and no one will be able to put it out.

This prophet surely is threatening us! All this extremism. God sweeping down like fire.... There are some ancient stories of a guy called Elijah who is said to have done this, but you never know if this was for real. Why does he not address some actual political issues? This would be surely more interesting than these ancient tell-tale stories.

(7) You are doomed, you that twist justice and cheat people out of their rights!

We do twist justice! He surely is on the side of the rioters of the last week! "Right". What is right? Do we not have lawyers to settle this? The judicial system is what it is. We cannot change the laws! Granted that the system is a little bit complicated.

(8) The LORD made the stars, the Pleiades and the Orion, He turns darkness into daylight and day into night.

(9) He brings destruction on the mighty and their strongholds.

(10) You people hate anyone who challenges injustice and speaks the whole truth in court.

This is all a lot of nonsense. I do not have to listen to this, do I?

Conclusion of Reading / Bridge to Application

The people of Israel flatly rejected Amos message. The high-priest of the sanctuary at Bethel threatened him, because he was causing unrest in Israel and strongly suggested that he should leave and go back to his native country Judah and earn his living there.

Amos was quite sure that the people would not hear his message. Otherwise he would not have sung a funeral hymn over them. We just heard a part of his message. Two years later a severe earthquake -- which Amos had predicted too -- destroyed parts of Israel reminding the people of his message. But there was no repentance from idols and sin. Some even sacrificed their children to idols by burning them! So some years later General Shalmaneser of Assyria came with a big army. He captured Samaria the capital of Israel and took the Israelites into exile. All the words of the prophet came true. Israel lost a large number of their men in the fight. The town of Gilgal went to exile.

The people were so strongly convinced by their perception of things and their thoughts about how the world was working and how religion was to function that they would not listen to him who created the world and gave them their land.

How is the situation today? How are our perceptions of God? Is our view of the world accurate? Can we still hear Gods voice? Do we have certain presupposition, making it difficult for us to hear him, whom we want to serve?

Contemporary Application

The Power of Reason

Our modern view of the world is shaped by our desire to categorize and control things. We have been very good in surveying the so-called "laws" of the world and we are utilizing them to control the world and do with it what we want. We are able to manufacture many goods by our knowledge about the characteristics of materials. We have managed to build machines with tremendous strength that can do heavier work than any men ever would be able to do.

We were so successful in building machines, that we were able to send people to the moon outside our own environment into an extremely hostile environment and get them back alive and well.

We are analyzing the world every day, more and more, to find out how it is composed and how the world "works". We are extremely curious about our world. And we enjoy the benefits it gives to us.

We think about everything in terms of the rules and laws that govern it. If I want to operate a car for example then I have to know how it works. What happens when I use the gas-pedal. How can I stop the car again. This knowledge is very important for me. Otherwise I would bring my life into danger by using this machine. How I drive my car on the street is also governed by rules that make traffic safe and protect me.

Mechanistic World view

Everything is functioning by laws. If we know these laws we can control it. We strive to find these laws. We go so far in our thoughts to think that if we would know all the laws of this world we could totally control our world.

If something unexpected is happening, we think that we need to find out the reason why. Are our laws not accurate? What caused this unexpected incident?

It makes us feel very uncomfortable to not know the reason why! We need to be in control at least in our thoughts. But is the world totally based on mechanics? Does all function by cause and effect?

The End of our World view

End of determinism in Quantum-Physics

Scientists have surveyed the contents of all matter. We found out how atoms compose molecules that are the essentials of all matter in our world. We surveyed the atoms further and found their components the electrons, protons and neutrons. We surveyed further and further into the smallest elements of our world. At this point very strange phenomena began to happen. The smallest elements we are surveying were not behaving according to laws any more. Sometimes they would. Sometimes they would not. Science was not able to give accurate laws anymore. It could just give statistics how probable it would be that some element would behave that way or this way. The world became non deterministic. This means that the cause-effect - our mechanical idealism of the world - is not valid anymore in this area.

Elements began to behave as if they had more than one nature. For example light sometimes behaved as if it were a participle and sometimes if it were a wave.

Physicists performed experiments and found strange phenomena. For example they shot a photon (light-participle) through a paper with two holes in it and tried to measure through which hole it would travel. Their experimental data was very strange, because it indicated that the photon traveled through both holes!

Our logic and scientific method was not sufficient to explain these phenomena! Consequently we must conclude that mechanics are not able to fully explain the universe! The universe is more than just cause and effect.

The End in Cosmology

Astronomers surveyed the sky and found distant stars and galaxies. They developed theories about the universe and then tried to match their collected data with their findings.

They were firmly convinced at the outset that the world was eternal. Strangely though they found that the universe was expanding. This was a very uncomfortable thought because this meant that the universe had a beginning! If it has a beginning it might too have an end!

Einstein was so disturbed by these theories of an expanding universe that he himself came to study the "red shift" (used to demonstrate the expansion). He traveled all the way from Germany to Pasadena, California for it!

This discovery meant that the universe was not a closed system!

Just recently some more evidence has been found in a characteristic pattern of radio-waves in the background of the universe from the early more compact stages of the universe. Scientists can only predict a certain amount of these early stages. The universe becomes so dense that all our "laws" become invalid the nearer we come to the earliest stages of the universe!

The scientists further discovered that the forces that define the characteristics of matter are extremely fine tuned. A slight variation in these basic parameters of matter that hold all things together and the whole universe would not have come into being. No life would have been possible.

This all leads to the disturbing discovery that there is some intelligence at work in the universe. There is no chaos there is order. Some suspect that this intelligence is still operating in the universe!

How do we view Persons?

But still we are operating on the basis of a mechanistic World view. We have been firmly educated that way. We view everything as a kind of machine. We have expanded this principle to society. And in the so-called "social sciences" we try to find out what principles govern whole societies. What rules can we use to influence our societies?

In the same way we are trying to use our logic in psychology. How does a human function? What laws govern the human mind?

Government treats humans as machines and regulates through laws how they have to function.

What about us? Are we not in the same habit of treating other human beings as a kind of machine? Are we not often treated by others just like that.

If we are buying something we go through a certain procedure, but we do not really notice the other person behind the desk. It could be anybody else. We do not treat the human being at the cashier desk as a real person. No we use it (important to depersonalize!) to go through the procedure of buying. There is no personal encounter neither for you who is buying as well as for the person at the cashier.

Our whole society is often regulated and we often daily go through quite a lot of these unpersonal mechanistic encounters. We even often develop a kind of routine in contact with our family members! How far is your life dominated by living with these mechanic persons?

The great loneliness

Many of us think this is normal, because it is well in tune with our mechanistic view of the world. But on the inside we are desperately longing for personal contact. For somebody who really knows us. For somebody who shows a little love towards us and is really concerned about us and not just about to get the job done. We feel extremely lonely in a world where we are surrounded by billions of people, because there is rarely a personal encounter.

Everything is just fine - financially, food wise, we have everything that we could long for -, but we do not feel like it. We feel the lack of these personal contacts, we are longing for love.

This is one reason why salesmen focus on personal things to win confidence and suggest to the person that there is a personal interest in them. They just do it to be able to sell their products! And it often has a tremendous effect! People just buy because they feel that somebody at least takes a little interest in them! Is this not the reason why so many cults have a lot of appeal? The community is a very strong motivation to be there. This can also be valid for churches. We need a strong community to be attractive to others! Let's show them that we have the best fellowship. Did Christ not say that the world shall know us by our love towards each other?

Attractive community means to not treat people like machines not just to use common phrases like "How do you do" "I'm fine" but a real exchange of concerns and participation in the others life! This includes also daring to criticize the other. To just smear honey into the beard of the other is not love or fellowship. We are not selling something! Be honest! Be yourself so you can know each other.

There are many people extremely lonely out there, and extremely frustrated with a society that provides for their material well-being for food and shelter, but does not give them meaningful relations. I am sure this is the reason for the problems we are facing with our youth today.

In the time of Frederick the Great (18th century) an experiment was made to find out what the original language of mankind was. Newborn child were left on their own. No one was to talk to them to find out what language they would speak..

Surprisingly they did not grow up. They died, because of lack of relationship to others! They were not able to develop without attention from others!

Relationships are necessary to develop as a human being, to develop a personality. We are not who we are by our capacity to think - as it is constantly indoctrinated into our heads by our culture -, but to a large extent by our relationships to others. The picture we have of humans in the West is largely determined by individualism.

Everybody should be able to function on himself. But this is not possible. A human being finds meaning in life through relations and personal encounters.

What were the Riots in LA about?

Some youth desperately were looking for meaning in their life and in relation to others. They were not able to express this desire but felt it urgently necessary to let the whole nation know that there is something wrong with our society. They desperately wanted attention from others!
Many people are searching for meaning and for real life. There is a longing for the ultimate relationship to the living God, the relationship that gives us meaning and in this relationship we discern who we are.

How do we view God?

As we view the person at the cashier desk, so we think about God. Put a good prayer in and voilà the answer comes out.

God is caught in our laws that we built up for him. We have a definite picture of him in our minds. God functions according to our rules.

This is especially evident in theology. The more one defines God the less he is free to respond to God, up to the point that some theologians out rightly deny that

A) God can talk to you and you can have a meaningful relationship to him.

B) That there is a God. We have a bunch of rules. There is no personality in it.

Most theologians refrain from the last conclusion and are satisfied with the first one. Some radicals were not content with halfway measures and took this to the end and arrived at conclusion B.

We should be very careful about putting God into our little boxes of definitions. God is free to act as he wishes! God has the freedom to do with this world as he pleases!

If we think we are so great that we have a firm hold on God, we lose his personality and we are not able to relate to him. We relate to our own little idol that we have worked out in our minds. This idol - consisting of a large set of rules - of course is not able to speak to us. We have done a great task. We got God!

Amos updated to our time

I have translated the passage from Amos that I have read at the beginning into our modern language and I have adapted it to our modern situation:

(1) Listen you people, who think that you are the greatest of all time of all the world!

This is the song I sing upon you for your funeral, for you are as good as dead!

(2) The Great, your beloved greatness, is fallen, never to rise again.

Abandoned it is on the ground in its greatness, so great is the fall that no one can rescue it !

(2) The One reigning over the Earth says:

A big army you will sent to fight, but there will only be some divisions left

Then you will send your divisions but only a few will return.

(4) The One Superior says to the great people:

Return to me and live !

(5) Do not worship your knowledge. Do not try to find me with your Philosophy.

Cant you see that pure reason leads to emptiness and deception? Do not justify your sin with theology.

Do not look for me in Philosophy. Philosophy will be forgotten.

(6) Return to me and live !

If not he will come on your greatness and consume you in his wrath burning like a fire!

His wrath will ridicule knowledge and philosophy. No one is able to fight against his wrath with empty words.

(7) You will be utterly destroyed, you that make your own justice and deceive people about me !

(8) The One who is has created the universe. He constructed the galaxies and the subatomic particples. His name is the one who he is. He is "Yahweh".

(9) He will destroy the self-sufficient, the self-proud and the self-deceived!

Final Appeal

Do not construct your own God. Go to him and talk to him if you want to know him. God is a loving God who loves you and wants you to love him!

Love is more than reason.

Love is more than philosophy.

Love is more than theology.

Love is personal!

If you want to know him be open for his talking to you! Do not restrict him with your rules. Bow down and worship him, for he is, but he does not fit our rules.

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