

Genesis 1:26-28

COVENANT RENEWAL

Matthew 28:18-20

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THE "CHURCH" GOD HATES (The Covenantal Structure of Amos)

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Transcendence

The Words of Amos, who was among the sheep-breeders of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. And he said: "The Lord roars from Zion, and utters His voice from Jerusalem." (Amos 1:1-2).

Hierarchy

Thus says the Lord: "For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" "For three transgressions of Gaza (Philistia), and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" . "For three transgressions of Tyre (Phoenicia), and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" . . "For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" For three transgressions of Ammon, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" . "For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" . "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" "For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" . (Amos 1:3-2:8ff.).

Ethics

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought from the land of Egypt

Hear this word you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, "Bring wine, let us drink!"

Hear this word which I take up against you, a lamentation, O house of Israel: . (Amos 3:1-5:17).

Oath

Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you?

Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria, notable persons in the chief nation, to whom the house of Israel comes! . (Amos 5:18-9:4).

Succession

The Lord God of hosts, He who touches the earth and it melts, . "Yet I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob," says the Lord. "On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David. . That they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the Gentiles who are called by My name" (Amos 9:5-15).

The other day, I came across a story that reminded me of the modern church. During World War II a tale was going around about a German soldier who was wounded

at the front. He was ordered to go to the military hospital for treatment.

When he arrived at the large and imposing building, he saw two main doors, one marked "For those slightly wounded" and the other, "For those seriously wounded." He entered through the first door and found himself going down a long hall at the end of which were two more doors, one marked "For officers" and the other, "For non-officers."

He entered through the latter and found himself going down another long hall at the end of which were two more doors, one marked "For Party Members" and the other, "For non-Party Members."

He took the second door, but when he opened it, he found himself out on the street.

When the soldier returned home, his mother asked him, "Son, how did you get along at the hospital?"

"Well, Mother," he replied, "to tell the truth, the people there didn't do anything for me, but you just ought to see the tremendous organization they have!"¹

Haven't you seen churches like this: great organizations but little help for anyone, so skilled at ushering people around the halls of their activity and back out onto the street? Their youth groups are glorified babysitting programs. Their ladies' and men's groups are social clubs. Their outreach excludes mother's homes and pro-life causes. Their programs provide entertainment for all ages but no food or clothing for the homeless. Their services are filled with only the upwardly mobile.

There are many large and small churches in America that don't help anyone. I believe God hates these churches. He despises them the same way He loathed the church of the Eighth Century, a time when God sent a prophet named Amos.

The Days of Amos

In Amos' day, everything seemed to be going well. From just about everyone's point of view it was not a question of whether it was the "best and worst of times," to use Dicken's worn out phrase. It was generally agreed that it was the best of times all around.

Israel and Judah, though divided, gained back the territory lost after the death of Solomon. Jeroboam II [King of Israel] included in his sphere of influence Aram and Hamath to the north and Ammon and Moab to the east. Uzziah [King of Judah] extended the boundaries of Judah to include Edom, the tribes of Arabia, the Negev and the Philistine cities (Gath, Jabnet and Ashdod).

"Key trade routes – one following the coastline, another going through Transjordan – once again passed through

1. John T. Semands, *Harvest of Humanity* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1988), p. 13.

both kingdoms. The Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon offered an opening onto the Mediterranean, while the port of Elath, on the Red Sea, became an important channel for trade with partners in the south."² "Palestine had become the center of international economic exchanges."³

"In addition to the renewal of trade, industrial activities flourished, herds grew, and agriculture was encouraged. The era of peace and prosperity was not limited to the royal house, but extended to a wealthy class of society mainly made up of the nobility, officers and merchants. Those individuals built magnificent houses and invested in costly furniture (probably made in Damascus) and ivory ornaments (often inlaid with precious stones such as lapis-lazuli)."⁴

Despite the apparent success on the international, national, political and economic levels, the people of God bordered on apostasy. They had external wealth and power but they had no concern for the real needs of the land.

In steps Amos, the prophet. "As guardian of the covenant, Amos identified specific evils, including the corruption of the law-courts so that they did not defend the cause of the innocent and of the defenseless (Amos 2:5; 8:6), but merely responded to personal power. Not only were the innocent and the defenseless despised, but in the case of a misdeed, the penalty did not correspond to the crime committed. Two of the specific tenets of Biblical law – equal justice for all, and consideration of the weak – were set aside.

"Those who had power forced ruthless economic practices that respected neither the person made in the image of God nor the property of the powerless (Amos 2:6; 8:6). The 'poor' are considered righteous not because of the economic position as such, but because they are both innocent and defenseless. Peasants were compelled to surrender their crops at their own expense (Amos 5:11a). Prosperity based on wrongful gain flourished, with those newly-rich through use of power eager to invest in land and real estate (Amos 3:15; 5:11b). Amos never champions poverty against prosperity – such opposition is foreign to the Biblical mentality – but he questions the acquisition of wealth at the expense of the respect for God's law and therefore of justice. He attacks the way that Judah and Israel threw off the just requirements of the covenant and based their conduct on the desires and inclinations of their fickle hearts (Amos 3:9b; 8:5, 6)."⁵

The days of Amos are extremely analogous to our own times. The Berlin Wall has come down, creating a new euphoria in the air, and landing on several levels of the already Reagan/Bush optimism. The Wall was a symbol of everything we hated: communism, atheism, oppression, socialism, and so forth and so on. Since man is a creature of symbols, being the only animal who makes them, he operates in terms of his symbols: consciously or unconsciously. In the case of the Berlin Wall, he consciously associates its fall with the success of the West over the East. Is it really a victory?

I'm not sure, but the perception in America is, "Everything's OK back home." Look at the popularity of George Bush'. This is the guy they called a wimp just a little over a year ago. Now they think he's a warrior, a king sent to lead us all to great prosperity.

Yet, back home in America the situation is spiritually bleak. The Church still won't do what it's supposed to do.

2. Herbert Schlossberg, Pierre Berthoud, Clark H. Pinnock, Marvin Olasky, *freedom, Justice, and Hope* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988), pp. 28-29.

3. A. Neher, *Amos* (Paris: Vrin, 1981), p. 207.

4. Schlossberg, Berthoud, Pinnock and Olasky, *Freedom, Justice and Hope*, p. 29.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36

For example, I live in a town similar to most towns. The population is approximately eighty thousand people. Thirty thousand to forty thousand of those people are on church rolls, mostly evangelical Baptist ones, since there are roughly sixty to seventy Baptist churches in our town. Here's the telling frustration. Last week at our annual Pro-Life Rally, we could only get about six hundred people to attend. That's less than one percent of the population willing to take a public stand for Pro-Life.

Don't misunderstand, we don't need a lot. The Puritans dominated England with only three percent of the population. But we don't have even the three percent. We have less than one percent. And, if you can't rally more than one percent of your population to defend the innocent unborn child, your society is in serious trouble. We are in spiritual trouble, even though international waters may seem to be calming and even though the economy may seem to be prosperous. When I raise the abortion issue, we're still not talking about any of the other issues: education, the homeless, bureaucracy, drugs, family and so forth. We're in bad shape, as bad if not worse than it was in Amos' day.

Covenant Lawsuit

God always raises up a covenant lawsuit against His people when they begin to depart from Him. He prosecutes by use of His covenant witnesses, the prophets, bringing us to some distinct features of a covenant lawsuit.

First, a covenant lawsuit is historical not revolutionary in nature. It seeks to reestablish the original covenant made with God, not revolt against the old. In the case of the prophets, such as Amos, the covenant lawsuit calls the people of God back to the covenant of the Pentateuch. Modern scholarship has only recently returned to the Pentateuchal structure and ethos of the prophets. Brueggemann, the insightful Old Testament scholar though certainly not conservative, has the following to say on this matter:

A central fact in the study of the eighth-century prophets of the Old Testament has come clear in recent times. The prophets can only be understood in the context of the ancient historical legal traditions of the Pentateuch. Several generations of prophets have assumed that there is a sharp discontinuity between the religion of the Torah and the faith of the prophets, that the prophets represent a phenomenon which is radically new and which can be understood in relation to the Torah only by means of contrast. This assumption grows out of the notion that the ethical religion of the prophets is superior to the cultic religion of the Torah, that monotheism in the prophets has superseded the polytheism of the Torah, and that individualism in the prophets is superior to the collectivism of the Torah. This means that we need not begin with the Torah but can come to the prophets and understand them fully on their own terms.

The new direction of scholarship, which is not the movement of any special school or tradition of scholars, makes it clear beyond doubt that we can understand the prophets only in relation to the old historical and legal traditions preserved in the Torah. The prophets have as their primary function the reassertion and application of the old traditions in ways which are relevant and compelling for the present community of faith. They do not invent new ideas to speak nor are they mere repeaters of the old traditions. But their words and acts are thoroughly grounded in the ancient faith which has its source in Moses.⁶

Covenant lawsuits are Pentateuchal just as the covenant itself is Pentateuchal. All through the prophets, direct

6. Walter Brueggemann, *Hoses: Tradition for Crisis* (Atlanta: Knox Press, 1968), p. 13.

references are made to laws of the Pentateuch that are being broken and are therefore the basis for lawsuit. This also explains why the covenantal or Pentateuchal structure is consistently found in the prophets.

Second, a covenant lawsuit follows the structure of a covenant document, having only a few differences. It has five parts, each transforming the aspects of the covenant into points of prosecution.

I. Transcendence/The Call of the Witness: The first section of the prophets describes the person and origin of the prophetic witness.

II. Hierarchy/Interrogation by Yahweh: The second segment often interrogates the accused. It can also be organized as a pursuit of the accused, perhaps not using interrogation but demonstrating how later indictment is actionable (Has prima facie evidence).

III. Ethics/Historical Indictment: Indictments are laid down, dealing with specific sins and violations.

IV. Oath/Declaration of People's Guilt: Sentencing is passed in the form of sanctions, often called "woes."

V. Succession/Condemnation and Restoration: The prophets close with a description of the restoration of the people of God, reassuring them of transfer of the inheritance promised in Abraham.

Perhaps the greatest value of understanding the distinct structure of the covenant and 'of the structure of a covenant lawsuit is in seeing its relationship to the structure of the Pentateuch. After all, there is clearly a five-fold structure to the Pentateuch; no one objects. The covenantal structure is therefore nothing more than the Pentateuchal structure in microcosm; or, turning it around and saying it another way, the Pentateuch is "the covenant writ large!" Both have a fivefold structure.

I am constantly amazed at some who presuppositionally refuse to accept that there is a covenantal structure, moreover a five-fold one. They say, "It's in Deuteronomy but nowhere else." This is like saying as one comes to those great antebellum homes in the South and saying, "Well, it's an antebellum house in Virginia but you'll never find anything like this in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and certainly not Texas. And, if we do it's only random."

Why should it surprise us to find the Pentateuchal, which we could say is the Deuteronomistic structure writ large, elsewhere, indeed everywhere, in the Bible? If the Pentateuch is the foundation of the entire Scripture, the place where the covenant is imbedded and the reference point for all that Christ fulfills, why would we not expect to see a Pentateuchal character from beginning to end? Dare I say, why should we not anticipate a Pentateuchal structure from start to finish? Ah, but I have tipped my hand and shifted from the word covenantal to the word Pentateuchal. Now will it satisfy those in the academic community who think truth only comes in the form of "streams of consciousness"?

Third, a covenant lawsuit assumes an international application of the law of God because the Kingdom is not parochial. Any lawsuit against God's people affects the rest of the world to a greater and lesser degree, depending on the closeness of a particular nation to the Church. It is common grace in reverse. As grace is extended to the nations via the Church, crumbs under the table, so wrath is applied to the world when the Church apostatizes.

Amos is a striking example. All the nations around Israel and Judah are judged for particular sins against the covenant people. But, these nations are also judged for violating the law of God against other nations (Amos 2:1-4). With this, we have a proleptic fulfillment of the New Covenant.

The nations of the world come to Israel in the Old Cove-

nant, when they convert. In Solomon's day, they came to him for wisdom. Yet, in the New Covenant, the Church goes to the world. Christ sets the example. At the end of the Gospel of Luke, he applies Moses to the Gentiles. He proclaims the application of Scripture to nations of the world.

In one sense, even if there were no example in the Old Testament of the law's being applied to the nations of the world, the principle of Moses' being applied to the Gentiles when Christ comes would still stand. The Old Testament clearly anticipates His success where all the others had failed to bring the nations to Yahweh. Nevertheless, Amos is a decisive example of the Gentile nations receiving the sanctions of the law of God.

So, Amos is a covenant lawsuit not only against Israel and Judah but the nations as well. Let us examine the covenantal lawsuit structure to see if it does indeed follow the pattern of the Deuteronomistic covenant.

The Covenant Structure of Amos

Transcendence/Call of the Witness (1:1-2)

The Words of Amos, who was among the sheep-breeders of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. And he said: "The Lord roars from Zion, and utters His voice from Jerusalem ." (Amos 1:1 -2).

These statements describe primarily Amos' call as a witness of the Lord. They also explain the transcendent nature of this call. Amos was not a prophet by birth. He was called from another profession. He was not even looking to be a prophet. He received the Word of God while he was engaged at his work. In this regard, he opens his book much the same as Moses in Deuteronomy. Moses spoke the commandments given to him and Amos speaks what he "saw."

Hierarchy/Interrogation by Yahweh (1:3-2:16)

Thus says the Lord: "For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" . "For three transgressions of Gaza (Philistia), and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" . "For three transgressions of Tyre (Phoenicia), and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" "For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" For three transgressions of Ammon, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" . "For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" "For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment" . . . (Amos 1 :3-2:8ff.).

The second section of a covenant lawsuit normally consists of a series of questions. The Lord pursues the offenders in this manner. In the second part of Amos, God lists the offenses of eight nations and does not ask a question until the summary section at the end of the pericope (2:11). The Lord probably waits to interrogate until the final comments in this section because He does not have a direct covenant with the nations. He only speaks to His covenanted people. He does not talk to those outside of the covenant, explaining why the interrogation follows the paragraphs on Israel and Judah.

Also, since interrogation is generally a form of pursuit by the prosecutor of the defendant, the pursuit theme can be expressed in other ways. Amos is a graphic example. Commentators have observed that the nations mentioned

form concentric counter-clockwise circles. One exegete has even described this section as a "whirlpool of judgment."⁷ The literary structure emphasizes that God closes around the two central covenantal nations: Israel and Judah. This is pursuit. God pursues Israel and Judah through the nations as a lex talionis for Israel's failure to apply God's law to the nations.

The pursuit in terms of the nations also fits the hierarchical themes often found in the second part of the Biblical covenant. Israel and Judah represented the nations of the world. In Deuteronomy, representatives were selected to govern Israel (Deuteronomy 1:9ff). In Amos, failed representatives are singled out as the source of judgment on the world.

Ethics (3:1-5:15)

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought from the land of Egypt . . .

Hear this word you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, "Bring wine, let us drink!" . . .

Hear this word which I take up against you, a lamentation, O house of Israel: . . . (Amos 3:1-5:17).

The third section of a covenant lawsuit issues indictments. The third part of Amos divides into three segments around the phrase, "Hear this word." Then follows prophetic indictments against Israel and Judah.

This pattern fits the ethics emphasis of the third part of the Biblical covenant in Deuteronomy. Moses exegetes the ten commandments. Amos sounds this ethical tone with the introductory formula, "Hear this word." He also, however, brings lawsuit indictments in terms of the ten commandments, making direct reference to the time when the ten commandments were given after the deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Amos 3:1).

Oath/Declaration of Guilt (5:16-9:4)

Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you? . . .

Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria, notable persons in the chief nation, to whom the house of Israel comes! . . . (Amos 5:18-9:4).

The fourth section of the covenant lawsuit declares guilt. In the case of Amos, he expresses Israel's guilt through a series of shame statements. These "woe" formulae surface the obvious guilt of nations who think they are so good that they eagerly await the "day of the Lord,"

as well as live in ease. Also, the reference to the "day of the Lord" calls up the declaration of guilt theme. This is the time of times when man will be judged and his guilt will be declared.

As for the parallel between covenant lawsuit and the Deuteronomic covenant, Meredith G. Kline notes that "woe and weal" language is connected with sanctions.⁸ Amos' use of this language therefore serves as a structural marker, making his book agree with the Deuteronomic covenant sanctions pattern.

Succession/Condemnation and Restoration

The Lord God of hosts, He who touches the earth and it melts, . . . "Yet I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob," says the Lord. . . . "On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David. . . That they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the Gentiles who are called by My name" (Amos 9:5-15).

The final segment of Amos' covenant lawsuit expresses condemnation of Israel. Yet, it also speaks of a time when the tabernacle will be rebuilt and the people of God will come back (Amos 9:11-12). When is this time? James, the first bishop of Jerusalem, interprets this section of Amos as applying to the Church (Acts 15:16-17). In other words, the restoration of Israel will be through the Church not apart from it. As a matter of fact, the Church is the rebuilt temple. Peter says, "Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5). There can be no doubt that the Church is the new Temple. There never will be another temple built in Jerusalem of old!

As for the relationship between the final part of Amos and the Deuteronomic covenant, Amos begins this segment with a reference to Yahweh's "touching" the earth. The imagery is that God lays on hands in the same sense that He would transfer inheritance by the head of Israel's laying on hands. In this case, when God "touches" the earth and lays on hands, destruction comes to those who are false sons. And, true succession comes through the rebuilt temple, which is the Church itself, built by the Gentile Church.

Thus, Amos is a covenant lawsuit perfectly following the covenant structure of Deuteronomy. The point of the lawsuit is to prosecute a guilty nation and replace it by transferring its inheritance to a new nation, the Church of Jesus Christ.

7. Gordon J. Keddie, *The Lord is His Name* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1986), p. 22.

8. Meredith G. Kline, *Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1972] 1976), p. 52.