

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Amos 7:7-17

NRSV

The reign of King Jeroboam II (786-746 BC) was a time of prosperity for Israel, the northern kingdom. Social and religious corruption were rife; many worshipped materialism and other gods. Amos was both a breeder of cattle and/or sheep ("herdsman", v. 14; "flock", v. 15) and a fruit farmer ("dresser of sycamore trees", v. 14). Born in Tekoa, in the hill country in northern Judah (*sheep country*), he likely also owned land in the Jordan valley, where sycamores flourished. (Palestinian sycamores bear fruit, much like figs, which has to be *dressed* (punctured) to make it edible.) God has called him to leave behind his prosperity, to warn the north about impending doom, a result of their waywardness.

In vv. 1-6, God shows him two visions of planned devastation: of locusts devouring the crops, and of fire consuming the whole of creation. ("Jacob", v. 2, is Israel, the first "mowings", v. 1, a tax.) In both cases, Amos intercedes with God on behalf of the people, pointing out that Israel is weak and helpless (spiritually). God listens and cancels his plans. But now vv. 7-9: when Israel is tested like a "wall" with a "plumb line", she doesn't *measure up*. Amos raises no plea against divine judgement. God will no longer ignore the people's errancy ("never again pass them by", v. 8). He will destroy both the "high places" (v. 9, mountain-top altars where early Israel, and pagans, worshipped) and "sanctuaries" dedicated to him. He, via the Assyrians, will end Jeroboam's line "with the sword".

"Bethel" (v. 10) was the principal northern shrine to God, and "Amaziah" was the royal priest there. To the king, he accuses Amos of treason, for upsetting civil order. He quotes Amos out of context (v. 11) and banishes Amos to Judah (vv. 12-13). Amos replies that he is not a *professional* prophet, paid to say what the king wishes to hear, but one called by God (v. 15). Because Amaziah has contradicted God's orders (v. 16), Israel will be invaded (v. 17): there will be rape, slaughter of innocents and plunder; Amaziah (as a priest, keen on remaining ritually clean), will be exiled to idolatrous Assyria ("an unclean land").

Psalm 82

NRSV

The superscription is "a psalm of Asaph": he was appointed by David to share in leading worship, and sang and/or played at the dedication of the Temple Solomon built. In a vision, the psalmist sees our God as a member of the council of gods. Our God accuses the others of favouring "the wicked" (v. 2) over the "weak and the needy" (v. 4). They are ignorant of God's ways ("walk ... in darkness", v. 5); their failure to be just destabilizes the physical world ("foundations ..."). In spite of being *gods*, they will be demoted and die (vv. 6-7). Perhaps v. 8 is sung by the congregation: only God can rightly rule the earth; he is universal.

Scholars are divided on whether the author is Paul or one of his followers. In the days long before copyright, a writer who thought he really understood how a great writer thought might write in his name: an honour to the great man. If Paul did write Colossians, he probably wrote it from prison (with "Timothy"): there he had time to reflect, and possibly to read. The church in Colossae was probably founded by "Epaphras" (v. 7). Colossians was written to counter deviant teaching, including the need to practice Jewish rituals, and Greek theosophical speculation. Christians there tended to seek power for human life not solely from Christ, but from various sources. They tried to merge traditions.

The letter begins in typical Greek style: the names of the senders (v. 1) and those of the recipients (v. 2), and then a prayer for thanksgiving or of petition (here Christian, vv. 3ff). "The saints" (v. 4) are those set apart for God's work in the world. Note the *triad* of "faith ... love ... hope" (vv. 4-5), the steps in coming to know Christ. The community is basically faithful to the *good news*, as taught by Epaphras. The Church is growing both in Colossae and throughout the Empire ("the whole world", v. 6). Vv. 9-13 are one sentence in Greek: "we have not ceased ..." "praying", "asking" and "giving thanks" (v. 12). The "knowledge" in v. 9 is practical: born of experience of a person, i.e. Christ. Perhaps they are to "endure" (v. 11) the false teaching. The opposition of "light" (v. 12) and "darkness" (v. 13) is also found in the Qumran literature. The phrase "forgiveness of sins" (v. 14) occurs only in letters not generally agreed to be by Paul.

Luke 10:25-37

NRSV

Jesus has prepared disciples for a missionary journey beyond Israel. He has given them advice on how to introduce receptive people to his message of peace and eternal life, to entry into the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps the "lawyer", a person expert in the interpretation of Jewish law, has heard Jesus' words about mission to Gentiles. He asks: *How much must I do ...?* Jesus speaks to him in his terms (v. 26). The lawyer answers with a verse from Deuteronomy and another from Leviticus, both books of the Law (v. 27). Jesus echoes a verse in the Law (v. 28). At the time, Jews debated whether all fellow Jews (or just some) were their neighbours. The lawyer seeks to prove his entitlement to eternal life by defining the limits of his duty to neighbours, but Jesus reinterprets the Law in the story of the Good Samaritan (vv. 30-35). The "priest" (v. 31) stands for Jewish religious leadership; Levites (v. 32) assisted priests in the Temple. The man may be dead; if either touches him, he risks ritual defilement. Each keeps the law *literally*. Jews saw Samaritans as religious deviants, but they did keep the Law; each group despised each other. So for a Samaritan to risk becoming unclean is to act according to the *spirit* of the Law rather than the *letter*. ("Oil and wine", v. 34, were medications.) In v. 37, the lawyer recognizes that the Samaritan has acted properly (but can't bring himself to say *Samaritan*.) The *neighbour* argument is irrelevant. The lawyer must see behind the Law to love of all. Even non-Jews who demonstrate this love can enter the kingdom.