

Homily for Thursday in the Fifth Week after Pentecost

July 2, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2, Proper 8: *Amos 7:10–17; Psalm 19:7–10; Matthew 9:1–8*

Robert Alter is professor emeritus of Hebrew and Comparative literature, at the University of California, Berkeley. He is widely admired as a gifted translator of the Hebrew Scriptures into English. Before the pandemic, the clergy here preached short sermons at Solemn Evensong on Sundays during the academic year. Every other year, Genesis and Exodus are read in the seasons of Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. His 1996 commentary and translation of Genesis is one book where I read all of the footnotes. He’s been working on a translation of the Hebrew Bible for decades, I think it’s fair to say. Last year, he published, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*.¹ This week, our first readings at our daily Mass have been from the Book of Amos. As a footnote, the King James Version of the Bible has no greater fan than Professor Alter. But that’s a subject for another time.

This is Alter’s translation of the beginning of Amos, “The words of Amos, who was among the sheep-

¹ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 3 vols.

breeders of Tekoa, who saw visions concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.”²

In the first footnote in his translation we learn that Tekoa was a village near Jerusalem. So, a shepherd from Judah was sent to the northern kingdom of Israel to prophesy the destruction and exile of Israel. Amos is not a long book, but, given the structure of the lectionary, we do not have the opportunity to hear Amos turn his attention away from Israel to his own kingdom, Judah. The prophet abruptly says, “Woe, you complacent in Zion and you trusting ones on Mount Samaria . . . The Master, the Lord, has sworn by His life . . . I loathe the pride of Jacob, and his citadels I hate, and I will hand over the town and its fullness.”³

Today we have heard that the fate of Israel, conquest, destruction. This happened, not only because Israel worshiped other gods, but they had become an immoral people. The poor were hungry and sometimes sold into slavery, transgressions of the Law of Moses. The psalmist sings, “The Lord cares for the

² Amos 1:1. Translation: Alter, II:1255.

³ Amos 6:1a, 8. Ibid., II:1270–71.

lives of the godly,”⁴ “Though the Lord be high, he cares for the lowly;”⁵ “The Lord cares for the stranger.”⁶

In today’s lesson, Amaziah, a priest to the king of Israel, is sent to tell Amos to leave Bethel and Israel. Amos’s expulsion will not alter Israel’s future. Amos responds by telling Amaziah something about himself, “No prophet am I, nor the son of a prophet am I, but a cattle herder am I and a tender of sycamore fruit”⁷— something like a fig.⁸ His final words to Amaziah are, “Your wife shall play the whore in the town, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and you shall be shared out with a measuring line, and you shall die on unclean soil, and Israel shall surely be exiled from its soul.”⁹ The unclean land is Assyria, a land of idolatry.¹⁰

In his sermon yesterday, Father Jay Smith mentioned some of the most famous words of Amos, “Let justice

⁴ Psalm 37:19a.

⁵ Psalm 138:7a.

⁶ Psalm 146:8b.

⁷ Amos 7:14.

⁸ Alter, 1274, n.14.

⁹ Amos 7:17.

¹⁰ Philip J. King, “Amos,” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), I:251.

roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used these words in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. That same year in June, the Supreme Court outlawed the worship in public schools. That said, a greater percentage of Americans in 1963 than today would have known that these were words sacred to Jews and Christians, sacred to Jesus. Amos’s words prefigure the words of Jesus in Matthew—and a parallel passage in Luke—“Whatever you wish that [men and women] would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.”¹¹

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹¹ Matthew 7:12. The Greek here is inclusive.