

Amos 7:7-17

“Are you set by the Lord’s plumb line?”

7 “This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. 8 And the LORD asked me, ‘What do you see, Amos?’ ‘A plumb line,’ I replied. Then the Lord said, ‘Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. 9 The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam.”

10 “Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: ‘Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. 11 For this is what Amos is saying: “Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.” 12 Then Amaziah said to Amos, ‘Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. 13 Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, because

this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.’

14 “Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. 15 But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.” 16 Now then, hear the word of the LORD. You say, “Do not prophesy against Israel, and stop preaching against the descendants of Isaac.”

17 Therefore this is what the LORD says: “Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country. And Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.””

Some people spend considerable time doing church activities.

I sure you agree it’s wise to ask:

**“What return will I get on my investment?
Will what I’m doing please God?”**

Wouldn’t it be sad to spend your life with religious practices that bring no return?

To find that you have no more to show for it than a ticket stub for a losing game?

Do you expect a good return on your religious experience?

To avoid a bad result, it helps to know of a certain preacher and his message.

People often assume that preachers differ from other folks.

My experiences confirm that presumption.

When I tell people I’m a minister, most of them start acting differently around me.

That’s why I often don’t tell folks when I first meet them that I’m a preacher.

I like to know what people actually think and feel, so I often try to keep my identity a secret for a while.

I never try to deceive anyone; I just want to converse with real people, not folks trying to act holy in front of me or taking exception to my profession.

On the other hand, if you feel that God has

called you to do something, it tends to make you different, doesn’t it?

The fellow we’ll talk about today was in most ways an ordinary citizen.

He farmed and did ranch-type-work.

This man took care of sheep, but not the kind we usually see.

These short, desert variety sheep produce exceptional wool.

Also these sheep are distinctly ugly.

There’s a present link with these sheep.

Many check-out stands surround buyers with magazines about famous people.

The covers and stories highlight rich, famous, alluring folks in charming poses.

Would a magazine specializing in pictures of ugly people succeed?

Magazines print pictures of beautiful folks who suffer bad hair day or wasting diseases.

Those photos are for shock and contrast.

Could a publication succeed that features only repulsive people?

No person here would qualify to get your picture published in such a magazine.

But suppose there were such a publication.

Imagine what it would be like for anyone whose photo they printed.

He/she would be the butt of jokes, insulting comments and scorn.

“Where are you going with this?” you ask.

Ancient shepherds who tended ugly sheep received the same contempt.



Ugly New Zealand sheep. I don’t know where this sheep lived.
Did Amos’s sheep resemble either of these?

It was bad enough just being a shepherd.

But if you tended repulsive sheep, Israelites of the day called you a derisive name.

They called a shepherd of this particularly unsightly breed a *noqed*.¹

¹One scholar noted that if you wanted to contemptuously address an

Amos, this preacher and tender of ugly sheep, worked more than two jobs.

He tended cattle, too.

In addition, he worked with a certain variety of fig trees.

Sycamore fig trees produced low quality figs.

For the figs to ripen properly, they had to be opened with a special instrument that released excess juice.

Imagine needing to climb into an apple tree and cutting a slit in every apple.

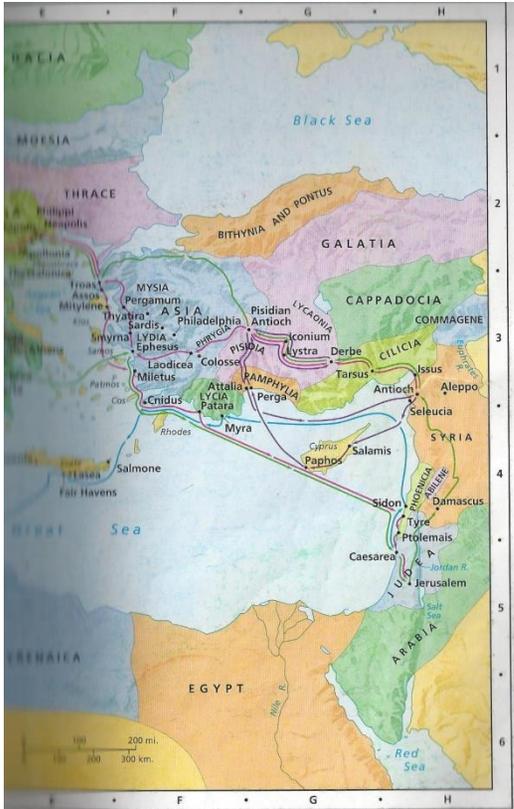
Amos’s job was to slit every fig on each tree.



Yet this Ag-guy became the first so-called literary prophet of the Old Testament and one of history’s best writers. Amos wrote colorfully, powerfully, accurately.

Arab today, you’d say to him that “he was viler than a naqqad,” that is, dumber, filthier, and stupider than a shepherd of ugly sheep. See O. Bussey, *New Bible Commentary*, p -701.

So he shepherded ugly sheep, raised cattle, cared for fig trees and wrote exceptionally—a Renaissance man before the Renaissance.



Now a bit of history about a tiny strip of land at the Mediterranean Sea’s east end. It is so small you could fit all of this disputed territory into one fourth of Iowa.

This little area ranks as probably the most contested piece of real estate in the planet.

The dispute over its control boils constantly in the U.S. Congress and the United Nations.

How did that tiny piece of real estate become so valuable?



1. Until the days of airplanes, and large ships, if you traveled between Africa and the Middle East, Far East, or Europe, you journeyed through Israel-Palestine.

Many major trade routes went right through the area.

Modern people tend to underestimate the amount of trade that went on in ancient times.

- The toy business is huge in our society; archeologists have dug up children’s toys and dolls made and sold millennia ago.
- Ancient folks liked perfume, stylish clothing, musical instruments, alcohol, and drugs and traded for them.
- They manufactured and sold military equipment.

- **Ag business was vital; because people eat, they traded food and spices.**

2. Another fact about tiny strip is its fortunes always depend on the relative strength of its neighbors.

During ancient times, Israel usually became strong when the dominant powers such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon were weak.

David and Solomon enjoyed their glory days in the 10th centuries BC,

Whether Egypt was weak, I don’t know, but Solomon built an alliance with Pharaoh by marrying his daughter and building her a huge palace near Jerusalem.

A significant split in Israel took place after Solomon’s time (about 920 BC).

Imagine if the Confederate States of America successfully seceded in the Civil War, and presently two different countries existed here instead of the present 50 states.

Ten of Israel’s twelve tribes seceded creating two smaller countries called Israel and Judah.

Those two little nations never reunited.

Under a king known as Jeroboam II, financial prosperity did return, however especially in Israel to the north.

About 800 BC, the big, bad neighbors were quiet, so Israel had its own way for a while.

Trade flourished.

The markets were up.

Rich people ate international gourmet foods.

Many folks lived like fat cats.

Wealthy women didn’t go to the gyms.

Many of them just ate, partied, and got fat (ideal circumstances for *Slim-Fast and Weight Watchers*).

Caravaneers brought in ever bigger sizes of linen dresses from Egypt (I made that up). Amos called them “**fat cows of Bashan,**” (Amos 4:1) however.

Men and women drank wine from huge bowls, wailed drunken songs, and improvised while strumming guitar-like instruments (their equivalent of jazz, and rock).

As they concocted all types of mixed drinks, leisure-time activities were the rage.

How did these people become wealthy?

- They took advantage of the poor.
 - They robbed the indigent of food.
- They used measuring scales that helped them cheat innocent people.
 - They bribed judges to gain real estate and build houses.
 - They mixed dust in with wheat and barley that they sold to poor folks.
 - They enslaved people who couldn’t afford to pay for a pair of sandals.

Many of those cheaters considered themselves God’s chosen people.

At religious services they acted piously.

Their hypocrisy upset the Lord.

He sent the fig tree-dressing, cow-tending, shepherd of ugly sheep north to prophesy and warn those folks of God’s fury.

Our Amos text features this notice:

7 “This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. 8 And the LORD asked me, ‘What do

you see, Amos?’ ‘A plumb line,’ I replied. Then the Lord said, ‘Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.’”

What does this plumb line caution mean?

Many church folks now judge their actions by the world’s standards.

The old saying went: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”²

Paul advised Christians in Rome not to make that mistake:

“I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”³

² This saying probably originated with Ambrose of Milan (339-397): “If you live in Rome, live in the Roman way; if you are elsewhere live as they do there.” *Ductor Dubitantium*, which probably was a *Guide for the Uncertain*

³ Romans 12:1, 2 NIV

The word “pattern” is the term from which we get “schematic.”

If we don’t set our guidelines by God’s will, everything will be out of plumb.

The famous Tower of Pisa is 180 feet tall.

Its lines are straight but far from plumb.

Top to bottom, it’s 14 feet out of perpendicular.

It’s famously odd, but of no practical use.

The plumb line the Lord uses is the model Jesus taught and lived.

Jesus strongly warned us about conforming to the world’s standards.

Here’s what he said in Matthew 15:

V. 3 “Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?”

V. 9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’

V. 13 “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.

Verses 18-20 “But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart,

and these defile them. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. 20 These are what defile a person . . .”

Slander is a “false report intended to damage someone’s reputation.”

The world’s media daily reports material based on “anonymous” and “unnamed sources.”

Jesus considers such reports as evil slander.

We do well to avoid communication sources that practice such things.

Church attendance means nothing if we don’t conform to God’s standards.

The 8th century BC Israelites refused to change their behavior and lifestyle.

By their society’ standards, they were doing great.

They listened to music, drank a lot, enjoyed a leisurely life, gossiped and slandered others.

God’s plumb line showed their errors.

Amos prophesied in 8:3 "In that day," declares the Sovereign LORD, "the songs in the temple will turn to wailing."

Within 40 years, the Assyrians came to do what God warned.

The ten northern tribes not only lost the war, they lost their nation and identity.

I have no idea what God plans for us and this country.

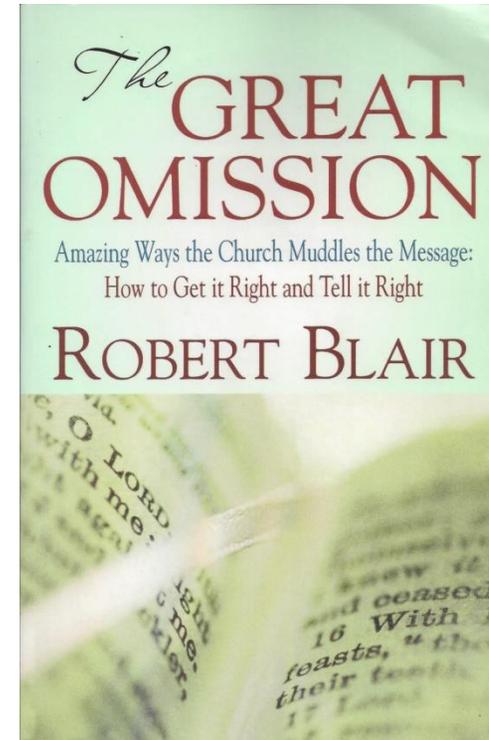
He makes clear that we should honor him, do right, love one another, and live purely, looking always to his word for guidance.

What kind of return will you get on your religious and life experience?

I pray that none of us will be disappointed on the Lord’s Day of Judgment.



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