

CHAPTER XVII

Bands of Love. Amos and Hosea

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In the latter part of the eighth century B.C., a shepherd who owned a small place with a few sycamore trees on it and a peculiar breed of sheep, foretold an earthquake two years before it occurred. This man was not one of the school of prophets; but he is the first to write his speeches and so begin that unique class of literature known as Prophetic. The primary function of the prophet (one who speaks for another) is not the foretelling of events, but to speak for Jehovah or in place of Him, and in this sense he was the upholder of righteousness and the condemner of evil wherever found. Prediction was merely secondary and incidental; for anyone who comprehends principles knows that to fulfill them means safety, to violate them is disaster.

The book of Amos, according to Prof. Moulton, "is made up of two parts; one a single prophetic utterance of four lines; the other the most elaborately constructed piece of writing in all literature."

The words of Amos, who was among the herdsmen of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. And he said:

"The Lord shall roar from Zion,
And utter his voice from Jerusalem;
And the habitations of the shepherds shall mourn,
And the top of Carmel shall wither."

The fulfillment of this prediction brings the obscure herdsman into prominence, and was accepted as the seal of his prophetic calling.

To Amos, with his positive conviction that God is the supreme power in all human destiny and natural phenomena, there was no such thing as chance. Faith has lines of communication, and knows of things to come, for it is moved by the tides of unseen causes, in rhythm with nature's pulse. It was said that at the eruption of Mount Pelee not a wild animal was found in its vicinity, but man, who had blunted by heedlessness and sin the finer instinct which feels the divine warnings, was destroyed. The faith of Amos was intuitive perception, which we may call educated instinct; it is instinct brought to the *n*th power of consciousness. This soul faculty belongs to each, as sight and hearing are universal faculties of man.

Elijah and Elisha stand out as lovers of God, and walk as supermen, above the normal level of man; but Amos and Hosea are lovers of man and will not save themselves until mankind is saved with them, and walk down among them, one telling the doom that must come, because the justice of God will permit no unrighteousness to flourish; the other with a message of the yearning love of the Father to reclaim His erring children.

Amos has been called "a moral reformer," in distinguishment of the practical work of reclamation which is the distinct note of his message. He comes from Judah to tell Israel of the impending doom that awaits her if she will not change. It is a courageous act, and he has a style of extreme boldness. Conditions in Israel were deplorable; the king and nobles have "houses of ivory" and "summer and winter" houses; the poor are oppressed and helpless. He preaches the justice of God; and the guilty must suffer because of this supreme attribute of God. He fearlessly denounces oppression, deceit, false balances, and inhumanity. "Hear this, O ye that would swallow up the needy, and cause the poor of the land to fail, making the ephah small and the shekel great, and dealing falsely with balances of deceit; that ye may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes, and sell the refuse of wheat. Shall not the land tremble for this, and everyone mourn that dwelleth therein?"

But mortals at all times like to be comfortable, and insist upon it, even when standing on the edge of a precipice. The one who speaks "comfortable words" is welcome; but the "doom prophets" are disturbers that they dread to hear. Coming from Judah, always less worldly-minded than Israel, already they think of their southern brethren as foreigners, Amos is invited to go home. "Amos, O thou seer, go, flee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there; but prophesy not any more at Beth-el, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a royal house."

But Amos has been sent to Israel by Jehovah, and must deliver his message. His insight into the divine nature and the conditions in Israel enable him to perceive her impending downfall as clearly as he had foreseen the earthquake. God's righteousness cannot be ignored; Israel is steeped in debauchery, luxuriousness, and idolatry. Over against this he perceives a Power advancing to overthrow this condition--locusts, plagues, drouth, enemy powers, swords in their hands to destroy immortal Israel.

Reading Amos, and perceiving the superb literary climaxes that he attains, makes one wonder if we have not come far astray in our culture and education. To cram the stomach with food will not make the graceful, lithe form; to cram the brain with impressions does not give easy literary forms of expression. Amos makes the structure of his composition reflect his thought; and the general movement of his prose poem conveys the action of sin followed by judgment, not in a future life, but here and now; and he achieves a distinct literary triumph.

In the wilderness of Judah, David had grown under the open sky into greatness; here also Amos, another shepherd, in solitary communion with the Soul of Things,

becomes sensitized to the rhythmical movements of mental forces. His imagery is direct, drawn from the rural affairs with which he is familiar--wagons, harvests, cattle--and from nature--hills, mountains, lions, birds. Chapter IV is a literary gem, the denunciations because of divine warnings unheeded naturally reaching the climax: "Yet ye have not returned unto me, said Jehovah."

Yet there is more than justice to God, according to Amos. He is merciful too, and he will not forget his suffering poor in the "great day" when wickedness will be overthrown; all the faithful will be saved. Judah and Israel will again be united. Not only this but all the nations about them will be united to them, whom before this the Hebrew had rigidly excluded from the salvation of Jehovah.

"In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and the nations that are called by my name, said the Lord that doeth this. Behold, the days come that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth the seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hill shall melt. And I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel, and they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards and drink wine thereof; they shall also make gardens and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their land which I have given them, said the Lord, thy God."

As the message of Christianity is given by the four evangelists, the last one being the climax because it reveals the supreme attribute, love, the last of the four prophets to Israel reaches the heart of the universe, Love. "Life is just our chance o' the prize o' learning love"; and Hosea stands out in human history as the first seer to understand the Love that is infinite, and that it never, never lets us go.

Hosea lived a little later than Amos; possibly near the time of the fall of Israel under the Assyrians in 722 B.C. He is the second prophet to leave a written record of his teachings. He is a little difficult to follow, as he makes reference to conditions with which we are not familiar; and he gives fragments of what we should judge were oral speeches. Israel could not reject Hosea on the grounds that she rejected Amos; for Hosea is no "foreigner" but native and a living flame of patriotism, in its best and highest sense.

Two political parties had sprung up in both Israel and Judah; divided and almost constantly at war with each other, both had become weakened. Weakness reaches for aid outside itself, so one party advocated an Assyrian alliance, the other an alliance with Egypt. Hosea, like our own George Washington, protested against entangling alliances. Jehovah was the strength of the nation, and to make an alliance with a foreign and heathen power was unfaithfulness to Him.

Hosea had learned the great truth "the state is the individual writ large, for he sees his own unhappy domestic affairs repeated in the state on a larger scale." He had learned to gauge Jehovah's love by the measure of his own heart throbs; he understood the love that is infinite by the unquenchable love in the depths of his own being, measureless, unfathomable, unfailing; a love that "alters not, when it alteration finds" but loves on in undiminished fervor; and must win in the end, because it can accept no end by unity.

Hosea's wife is unfaithful to him; she bears children, but leaves both her husband and her children for lovers. Down, down she sinks in the social scale until she becomes public property; forsaken by her paramours she is sold as a slave. Hosea buys her and brings her home; she is not reinstated as his wife, but is given the opportunity to redeem herself; and during this time she shall be "no man's wife."

No one can look out upon life save through his own lenses; and Hosea sees Israel--his poetic name for her is Ephraim--as the beloved wife of Jehovah; whose love for her was the same as his love for Gomer. The word "husband" means "caretaker," and after Hosea many of the prophets use the word as a synonym for Deity. What more could Jehovah do for his wife, Israel, than He had done for her? She is wealthy, and this wealth had come to her freely from her husband; she bears His name and is safe under His protection; she is beloved of Him and has borne children to Him, the nation; but faithless Israel runs out after strange lovers, Assyria and Egypt; and the idols of these nations are in her groves and on her high places, badges of her shameless disgrace. Yet, Jehovah must do what he himself had been compelled to do: "Ephraim is joined to idols: leave him alone."

After all, this is "hell" and the greatest punishment that can be meted to anyone; for the one thing that none of us can stand is to be "let alone" by Love. When we stray do we not want Love to follow us with its gentle reminders, that it is still there? He whom Love lets alone has no destination, no incentive for work, no goal of attainment; he is without friends, without home, without country, without God, and he is *lost*. We may want to stray and make individual experiments, lose ourselves and find ourselves; but we never want to be "let alone" but to know that Love is still there, that it keeps the home fires burning, will welcome us on our return; and never can it leave us *alone*.

The hardest lesson any of us have to learn is the lesson taught by Hosea; to give freedom and yet not leave the sinner *alone*. This is Hosea's lowest note; Jehovah could not leave Israel alone. She was His wife, He loved her, and she had borne Him children, He was God, and could not do otherwise. Hosea knew he loved Gomer, because Jehovah loved Israel; that love had entered his heart and it was impossible for him to cease to love.

No, Jehovah could not let His erring wife go, "I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offense, and seek my face; in their affliction they will seek me

earnestly." Love's opportunity is the need of him; it always comes, and Love, child of eternity, can well afford to bide its time. One of the greatest impressions ever made upon me was from the stage in "Peer Gynt." In his youth, Peer Gynt had wooed and won a beautiful girl and taken her to his mountain home, then he deserted his young wife. Over the whole world he roamed, seeking adventures and diversions everywhere; and when satiated, disillusioned, old, he returned. In the same mountain home where he had left her he found her, and she came to greet him with illumined face, "Thou hast made my life beautiful."

It is not the love that is returned to which we owe the most gratitude; it is the love that another can stimulate in us that holds us debtors and places us in a position that we can never fully repay. If another has sent a shaft of the infinite Love into our hearts, we are born out of this world into the Real, where "a thousand years is as one day." "Whosoever loveth another is born of God," the infinite Love, and can ask no return, just the privilege of loving. Love is sublimely independent, and asks, "And if I love thee, what is that to thee?" Its satisfaction is in just being Love.

The yearning tenderness of God, Hosea had found, "I will heal their back-sliding, I will love them freely; for mine anger is turned away from him. I will be as the dew unto Israel; he shall blossom as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree and his smell as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and blossom as the vine; the scent thereof shall be the wine of Lebanon.

And returned Israel shall say:

"Ephraim--What have I to do any more with idols?

"The Lord--I have answered and will regard him.

"Ephraim--I am like a green fir tree.

"The Lord--From me is thy fruit found."

(Modern Readers Bible.)