

SPIRITUALITY OF THE JUDAEAN DESERT III:

Amos of Tekoa

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THE term 'desert' (*midbar*) in the Bible will often mislead people in our western countries, for what is meant by the term is, as often as not, something like uncultivated pasture-land or steppe-land. The root *debar* in cognate languages means 'to drive to pasture', and the *midbar* is the zone between cultivable land and absolute desert, a zone to which cattle could be and still are driven to gather what food they can. Such a 'desert' does in fact respond to beneficent rain, and sometimes appears, for a short time at least, quite green. The psalmist knew how the desert could be green, and sang of how 'the stream of plenty flows; flows through the desert pastures, till all the hill-sides are clad' (Ps. lxxv, 13). And Job tells of the almighty power of God who has 'carved a channel for the tempestuous rain, a vent for the echoing thunderstorm, that they should fall on some lonely desert where foot of man never trod, water those trackless wastes, and make the green grass spring . . .' (Job xxxviii, 26).

That green grass can appear in the short rainy season stirred the Hebrew imagination and furnished many an image for prophetic and apocalyptic passages, as in the magnificent vision of Isaias:

Thrills the barren desert with rejoicing; the wilderness takes heart and blossoms, fair as the lily. Blossom on blossom, it will rejoice and sing for joy; all the majesty of Lebanon is bestowed upon it, all the grace of Carmel and Saron. All alike shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God . . . God himself is coming to deliver you! Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and deaf ears unsealed; the lame man, then, shall leap as the deer leap, the speechless tongue cry aloud. Springs will gush out in the wilderness, streams flow through the desert; ground that was dried up will give place to pools, barren land to wells of clear water; where the serpent had his lair once, reed and bulrush will show their green. (xxxv, 1-7.)

Most of the year however the steppe-land is a hard and parched domain. We read how king Ozias tried to remedy the penury of

water by digging cisterns (II Paralip. xxvi, 10). Ruined cisterns of the past can still be seen in the Judæan desert—sad reminders of war's destruction or man's neglect. Yet other terms for the wilderness were *Arabah* and *Yeshimon*. *Arabah* was used specially of the wastes of the lower Jordan and Dead Sea depression; and *Yeshimon* is from a root verb denoting devastation or desolation. Jeremias mourns the desolate pastures of the Judæan desert land:

Sad dirge be made for the hills, lament for all the wide pasture lands that are scorched bare and left untravelled; silent the herdsman's call; birds that nested there, cattle that grazed there, fled and gone. (Jerem. ix, 10.)

The desert of Juda in particular is a well-characterized region, some fifty miles long and fifteen miles wide, stretching to the east from the cultivated Judæan hill ridge, on the line Bethel, Jerusalem, Hebron, and then generally downwards towards the Dead Sea. There are many rounded slopes, but more is rocky and broken up by the deep *wadis* or torrent-beds, which mostly run eastward. The new testament alludes to this region as 'the wilderness of Judæa' or 'the desert' (Matt. iii, 1; Mark i, 4; Luke iii, 2). On its borders are and were a number of small towns or villages, but—a glance at the map will clearly show this—no permanent habitations within the devastated area, save only the oases of Jericho and Engaddi. One of these border-places is referred to by St John, for before his passion our Lord retired to Ephrem 'in the country which borders on the desert' (John xi, 54).

Naturally enough the wilderness with its rocky fastnesses was a ready refuge of the persecuted as of bandits; and David himself was for a time leader of a band of resolute outlaws in that same region (cf. I Kings xxii-xxiv). Centuries later the Maccabees sought refuge there from the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes: '... and now Mattathias raised a cry within the city, Who loves the law? Who keeps the covenant unbroken? Out with you and follow me! So fled he with his sons into the hill-country, leaving his possessions behind, there in the city. Many there were that went out into the desert at this time, for love of truth and right. . . . (I Macc. ii, 27-29.)

Later the sectaries of Qumrân also sought refuge in this same region. Then again, later, in a rather different way, the many caves of the wilderness became favourite haunts of monks and hermits. Apart from the regular *laurae* and monasteries, as at

St Theodosius or St Euthemius, many would spend Lent in a cave of the *Paneremos* or all-deserted region.

A great central portion of this Desert of Juda was termed the wilderness of Tekoa, lying mostly as it did eastwards of the village of that name. The site was south of Bethlehem, on an eminence, now covered with ruins of various periods, and further within the desert region than most of the border villages. Thus Cassian was more than ordinarily impressed with Tekoa's solitude, and realized that eastwards and southwards it stretched for many miles.¹ St Jerome uses a mention of Tekoa to dilate on how Palestine is bordered by wildernesses unfit for cultivation but still good for rough pastures: 'Tekoa is six miles from Bethlehem, but beyond it we find not the slightest hamlet . . . so vast is this wilderness which stretches to the Red Sea and to the bounds of Ethiopia, Persia and India. And as the ground is parched and gritty it bears no crop whatever; shepherds however abound and compensate for the earth's sterility with an abundance of flocks' (*Prol. in Amos*. P.L. 25:990). It is this portion of the wilderness which is referred to in Maccabees (I Macc. ix, 33); here too Josaphat won his extraordinary victory over Ammon and Moab, more by power of prayer than by any feat of arms (I Paralip. xx, 20). But Tekoa is and was more famous still for the great prophet who had come from there centuries before, Amos 'who had been of the herdsmen of Tekoa' (Amos i, 1), who was snatched from a life of familiarity with the wilderness and its hard and humble ways, to be a prophet of God in cities and among the rich and heedless and all-too-knowing.

Amos, the herdsman of Tekoa, clung to his lowly origins. He was from the desert's edge, and never forgot it. As a boy we can imagine him walking those silent hills and crags and ravines. He lifted stones and found lizards. Perhaps with a friend he would cast stones into a dark and frightening cave (like the Arab boys who in this way lit upon the Dead Sea scrolls). Sometimes too he might light a fire to ward off a fearsome lion that was going about seeking whom it might devour. Certainly there were lions in the wilderness then, and up to St Jerome's time. And lions affected the thought and language of Amos: 'The Lord will roar from Sion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem . . .' (i, 2); and again: 'The lion shall roar, who shall not fear? The Lord

¹ Solitudo vastissima et usque ad Arabiam ac Mare Mortuum [Coll. VI. PL. 44, 64.]

God has spoken, who shall not prophesy?' (iii, 7, cf. iii, 4). As he grew older he learnt a craft which he could ply in the happier cultivated parts of the country, for as well as a herdsman he was, we are told, a 'dresser of sycamore trees' (by which is meant a species of fig tree). This herdsman-craftsman had nothing in him to predispose him to prophesy; he blurts out: 'I am no prophet, nor a son of the prophets' (vii, 14). Yet, very surely, God said to him, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'; and he had 'visions concerning Israel'. As with Gideon, David, Eliseus and others, Amos is in the line of prophets taken by God from simple conditions of life to a sublime ministry under God and for God. From being nothing of a prophet he was fashioned into a typical prophet, a seer (vii, 12), one who had visions (i, 1) and to that extent was a depository of the secrets of God and in the most authentic line of true prophecy. Though he had 'visions concerning Israel' yet, his book shows, his pre-occupation was with the whole people of God. He lived and prophesied under Ozias of Juda (739-727 B.C.) and Jeroboam II of Israel (784-744 B.C.), when the two kingdoms had long been separated, and when North-South feeling was unabated, and so his preaching in the northern capital was resented: 'Seer, be off with you to Juda and eat bread there and there prophesy. But no longer be a prophet at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary and a house of the kingdom' (vii, 12). Amazias' language suggests that the power of the crown had taken the place of the sovereignty of God advocated by Amos. Bethel (—'house of God') becomes on the lips of Amazias 'house of the kingdom, or royal domain', and Amos' preaching of a pure service of God was no doubt deemed too uncomfortable for established and royal conformity, which did not shrink from compromises with the cults of Canaan. Anyway, Amos, like an Isaias or Jeremias after him, had the privilege of being rejected because of his God-given message.

Thus far we have spoken of Amos the man and the prophet, against the background of Tekoa's wilderness. Now let us consider some facets of his teaching:

(a) God is Lord of all creation and Lord of all history and it is an anguishing thought that man should so often have left his Creator.

iv, 6-13 Further, I gave you not a bite in all your towns,
and lack of bread in all your regions

—and you did not return to me,
Oracle of the Lord!

So too, I have refused you rain,
for three months before the harvest.

I caused rain to fall
on this town and not on that.

One plot received showers,
another, waterless, has withered.

Two or three towns staggered to another
to drink, and were not sated

—and you did not return to me,
Oracle of the Lord!

I smote you with blight and rot of corn;
your many vines, your gardens,
fig-trees and olives have been ravaged by locusts,

—and you did not return to me,
Oracle of the Lord!

I cast upon you a plague
after the manner of Egypt.

I slew your young men by the sword,
while your horses were seized as loot
and the stench filled your camp and your nostrils,

—and you did not return to me,
Oracle of the Lord!

I caused upheaval in your midst
like that divine overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrha.
You have been as a brand snatched from the fire,

—yet you did not return to me,
Oracle of the Lord.

Therefore, thus I will do to you, O Israel,
and as I will do this to you,

prepare to meet your God, O Israel.

See! He who fashioned the hills, created the wind,
who reveals to a man his own devising,

who makes the morn and the dark,

who strides over the high-places of earth,

His name is the Lord, God of hosts!

The dramatic build-up of these verses shows a unity which culminates in the conclusion: 'His name is the Lord, God of hosts!'. Five times we are given a call and inducement to penance:

'yet you did not return to me'. It remains then that God will appear himself: 'Prepare to meet your God, O Israel'. There is a parallel climax in Job, where the long-drawn discussions end with an appearance of God himself. Amos sensed the chosen people's history as it was even at that early stage, and God had intervened and made himself felt in time of famine, and God's mysterious providence was ever at work, giving rain to one place and not to another. Sirocco, mildew and locusts have ravaged vines, figs and olives, the signs of God's covenant. Then a recall of the people's history, '... the manner of Egypt ...', then back to pre-Mosaic, or primitive and universal history. Each of these crises should have led to or brought back to God. Each remained uncomprehended. There was no return to God. So God decides to intervene himself; and God will appear as Lord of creation. And all this, for us who come 'at the fulness of time' is by way of parable and a prefiguring of what was to be seven hundred years after Amos, when God appeared in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ who is Lord of the new creation.

Further to the assertion of creation (in iv, 13 above), Amos teaches that God made Pleiades and Orion (v, 8), and 'his the arched stairway of heaven, his the knitted frame of earth' (ix, 6); and there is a continual creation and sustenance of all, for God changes dawn to dusk (iv, 13), creates locusts (vii, 1), produces floods and earthquakes (ix, 5). Creation is for Amos a pact or *berith* which manifests the presence of God, and he is well aware of that presence and, indeed, of the inescapability of God: '... flee they, never a fugitive shall escape; from the pit beneath I will drag them up, from heaven above I will drag them down; hide they on Carmel's heights, I will search and seize them, lurk they in the sea's depths, my writ runs there ...' (ix, 2-3).

(b) At the outset of Amos' teaching is a great deal directed against Damascus, Tyre, Gaza, Ammon, etc., as well as against Israel and Juda; thus the very first chapter has its sinister and repetitive sentence: 'Because of the three- or four-fold crime of Damascus (Gaza, etc.), I will not change its fate ...'. It need not surprise us that the herdsman of Tekoa should have had his mind on other countries, and some quite far away. One brought up at Tekoa would have daily got up and seen, to the east, the astonishing panorama of the hill ranges of Ammon, Moab and Edom, all of which, in the clear light of Palestine, are seen from that high

point which is Tekoa. With the borders of three countries there before him all his life, he only had to imagine and learn about Damascus, Tyre and Gaza. But as his prophetic work took him to Samaria, he will also have had first-hand knowledge of these other regions too.

(c) An important theme in Amos is his preoccupation with the poor and lowly and oppressed, and his denunciation of loose and luxurious living. A great reproach against Israel is that 'it has sold the just man for silver, and the poor man for a pair of shoes'. The reference is to the outrageous and unjust seizure of the poor for debt, even when the debt was only to the value of a pair of shoes, and it may well have been a proverbial expression (cf. viii, 6). Even more, Israel 'will make slaves of poor honest folk', and 'ground in the dust are the poor man's rights, shouldered aside the claim of the unbefriended' (ii, 7). Such shameful conduct in the northern kingdom is to come to the knowledge of Philistine and pagan: 'publish it in the houses of Azotus and in the houses of the land of Egypt; assemble yourselves upon the mountains of Samaria, and behold the many follies in the midst thereof, and them that suffer oppression in the inner rooms thereof . . .' (iii, 9). Amos felt for the poor and unprivileged and stood for them. It is probably misleading to talk, as some have done, of the 'social doctrine' of Amos. Amos was not a demagogue, nor a 'socialist' with all its modern connotations. Still less an egalitarian. But he contributed much to that feeling for the poor which is such a prominent theme of the scriptures. Hebrew has many words for the poor, the lowly, the miserable, the oppressed; and with many words goes the growth of a tradition of the 'underprivileged', of those who are in want, and crying to God to help their inhuman lot. The prophet Amos among them bears witness to this tradition: cf. Isaias x, 2:

Woe to the lawgivers of unjust law,
 woe to the scribes of oppressive decrees,
 woe to you who refuse justice for lowly ones (*dallîm*),
 who make away the right of the poor (*aniyyîm*) of my people.
 and cf. Ps. lxxxii, 3-4:

Do justice to the oppressed and orphaned;
 to the unhappy (*'ani*) and the poor (*resh*) do right;
 free the miserable (*dal*) and the pauper (*'ebyon*),
 from impious hands save them.

With feeling for the poor goes indignation against the pampered rich of Samaria: 'Hear this word, ye fat kine of Samaria that are in the mountains of Samaria. You that oppress the needy and crush the poor, and say to your husbands: Bring and we will drink . . .' (iv, 1). ' . . . your manifold crimes and your grievous sins: enemies of the just, taking bribes and oppressing the poor in the gate . . .' (v, 12). ' . . . you that sell refuse for wheat . . .' (viii, 6). The 'houses built with square stones', the 'beds of ivory', or 'houses of ivory', and wine bowls and luxurious wealth generally, all come in for Amos' censure. He never forgot his origin on the desert edge; he never grew reconciled to the material civilization of a Samaria which is in part known to archaeologists of today by the now famous ivories of Samaria, delicate little plaques of ivory which were inlaid in the furniture or woodwork of the time.

Against injustice and oppression of the poor generally, Amos preaches a doom to come (v, 27), and positively 'Seek ye good and not evil . . . hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate: it may be the Lord, the God of hosts may have some mercy on the remnant of Israel' (xv, 14-15).

(d) At the heart of Amos' thought and the key-point of his book is the notion of a covenant, or *berith*, made with the whole nation. God's initiative and God's choice is the basis of all essential history:

iii, 1-2 (O children of Israel) hear this oracle
 which the Lord pronounces against you
 and against all the family which I caused
 to come up from Egypt (saying)
 You alone have I lovingly chosen
 from all the families of earth:
 that is why I am remembering
 all your wrongdoings.

Amos addresses the *whole* kingdom: God's message is not for a divided part. God's loving care at the Exodus looms large in all Hebrew thought and prayer: Amos gives it one of its earliest written expressions. 'Lovingly chosen' is an attempt to represent the rich connotation of *yadah*, more especially when it is God who 'knows' with love and friendship. This knowledge of God, or election of love, is of all time and enduring: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love, and having compassion have drawn

you to me' (Jerem. xxxi, 3). 'I am remembering' and bearing with the sin of the people for which they are responsible, until the due time of punishment. The sin is here termed 'deviation' (*awah*), as implying deviation from the Covenant of God.

It might be argued that Amos equally forcefully denies Israel's election in ix, 7:

If I brought Israel out of Egypt,
have I not also brought
Philistines from Caphtor
Aram from Qir?

Rather does Amos teach that all God's elections are a background to Israel's election. Amos was universalist, already in 740 B.C. Israel is the first-fruits, the special people of God; not the only people of a God who is Lord of all peoples as of all creation. (e) Then there are Amos' messianic passages. We say Amos', despite the critics—who are now no longer unanimous.

ix, 11-15 In that day I will raise up the house of David that is fallen,
I will repair its breaches, raise up its ruins;
and I will build it as in days of old.
So may they possess what is left of Edom,
and all the nations upon which my name was called,
—Oracle of the Lord, who will do this.
See, days are coming—Oracle of the Lord—
when ploughing will touch on reaping,
the pressing of the grape hard upon sowing of seed;
when mountains will run with new wine
and hill-tops flow with it.
I will bring back the captivity of my people Israel;
they will rebuild ruined towns (and dwell there),
they will plant vineyards and drink their wine,
they will make gardens and eat their fruits.
I will plant them in their own soil
and never again will they be plucked up,
from off the soil which I have given to them
—Word of the Lord, thy God.

The messianic promises include a restoration of the Davidic kingdom (consistent with Amos' preaching to *both* kingdoms virtually seen as one); the recovery of material prosperity (which in *that day* will not be misused by man's cupidities), and endless

possession of the holy land which is God's gift (a type of the kingdom promised by our Lord).

In the meantime, in this life, Amos gives us God's purest and simplest message: 'Seek ye me, and you shall live' (v, 4)—just two words in Hebrew, but two words which meant everything to Amos. The quest for God was the secret of his life, as it is of ours who, in the fulness of time would seek to have life yet more abundantly.



RELIGIOUS POVERTY AND HUMAN SOCIETY¹

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DOES the religious life have anything to say about how men should live in society? People tend to think that anyone entering chooses a life that is, in human terms, a-social. Even religious orders which exist to be of direct use to society only perform their function from outside society, without getting intimately involved with the lives of the people they serve. And today, more than ever, religious are being reproached with this, even by Catholics. Religious life is too 'other', and religious poverty, in particular, bears slight resemblance to the real poverty in which so many people spend their lives. In fact the religious orders have abandoned the poor and grown indifferent to human misery; it has even been suggested that they aggravate it by their insistent appeals for the means to maintain themselves in their vast establishments. As it stands religious life is not only a-social but quite possibly anti-social as well. Let it adapt itself to new conditions, and identify itself with the aims and outlook of modern society.

But this kind of criticism is only possible, surely, because human and natural values are being used to judge a situation to which they quite simply do not apply. In its essence the religious life is an attempt to realize on earth the ideals of the perfect society shown to us by the life of Christ with his apostles; and

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