Mercy in the Old Testament

by Reed Lessing

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Preface

This booklet is the first in our Mercy Insights series to specifically take up the issue from an Old Testament perspective. Dr. Reed Lessing of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, provides a concise and delightful study of the unique theme of mercy in the Old Testament. As Lessing shows, Yahweh's fundamental "act of mercy in delivering Israel out of Egypt is the springboard for all acts of mercy." Lessing also demonstrates that for the Old Testament prophet Amos, this mercy of Yahweh is expressed in the life of the community by way of social concern. Indeed, "Amos does make it clear that acting unjustly toward marginalized people is a theological issue." The church still has something to learn, and much grace to receive, from the Old Testament!

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Introduction

Today there was a global tragedy of epic proportions. Today 35,000 people died. All of the victims were children. But worst of all, this disaster will happen again and again and again. Every day in our world 35,000 poverty-stricken children die of malnutrition and starvation.[1] But this is only one of numerous challenges that face a church that seeks to witness to the Gospel through acts of mercy. Other pressing horrific issues include people who suffer due to AIDS, unjust laws, forced childhood slavery and prostitution, and the list could go on and on. Too often texts like Deut 15:11, "there will never cease to be some in need on the earth" (cf. also Matt 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8) are improperly understood to be expressions of fatalism; as though poverty is part of the natural order of the world and therefore there is nothing anyone can do about it. Certainly the New Testament instructs the church to respond to the broken and helpless people in the world (e.g., Acts 4:32-37; 2 Cor 8-9; Gal 6:10). But what about the Old Testament? Does it have anything to say to the church as she seeks to address world relief and human care?

Yes it does. What follows is an overview of what the Old Testament teaches in regards to acts of mercy. After a look at the Hebrew word *racham*, often translated "mercy", a general investigation of what the Pentateuch teaches about mercy will provide the foundation for a more focused study of mercy in the book of Amos. The study then concludes by offering several suggestions on how the Old Testament is able to motivate and inform Jesus' call to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Mercy *(Racham)* in the Old Testament

As a noun, *racham* denotes "grace" or "mercy" and is almost always associated in one way or another with Yahweh. He is often described as being great in mercy (e.g., 2 Sam 24:14 – 1 Chon 21:13; Dan 9:18; Neh 9:19). *Racham* sometimes appears with the verb "to give" (e.g., 1 Kings 8:50; Jer 42:12), in which case it is always traced back to Yahweh. In poetic texts *racham* is often parallel with *hesed*, or "loyal covenant faithfulness" (e.g., Ps 40:11; Lam 3:22), which indicates that *racham* is never just an emotion — it is always oriented toward a specific action that displays covenantal faithfulness. The adjective from the root racham is *rachum*, and it modifies Yahweh exclusively. It is frequently

paired in poetic texts with "gracious" (*hanun*), e.g., Exod 34:6; "Yahweh is a merciful (*rachum*) and gracious (*hanun*) God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness" (cf. Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:13). Every human act of *racham* in the Old Testament is derived from Yahweh. He is the source of all mercy.

The beliefs of Israel's neighbors in Canaan, Mesopotamia, and Egypt have no such understanding of their deities. The mythologies composed by these pagan people present gods and goddesses who are violent, inaccessible, dominating, and capricious. The characteristics of care and compassion are strikingly absent from these texts.[2] Mercy and compassion are unique to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Also unique is Israel's belief that people are created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors believed in myths portraying people as afterthoughts with no other purpose than to serve the gods and keep them comfortable. In contrast, Israel held to a high view of humanity, whose purpose is to procreate and care for the world (Gen 1:28). Being made in God's image is analogous, in the ancient Near East, to a governing sovereign who cannot be present everywhere in the realm, but who erects statues of himself as witnesses and reminders of who the real sovereign is. By analog, the invisible God has placed human beings in creation so that, upon seeing the human creature, other creatures are reminded of Yahweh's rule (cf. Ps 8:5). To value people is to value Yahweh.

Yahweh places infinite value on each person, even if he or she is outcast and disenfranchised. For example, in Gen 11:30 Sarai is described as being "barren" (*aqarah*). It was through this socially ostracized old woman and her husband Abram that all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). This narrative is paradigmatic in that it demonstrates how Yahweh has a deep affection and affinity with people who have *nothing*. In fact, the barrenness of Israel's three matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah (Gen 25:31), and Rachel (Gen 29:31), highlight the important fact that Yahweh "chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; he chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chooses the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not" (1 Cor. 1:27-28; cf. also Isa. 54:1; Luke 1:7).

Because of His mercy granted to the patriarchs and their wives, Yahweh remembered His covenant with the slaves in Egypt who had nothing. He came down to rescue them (Exod 3:6-7), while at the same time inflicting judgment upon the gods of Egypt (Exod 12:12), whose mythologies encouraged the slavery and marginalization of oth-

ers (Exod 1:8-22). After the exodus, the Old Testament teaches that any system that impoverishes people will be placed under Yahweh's judgment. He hears the cry of the oppressed (Exod 2:23). He feels their pain (Exod 3:7).

By means of the plagues, culminating in the slaughter of the firstborn and the Passover, Yahweh had bound the strong man and plundered his house (cf. Matt 12:29). The Red Sea crossing sealed Israel's deliverance and was a type of baptism (cf. 1 Cor. 10:2). Yahweh had furnished water, quail, and manna (Exod 15:22-17:7; cf. John 6:32-33). He defended them against their enemies (Exod 17:8-16; cf. 1 Cor 15:56-57). God's work constituted the foundation on which his covenant with Israel was built. By the time Israel reached Sinai in Exod 19, they had a long list of experiences indicating that Yahweh's mercy had followed them all the days of their lives (cf. Ps 23:6).

These events highlight a key structural element in the Pentateuch which is the inter-weaving of law and narrative. The law does not stand as an external code but is integrated with Israel's ongoing story. In Exodus, for example, readers move from story (ch. 19) to law (20:1-17) to story (20:18-21) to law (20:22-23:22) to story (ch. 24) to law (chps. 25-31) to story (chps. 32-34). The following interpretive implications for understanding acts of mercy are highlighted by this integration of genres:

1. Mercy is seen not as a response to the law as law, but as a response to the great acts of Yahweh's salvation;
2. The narrative shows that the law is given to those already redeemed; acts of mercy are not a means to achieve salvation;
3. The shape that the law takes in Israel's life is defined by the shape of the narrative action of Yahweh;
4. The motivation for following the law is drawn from Israel's experience with Yahweh rather than from abstract ethical arguments or divine imperatives.

These ideas are best illustrated in the preamble to the covenant at Sinai, which begins with the salvation-work of Yahweh: "I am Yahweh *your* God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exod 20:2). This individualized address from Yahweh, your God, lifts up the importance of internal motivation within a relationship rather than heteronomous imposition ("obey because God said so"). Yahweh's saving relationship with Israel provided the motivation for

each person delivered from Egypt to live lives of mercy. What Horace Hummel writes of the Ten Commandments pertains to the rest of the Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:22-23:19):

> It is of utmost importance to underscore the fact that grammatically the Decalogue is in *indicative*, not imperative form. (The negative is *lo'*, not *'al.*) These are statements of what the believer who has experienced God's grace *will* voluntarily do … They represent the perimeters or boundaries of God's kingship, beyond which the believer will not stray, but *within* which He [*sic*] is essentially free to respond joyfully and voluntarily, as illustrated by the rest of the "laws" or "codes" of the Old Testament.[3]

In reference to the Book of the Covenant, whose stipulations expand on the Decalogue by treating more specific acts of mercy, Hummel asserts, "We could partly describe them as illustrations or examples of faithful response to redemption."[4] This code is introduced and concluded with the First Commandment (Exod 20:22-26; 23:20-23). There are also interspersed throughout the section brief reiterations of the basic injunction not to acknowledge any other god but Yahweh (e.g., Exod 22:19; 22:28; 23:13). Israel's relationship with Yahweh encloses, as it were, every human relationship. Israel loved people because Yahweh first loved Israel (cf. Deut 7:7; 1 John 4:19).

Continuing the narrative, in Exod 25:1-9 Yahweh states to Moses, "have them [the Israelites] make me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them." The sanctuary will bring heaven to earth, allowing Yahweh to take up residency with the people. The Israelites diligently built the sanctuary, or tabernacle (Exod 35-39), and God descended the mountain and dwelt among His people full of grace and truth (cf. John 1:14). At the tabernacle — and later at the temple — Yahweh delivered His means of grace by means of blood sacrifices (cf. Lev 1-7) and priestly Torah instruction. These gifts, along with the exodus redemption, continually empowered Israel to be merciful to others.

In the Pentateuch, the theme of Yahweh's care for the powerless is not only in the Book of the Covenant (e.g., Exod 22:21-24; 22:25; 23:3, 6, 9, 10-11), but also in the Holiness Code (e.g., Lev 19:9-10, 15, 32; 25:35-38), and in Deuteronomy (e.g., 14:28-29; 15:7-11; 26:12-15). Julian Morgenstern has collected and arranged the passages in the Pentateuch into these four categories:

1. Commandments dealing with human relations and im-

plying social responsibility; Lev 19:14, 16-18, 32, 35-36; Deut 19:14; 22:8; 25:13-15.

2. Commandments providing specifically for the protection of the poor and the weak; Exod 22:20-26; 23:3, 6, 9; Lev 19:9-10, 13b, 33; Deut 15:2; 23:16, 20-21, 25, 26; 24:10-15, 17-22.
3. Commandments dealing with the administration of justice; Exod 23:1-3, 6-8; Lev 19:11-13a, 15; Deut 16:19-20; 24:16.
4. Commandments enjoining consideration for animals; Exod 23:4-5; Deut 22:1-4, 6-71, 10; 25:4.[5]

Morgensern's distinctions are useful categories and serve to illustrate the different kinds of mercy that were to be practiced in the Old Testament. The activities in the first category have to do not so much with acts of mercy as they do with what might be called basic honesty and integrity (e.g., honest weights and measures, Lev 19:35-36). Morgenstern's third group concentrates on justice specifically in the courts, but is applicable to every branch of civil administration, while the last category has as its focus the treatment of both animals and their owners.

The applicability of the second group of passages to the present study is more direct, but even then the directions are expressed in broad terms like, "do not mistreat an alien or oppress him … Do not take advantage of a widow or orphan" (Exod 22:21a, 22), while the provisions for gleaning (Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19-22) illustrate how mercy was to be exercised toward those who might be prime targets for mistreatment. Mercy consists not of the extraordinary, but of the ordinary. The pentateuchal legislation as it applies to matters of mercy deals primarily not in detailed casuistry but in the enunciation of broad principles. And yet Jeffries Hamilton is correct when he concludes that one of the features of "social justice in Deuteronomy"— which is closely connected if not synonymous with mercy — is "that doing social justice is not an abstraction but is something which can be detailed."[6]

One detailed and specific pentateuchal text that enjoins mercy upon Israel is the jubilee year. Every fiftieth year Yahweh commanded Israel to restructure her assets. This served as a reminder to the nation that all property and land belonged to Him; they were an exodus people who must never return to a system of slavery (Lev 25:42). The jubilee aimed to dismantle social and economic inequality by releasing

each member from debt (Lev 25:35-42), returning forfeited land to its original owners (vv. 12, 25-28), and freeing slaves (vv. 47-55).

Of course the Pentateuch is not alone in directing and empowering Israel to be merciful to others. The theme is frequent in the Psalter (e.g., 72:2-4, 12-14; 82:3-4; 107:41; 113:7; 132:15; 146:7) and in Proverbs (e.g., 14:21, 31; 19:17; 21:13; 22:9, 22-23; 23:10-11; 29:7, 14; 31:9, 20). At the core of the Old Testament is the teaching that Yahweh's act of mercy in delivering Israel out of Egypt is the springboard for all acts of mercy.

Old Testament Mercy in a Specific Case – Amos

The Old Testament prophets add still another dimension to the practice of mercy. They join their voices with the Pentateuch, Proverbs, and Psalms in exhorting Israel to have compassion for people on the margins. For example, Isaiah 10:1-4 directs a woe-saying against those who oppress widows, orphans, and the poor. The widow has no husband, the orphan no parent, and the poor have no money to give them access to the basic necessities of life. Jeremiah (e.g., 5:28; 7:6), Ezekiel (e.g., 16:49; 18:12), and Zechariah (e.g., 7:10) likewise express Yahweh's concern for marginalized people. The cause of the helpless is the cause of Yahweh.

However, it would be a misreading of prophetic texts to interpret them as if they cared only about justice and mercy and little or nothing about Israel's liturgical life. Unfortunately, passages like Isa 1:10-20 and Hos 6:6 are often understood as promoting acts of mercy in place of worship. But such texts need to be interpreted as examples of "both/and" rather than "either/or" exhortations. For example, a proper reading of Hos 6:6 is that Yahweh desires *both* mercy and sacrifice, the knowledge of God *as well as* whole burnt offerings.

Perhaps the strongest voice for *both* mercy *and* a vibrant liturgical life in Israel's prophetic corpus is that of Amos. This statement might come as a shock to those acquainted with this prophet. Why, isn't Amos a "fire and brimstone" preacher who delights in telling people that they are going to be obliterated by God? And in 5:21-24 doesn't the prophet relegate external forms of worship to a second class status? Indeed, a quick reading of the book might convince someone that Amos is a "turn or burn" zealot, who travels north from Tekoa, dumps Yahweh's wrath at Bethel, and dismisses Israel's liturgical life. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Amos is a great advocate for mercy. This belief is depicted in the

prophet's two-fold plea, "How can Jacob stand because he is so small?" (cf. 7:5). Amos is interceding, not for the "notable men of the foremost nation" (Amos 6:1), but for the masses who are described throughout the book as the righteous and needy people being oppressed by the systemic sin that kept them down and lifted the rich up. "Little Jacob" denotes all of the "small people" throughout the book who are the prime objects of Yahweh's mercy. To know this about Amos is to understand that throughout the rest of the book his disturbing oracles against Israel, Judah, and the nations are not spoken with sadistic glee. Like Jesus after him, Amos looked at the multitudes who were harassed and helpless, sheep without a shepherd — and he had compassion upon them (cf. Matt 9:36).

Throughout his book Amos mentions the same group of "small people" by means of several different referents. A listing is as follows:

1. The "needy" (*evyonim*) 2:6; 4:1; 5:12; 8:4, 6
2. The "poor" (*dalim*) 2:7; 4:1; 5:11; 8:6
3. The "oppressed" (*anavim*) 2:7; 8:4
4. The "righteous" (*tsedakim*) 2:6; 5:12

God's compassion for the lowly is also expressed in the New Testament. Mary sings about it (Luke 1:46-55), Jesus preaches about it (Luke 4:18-21), and the disciples model it (Acts 4:32-37; 6:1-6). At the final judgment in Matt 25:31-46 Jesus reflects his compassion for the stranger, the naked, the prisoner, and the hungry.

Representative of the group of "small" people in Amos are "the afflicted ones" (*anavim*) (e.g., Amos 2:7; 8:4). The noun is synonymous with hardship, torment, pain, and despair. It denotes the darkness of human experience, the shadow side of life. Many texts employing *anavim* demand Yahweh's intervention. An often-used idiom is, "Yahweh saw the oppression of …" (e.g., Gen 29:32; 1 Sam 1:11; Ps 119:153). Oppression is always a misery that affects Yahweh. The *anavim* enjoy Yahweh's special protection (e.g., Isa 11:4; 26:6; 61:1; Zeph 3:12). The Septuagint translates *anavim* in Amos 2:7 with *tapeinon* ("humble"), while in 8:4 the word *ptochous* ("poor") is used. In the NT, *ptochous* takes on the accent of humble ones (e.g., Matt 5:3; 11:5; Luke 4:18). Paul places priority on the lowly as well (1 Cor 1:26-28) and maintains that Christ became poor so that the baptized might become rich in grace (2 Cor 8:9). It is for this reason that Jesus announces that He comes "to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18; cf. James 2:5). Like Jesus, Paul was eager to "remember the poor" (Gal 2:10).

In the book of Amos the anavim, along with "needy", "poor", and "righteous", were being abused sexually (2:7b), fiscally (2:8; 5:11), judicially (5:10), spiritually (2:12), and vocationally (2:7; 4:1; 5:11). There was no justice or righteousness for these people, who were on the edges of Israelite society, because the nation's leadership was rotten at its core (e.g., 2:6-8; 4:1-5; 7:10-17). The elite denied their core identity as Yahweh's people; the once-oppressed in Egypt had become the oppressors of their own countrymen.

Israel's sins against the needy are a greater abomination to Yahweh than are the sins of the nations (cf. Amos 1:3-2:3). The nations mistreated unknown foreigners, whereas Israel's leaders were guilty of oppressing members of their own brotherhood. Rebelling against Yahweh's clear command (cf. e.g., Exod 21:2-11; Lev 25:35-43; Deut 15:7-18; 24:15), Israel's leaders were oblivious to the needs of the poor, and to oppress the poor was an indication that they did not fear Yahweh (Lev 25:43).

But it would be a misreading of Amos to believe that he idealized the poor or their poverty. The poor were not righteous because they had been denied their rights, but rather because *Yahweh had reckoned their faith as righteousness* (Gen 15:6; Hab 2:4; Rom 3:19-31). Responding to their gift of a righteous standing before Yahweh, these poor people were faithful to their covenantal calling and the rich were not.

The purpose of Amos' advocacy for the poor is not to put them on a pedestal, but to point out that Israel's leaders will have to face judgment because of their treatment of these people. Amos did not advocate class warfare; the righteous poor will be vindicated by Yahweh and Yahweh alone. The prophet's oracles call for conversion, not revolution.

At the heart of the book of Amos is the prophet's admonition toward Israel's leadership to practice justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedekah*). These two words are paired together in Amos 5:7, 24, and 6:12, as well as in almost eighty other texts in the Old Testament. *Mishpat* and *tsedekah* were to mark Israel off as different from the rest of the nations (e.g., Deut 4:8). The charter of Israel's existence was fair and just ethical action in every realm of life. And just as Israel was called upon to be merciful because Yahweh was merciful, so the nation was to practice justice and righteousness because first and foremost *mishpat* and *tsedekah* are attributes of Yahweh (cf. Jer 9:24). In fact all Old Testament ethics are an expression of Yahweh's character and originate in Him.

The word pair "justice and righteousness" does not occur in pen-

tateuchal legal texts. However, Abraham is described by Yahweh as someone who does "justice and righteousness" (Gen 18:19). The words appear in wisdom texts, e.g. Prov 16:8, 21:3. Wisdom may even say of herself, "I walk in the path of righteousness (*tsedekah*), in the ways of justice (*mishpat*)." Wisdom is summed up using this word pair (e.g., Prov. 1:3; 2:9).

Mishpat denotes decisions, judgments, and laws, while *tsedekah* is the underlying principle and relationship that finds expression in *mishpat*. Put another way, *tsedekah* is the basis for a person's relationship with Yahweh and *mishpat* is an expression of that relationship. Marginalized people in society receive mishpat when they are housed, fed, clothed, and incorporated into the economic fabric of the community. *Mishpat* begins with Yahweh's declaration of tsedekah to all who believe. This passive gift of *tsedekah* that comes through faith in Yahweh's mercy empowers active *mishpat* that seeks a more just and humane world.

In Amos 5:21-24 it appears as though the prophet categorically rejects Israel's worship. But like Hos 6:6, the main problem wasn't Israel's worship, but Israel's conduct *outside* of worship. Amos does not offer the people advice to make their festivals more meaningful like "a few less sacrifices here, a few more songs there." The only remedy is consistent moral and ethical action. If *mishpat* and *tsedekah* are not present, "religious life, with all its ritual accoutrements, becomes a sham."[7]

In Amos 5:24 the prophet pictures *mishpat* and *tsedekah* as a surging, churning and cleansing stream. They do not entail merely theological or theoretical ideas. Justice and righteousness are "self-giving and neighbor-regarding."[8] But in following other gods (cf. Amos 2:7; 5:26; 8:14), Israel's leaders adopted systems of belief and behavior that were opposed to Yahweh's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 17:18). The elite worshipped fertility gods and goddesses, whose stories contained violence, oppression, injustice, and sexual license. Their action reflected these narratives rather than the narrative of redemption from Egypt and the inheritance of the Promised Land. Jeremiah 2:5 and 2 Kings 17:15 indicate that the object of worship becomes the pattern for life; "and they walked after the worthless god and they became worthless."[9]

At the heart of Amos 5:24 is a water metaphor. "But let justice (*mishpat*) roll like the waters, and righteousness (*tsedekah*) like a never-failing wadi." "Waters" and "never-failing wadi" complement each other in that the meaning of "waters" is made clearer by the following reference to a wadi that is never-failing, perennial, steady flowing,

permanent; that is, it is supported by a wellspring or underground reservoir.

What is this additional source of water? Yahweh is Israel's only source of life (cf. Amos 5:4, 6, and 14). His declaration of righteousness to all who believe (cf. Gen 15:6) provides the wellspring to live a life characterized by *mishpat* and *tsedekah*. Israel did not trust Yahweh's provision of righteousness, so their intermittent, occasional, and sporadic ethical and moral conduct is like a wadi that only flows when it rains. Worshipers attended to the liturgical festivals, but justice and righteousness failed to flow out into the irrigation channels of daily life and relationships.

The torrential flow of a year-round wadi emphasizes power, permanence, and dependability. Most wadis flow with water in the rainy season, but when water is needed most, in the arid season, they become "a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Ps 63:1). Apart from trusting Yahweh's gift of righteousness, justice and righteousness in Israel were dehydrated, dry, and dead.[10]

Climactically, Jesus provides the free gift of living water that delivers His love *to* the baptized. His surging love then moves *through* them out into the world (cf. John 7:38-39). Baptismal cleansing and new life (cf. Titus 3:4-7; John 3:5) is made possible because of Christ's sacrificial death upon the cross. Water flowed from His riven side (John 19:34) to heal and cleanse all sinners. Sacramentally, this same water flows into the baptismal font to forgive filth, quench thirst, and defeat death. Apart from the baptized life freely imparted by Jesus, justice and righteousness will never cascade as a river of mercy.

Amos indicates as much. In 9:11 he envisions the day when Yahweh will raise "David's fallen booth." The restoration of the Davidic era implies that justice and righteousness will abound in Israel. Justice and righteousness marked the Davidic era (cf. 2 Sam 8:15) and were to be the defining marks of every Israelite king (cf. Ps 72:1).

Justice and righteousness, so central to Amos, will only be accomplished by the restoration of the Davidic line fulfilled in Jesus the Christ (e.g., Matt 15:22; 20:31; Rom 1:3). This is in harmony with the rest of the prophetic corpus. For example, Jeremiah promises a "Righteous Branch," a Davidic leader who "will enact justice and righteousness in the land" (23:5); He will be called "Yahweh is our righteousness" (23:6). Isaiah 11 begins with the image of the shoot from Jesse, given before in Isa 6:13. The use of "Jesse" rather than "David" in v. 1 and again in v. 10 indicates that this new king is not only of the lineage

of David, but indeed a new David (Jer 30:9; Ezek 34:23-24; Hos 3:5). The Messiah coming from the house of David is also affirmed elsewhere (Isa 16:5; 55:4-5; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Ezek 34:23-25; Zech 12:7-12; 13:1). Matthew's genealogy (1:6, 17), Luke's birth narrative (Luke 2:4), and Paul's sermon in Acts 13:22-23 confirm that this promise of a Messiah is fulfilled in Jesus. According to Isa 52:13-53:12, the way in which the Messiah will bring forth His righteous rule and justice (Isa 9:2-7; 11:11-16) is through His humble suffering and death. Christ's death and resurrection achieved a righteous standing for all believers. Those who are declared righteous by faith (e.g., 2 Cor 5:21) are also empowered to live lives of justice and mercy (e.g., Rom 12).

Conclusions

Jesus gave His disciples one mandate: to make disciples from among all the nations (Matt 28:18-20). The Great Commission, however, does not mean the church must remain passive in its engagement with a myriad of earthly issues that continue to face people.[11]

It is unfortunate, however, that many Christians believe the word "spiritual" means otherworldly piety. They have been taught that a "spiritual" person is one whose inner eyes are cast heavenward in prayer and contemplation, focusing on the joys of the life to come. To be "spiritual" implies that one is life-denying; it suggests communing with one's heavenly Creator by focusing upon the invisible realities and eternal mysteries of God's holiness. To live "spiritually" is often thought of in terms of passive detachment form this world, a transcending of the self to a higher, more sublime world. A "spiritual" person is really consumed with one agenda: "to win souls for Jesus." All other activity is inferior and lacking in priority.

But the Old Testament in general, and Amos in particular, challenges the church to renounce this type of dualism where spiritual issues are divorced from social issues, as if the latter were of no spiritual significance, and as if God had no better vision to offer the world. "The vertical dimension of faith — our confidence in the justifying grace of God in Christ — is accompanied by horizontal effects."[12]

Jesus not only offers the free gift of life *after* death; He also empowers the baptized for life *before* death. And this life is to intercede and assist orphans, widows, the diseased, the disenfranchised, all of the "small people" (cf. Amos 7:2, 5) for whom our Lord was so concerned about during His earthly ministry (i.e., Mark 10:46-52 — blind Bartimaeus; Matt. 15:22-28 — the Canaanite woman's sick daughter;

Luke 8:41-56 — Jairuis' deceased daughter and the woman with the flow of blood).

Of course, assisting the poor, working toward fairer wages, lobbying for a more humane way to address immigration, and so on, are not in any way salvatory. Society cannot be governed by the Gospel, and salvation will never be accomplished by means of political achievement. Although Amos takes up the cause of human need and destitution throughout his book, he never proposes concrete ways to eliminate poverty. Nor does he address issues of responsibility in terms of government or the private sector. However, Amos does make it clear that acting unjustly toward marginalized people is a *theological* issue. Material and economic poverty is an outrage that is not in accord with God's will. Yahweh hears the cries of people who are enslaved in economic systems that create intense suffering. Andersen and Freedman write: "The issue of right behavior to one's neighbors is the ultimate test of true religion, if not its actual essence and substance. It is not a substitute for theology but its necessary adjunct."[13] Martin Luther famously puts it this way:

> Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, and without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.[14]

Christians are resident aliens (Phil 3:20; 1 Pet 1:1, 2:11). Solving political and social issues brings only provisional order and peace. The church must be involved in public life. This, however, is penultimate; giving the gifts of the Gospel and Sacraments is *ultimate*. The danger may be that the church involves itself in the latest issue rather than the eternal issue.

Although the church has no divine mandate to address politics and economics in any specific way, it may, however, seek to catechize and empower its laity so that they faithfully speak to current issues in the four orders where God has placed them: marriage and family, work, public life, and church.[15] Preferring this indirect way of making

public impact, Lutheran pastors are called upon to educate and equip their laity to engage the world ethically in their respective vocations.[16] Benne calls this, "the ethics of character."[17]

As the church heeds Amos' call to channel Yahweh's justice and righteousness into the world, dangers are at least three-fold: (1) expect too much and offer the world a false hope; (2) deny the true mission, the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments; and/or (3) simplistically apply biblical texts to complex issues. However, "the Lutheran vision leads to a nonutopian view of history that is not cynical."[18]

The church works for relative victories while it prays for the final coming of the kingdom of God, when "David's fallen booth" (Amos 9:11) will be completely restored when the Son of Man comes again. By anticipating another kingdom from another place, the church, through its preaching, liturgy, and catechesis, undercuts the morally ambiguous kingdom of this world and its pretentious estimation of itself. The church best confronts injustice in the world by being different than, but not separate from, the world. As the church awaits the Second Coming of her Lord, the baptized are called upon to intercede and live for "Jacob who is so small," and to marshal resources in order to lovingly address human need.

Notes

1 As noted in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 2, eds. David Clark and Robert Rakestraw (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 339.

2 Studies addressing the characteristics of these deities and their resulting anthropologies include Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); and John Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1996).

3 Horace D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979), 74; emphasis his.

4 Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh*, 75.

[5] Julian Morgenstern, "The Book of the Covenant, Part IV," *HUCA* 5 (1962): 59-105, 61.

[6] Jeffries M. Hamilton, *Social Justice and Deuteronomy: The Case of Deuteronomy 15* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 139.

[7] Shalom Paul, *Amos* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1991), 192; cf. J.A. Motyer, who writes that the people were "praying on their knees in the temple and preying on their neighbors everywhere else" (*The Message of Amos* [Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974], 132).

[8] Robert Benne. *Reasonable Ethics: A Christian Approach to Social, Economic, and Political Concerns* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 62.

[9] Douglas Stuart notes that in behaving this way the Israelites were being consistent with the practices of the Canaanites. "Canaanite cultic religion allowed people to be personally immoral and unethical; they could still be right with the gods if they merely supported the cult enthusiastically" (*Hosea-Jonah* [Waco: Word, 1987], 355).

[10] Hans W. Wolff writes: "That which Israel has perverted into wormwood and poison (5:7; 6:12) was meant to effect blessing and prosperity among the people, just as the streams and rivers of a land bring the gift of fertility and life" (*Joel and Amos* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], 264).

[11] The famous advocate for the social gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch, gave this analysis of Lutheranism: "Thus far Lutheranism has buried its ten talents in a tablecloth of dogmatic theory and kept its people from that share in the social awakening which is their duty and right" (*Christianizing the Social Order* [New York: Macmillan, 1912], 125).

[12] Benne, *Reasonable Ethics*, 06.

[13] Francis Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 92; cf. James 1:27.

[14] "The Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," *Luther's Works* American edition 35:370-71.

[15] For example, in Rom. 13:8-14 the apostle instructs how the baptized are called upon to live in the public sphere.

[16] Benne writes: "Affecting people catechetically and sacramentally affirming their identity in Christ is arguably the most fundamental and potentially the most effective way the church affects economic life" (*Reasonable Ethics*, 195).

[17] Benne, *Reasonable Ethics*, 197.

[18] Benne, *Reasonable Ethics*, 79.

Topics for Discussion

1. How is the God of Old Testament Israel different from the gods of Israel's neighbors? (p. 2)

2. How might this be reflected in the followers of these other gods? And Israel's God?

3. The author highlights "the inter-weaving of law and narrative" in the Pentateuch. (p. 3) How does this put the law in a different light than simply "ethical arguments or divine imperatives"?

4. Why is it important that the Ten Commandments are in indicative form, and not imperative? (p. 4)

5. Read Duet. 7:7-9 and 1 John 4:16, 19. How do they compare?

6. What does the author mean by, "Mercy consists not of the extraordinary, but of the ordinary"? (p. 5)

7. Why are the poor reckoned righteous, according to the prophet Amos? (p. 8) Is it from a sense of justice, because their rights had been denied?

8. The O.T. frequently pairs justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedekah*). Does righteousness come from justice? Why or why not? (p. 8-9)

9. How does Yahweh's gift of righteousness differ from the "wadi" of our acts of mercy? (p. 9-10) What does baptism do to this unreliable wadi?

10. How does the O.T. challenge a dualistic spirituality? (p. 11)

11. Give examples of the three dangers listed on page 13. How do we avoid such dangers?