

by Ray W. Burgess, P.G.M.

In all the Lodges under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of the State of Louisiana (and many other Grand Jurisdictions) the Volume of the Sacred Law should be open at the Seventh Chapter of Amos in the Fellowcraft Degree. Why do we do this? This practice is not universal, but ours has the sanctity of long use and the sacredness of the familiar. Also, since one of the working tools of a Fellowcraft Mason is the Plumb, it is appropriate to open the Bible at the story about the plumb line of the Lord.

What do we really know about this man, the prophet Amos? Do we know why the Lord called him to deliver His message of judgment to His people of Israel?

Solomon received from his father, David, a powerful empire. During his latter years, however, it began to fall apart. Expensive building projects sapped the strength and loyalty of native Israelites. As the tributary nations saw the opportunity to assert their independence they did so and Solomon was unable to prevent the disintegration of the empire. Before Solomon's death the Aramaeans severed themselves from his kingdom, and shortly after he was succeeded by Rehoboam, a further split took place. With the breakdown of the mon-archy, subject states declared their independence so that the territory once ruled by David was divided into autonomous units.

The portion of Solomon's empire north of Mount Hermon, extending as far as the Euphrates, revolted and formed the kingdom of Syria, with Damascus as its capital.

South of Syria was the kingdom of the ten tribes, known as Israel, or the Northern Kingdom, with its capital at Shechem. The Northern Kingdom included the larger portion of Palestine proper, an area of about 9,400 square miles.

The kingdom of Judah included the tribe of that name, a portion of Benjamin, and Simeon, which had been incorporated earlier into Judah. Kings of the Davidic line reigned over Judah until the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (587 B.C.)

Solomon retained control over Moab; but his successor found the Moabites hard to keep in subjection. Moab disappeared as a political power when Nebuchadnezzar subjugated the country.

South of the Dead Sea was the kingdom of Edom which had been conquered by David and remained tributary during the reign of Solomon.

The three kingdoms which developed

from Solomon's kingdom in western

Palestine—Syria, Israel and Judah—strove for supremacy. Wars were constant between Israel and Judah. With the threat to both Israel and Judah from the powerful Syrian state of Damascus, there developed a tendency for the two states to reconcile their differences.

During the reigns of Ussiah, king of Judah (783-742 B.C.), and Jeroboam II, king of Israel (786-746 B.C.), the sister states pushed their boundaries out to include the territories which once belonged to Israel under David and Solomon.

Many of the smaller nations were required to pay tribute to Israel and Judah. Both kingdoms collected tolls from the caravans that passed through their lands. In this period in both Israel and Judah there was a transition from an agricultural to a commercial way of life. Industries and cities sprang up which gave rise to a class of wealthy merchants and landholders.

This new wealthy class built winter and summer houses out of hewn stone elaborately adorned and decorated. They had couches inlaid with ivory, covered with the finest imported silk, upon which they reclined while eating prime cuts of meat, drinking wine out of bowls, and listening to strains of varied music.

But the presence of great wealth did not mean that there was no poverty in the land. The extremely rich had obtained much of their wealth by their merciless oppression of the poor, taking exactions of wheat from them. The merchants used false weights and measures in their business transactions, in addition to selling refuse wheat. Because these unscrupulous men were able to bribe the judges, no redress was left for the innocent.

The tragedy of all this was that Israel's social structure was completely disrupted. Israel had originally been a covenant community in which there was no class distinction. All men were equal before the law, God, and one another. Now all this had changed. Wealth, power, and affluence came to some in Israel. But the affluent, rather than using their wealth to benefit all of God's people, squandered it on luxuries and status symbols and used their newly-gained power to keep their poor brothers in subjection.

One would think that, in the light of the conditions just described, there would have been little interest in religion in those days. Just the reverse was true. The people were very religious, especially the rich. Religious services were well attended; tithes and offerings were freely and punctually given; impressive festivals were held; and pilgrimages were made to the important religious centers. They thought they were in the favor of God and under His protection. However, just the opposite was true. The Lord despised their feasts and would not accept their sacrifices. Their worship was a profane travesty. It was an act of men and women morally unclean and unwilling to submit themselves to the searching discipline of God.

God had entered into a covenant with Israel. God had chosen Israel out of all the families of the earth. God had given her a land and had given her people special laws to guide them in the way they should go. It seems that Israel believed the covenant to be inviolable and that it gave her

privileges and a license that no other nation had. But Israel broke her covenant. She used her freedom from bondage to enslave a large segment of her own people. The gift of the land she used for selfish purposes. She rejected the law of God and walked after lies.

What was God going to do in the face of Israel's sin? Would he ignore it? Would he wink at it? Or would he stop turning away the punishment from Israel? The answer was "No," he would stop turning away the punishment from Israel. The end had come upon Israel.

Was there no hope for Israel? Was there no way to escape the impending judgment of God? There was only a slight possibility—only that possibility found in the sovereignty of God. Here is where we begin the story about Amos.

Very little is known about the man Amos. He is never mentioned by any other biblical writer. All the information we have about him comes from the little book which bears his name. Amos' name probably means "burdened" or "burden-bearer."

Amos lived in Tekoa, a village in Judah about 11 miles south of Jerusalem and 18 miles west of the Dead Sea. Tekoa was located in a barren rockbound region surrounded on three sides by limestone hills and a breath-taking view of the Dead Sea.

Amos was a shepherd or herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees (wild figs). He was probably a very poor man since his sympathies were with the poor against their rich oppressors. Although he was a shepherd and one who performed menial tasks, he was by no means uneducated. His formal training might have been nil, but he was a keen observer of the ways of God and men. Awareness and sensitivity characterized the man. His literary style was free and pure.

Amos lived in the time of the earthquake, just as the Northern Kingdom of Israel was coming to a close. Seemingly before anyone else in his generation, Amos heard the lion's roar of God's wrath. He is generally recognized as the first of the writing prophets in Israel. He introduced a new element into Old Testament prophecy. He was the first to preach a message of judgment that meant the end of the kingdom of Israel.

At about 760 B.C. God called Amos to deliver His message of judgment to the people of Israel. In spite of his humble background, he was the one God chose to preach His message of repentance and warning to a rebellious nation. Amos possessed a sense of unquestioned obedience and a clear proclamation of God's message. He was committed to the Lord and His principles of holiness and righteousness.

Amos began his ministry with biting words of judgment against the six nations surrounding the land of Judah and Israel. Next he announced God's judgment against Judah, but Amos was only warming up to his main objective: a vivid description of God's judgment against the nation of Israel. Amos condemned the people of Israel for their oppression of the poor; worship of idols; rejection of God's salvation; and defilement of the Lord's holy name.

Twice Amos saw the judgment of God coming and interceded for Israel, and God turned away his judgment. But with the third vision of the plumb line, we come to the title of this dissertation.

“Thus He showed me: and behold

the Lord stood upon a wall made by

a plumb line, with a plumb line in His hand.

“And The Lord said unto me, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, a plumb-line. And said the Lord, Behold, I will set a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel:

“I will not again pass by them any

more. ‘ ‘

Amos 7:7-8

The prophet Amos was the prophet of righteousness and he saw the Lord God as judging Israel by means of the plumb line, signifying the unchanging standards of that righteousness.

Let us look further at this plumb line.

What is a plumb line? It is a simple tool made of a cord with a weight attached to one end. It is used by brick masons and other builders to test the verticality of a wall or other structures. If a wall or a foundation leans, it is out-of-plumb.

Why did God say, “I will set a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel?” Because the plumb admonishes us to walk uprightly in our several stations before God and man. The people of Israel had sinned and in spite of the warnings of Amos, they had not reentered the fold. God made it very plain that each man must try himself by the unerring standard of the plumb line. The plumb line is the symbol of uprightness of character, of integrity, of honest and fair dealings among persons. To plumb one’s life and actions is to test them by the eternal laws to God. In all these tests, the people of Israel had failed. That’s why He said, “I will set a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.”

So it is with Freemasonry. The real worth of a Mason can never be measured in the opinion of his fellows or in the Masonic honors he has attained. The standard by which a Mason must be judged is by his own evaluation of his conduct and by the principles which he knows to be the unerring and unchanging ones.

What can a Freemason expect to get

from Freemasonry? The rewards of

Freemasonry and the wages of Masons are endless, so long as a man is willing to strive for them. If he is content to be a "button Mason," paying his dues merely for the privilege of wearing a pin, this is just what he will get out of Masonry. If he is content to be a "knife-and-fork Mason," showing up at his lodge only when there is some type of banquet, he will receive only this from Masonry.

If, however, he measures himself by the plumb, and sets his standards accordingly, he will benefit from Masonic education, Masonic philosophy and from the association with the finest men in his community.

The standard by which a man judges himself as a Mason is the same unerring principle by which he judges himself as a family man, as a churchman, as a business-man, and as a citizen. He will learn to walk uprightly in all his endeavors, learning from the plumb the lesson of rectitude of conduct. Each man must stand by the plumb line which is set in the midst of God's people.

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