

Amos and Zacchaeus

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There are several links between Amos and Zacchaeus. These centre around Christ as the spiritual "herdman, and a gatherer of sycomore fruit". By giving to the poor, Zacchaeus manifests an important theme in the prophecy of Amos.

IN LUKE 19:1,2 it is written, "And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich". The meeting which took place between the Lord Jesus and Zacchaeus has some background in the prophecy of Amos. In this article we will consider this background.

Jericho

In the days of Elisha it was said of Jericho, "the situation of this city is pleasant" (2 Kgs. 2:19). This was still true in the first century and explains why rich men such as Zacchaeus chose to live there.

The city is portrayed in the book of Joshua as being typical of the whole land. Joshua said to the spies, "Go view the land, even Jericho" (Josh. 2:1), as though viewing the city would give an accurate snapshot of the land as a whole. Joshua later was to say, "And ye went over Jordan, and came unto Jericho: and the men of Jericho fought against you, the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I delivered them into your hand" (24:11). To fight against Jericho was to fight against all the nations of the land. No doubt there were representatives from the various nations in the city to gather intelligence about the threat posed by the Israelites. So Jericho was not a peripheral city but embodied the characteristics of the nation as a whole, of which Zacchaeus was a leading, if unpopular, figure.

Jericho was known as "the city of palm trees" (Deut. 34:3). In the Song of Solomon it is said of the bride, "This thy stature is like to a palm tree" (7:7). The tall palm tree signified spiritual stature. This contrasts with the physical stature of Zacchaeus: "And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature" (Lk. 19:3). Yet by the end of his meeting with Christ he was to have the spiritual stature of the palm tree.

The city of Jericho is not itself mentioned in Amos. However, the judgements in the prophecy are spoken of in language which was foreshadowed in the overthrow of Jericho by Joshua. For example, the blowing of trumpets took place before the city was taken: "And seven priests shall bear before the ark seven trumpets of rams' horns: and the seventh day ye shall compass the city seven times, and the priests shall blow with the trumpets" (Josh. 6:4). In Amos trumpets are also mentioned. Of Moab God said, "I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the palaces of Kirioth: and Moab shall die with tumult, with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet" (2:2). And later it is written, "Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD [Yahweh] hath not done it?" (3:6).

The link with trumpets is strengthened by two further points. Firstly, on three occasions Amos writes of woes, or "alas", as the first reference renders the Hebrew (5:16,18; 6:1). This concept of the woe is also used in Revelation, where the last three trumpets are called woes (8:13). Secondly, the name Tekoa (Amos 1:1) is related to the word for trumpet.

When Jericho was captured "they burnt the city with fire" (Josh. 6:24). Repeatedly in Amos God speaks of sending fire against the wicked: "I will send a fire into the house of Hazael" (1:4); "I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza" (v. 7, cf. vv. 10,12,14; 2:2,5).

Earthquake

It is recorded of Jericho that "the wall fell down flat" on the seventh day (Josh. 6:20). The prophecy of Amos was written "two years before the earthquake" (1:1). The theme of the forthcoming earthquake is woven into the prophecy. Amos prophesied, "And he that is courageous among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day, saith the LORD [Yahweh]" (2:16). This came to pass, for Zechariah later wrote, "yea, ye shall flee, like as ye fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah" (14:5).

Although an earthquake is not mentioned in Joshua, the destruction spoken of by Amos, some of which no doubt would be caused by the earth-



View of modern Jericho from the mound of the Old Testament city, and still living up to its ancient designation as “the city of palm trees”.

quake, was to have the same effect on structures as the miraculous destruction of Jericho:

“in the day that I shall visit the transgressions of Israel upon him I will also visit the altars of Beth-el: and the horns of the altar shall be cut off, and fall to the ground. And I will smite the winter house with the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end, saith the LORD [Yahweh]” (3:14,15);

“For, behold, the LORD [Yahweh] commandeth, and He will smite the great house with breaches, and the little house with clefts” (6:11);

“I saw the Lord standing upon the altar: and He said, Smite the lintel of the door, that the posts may shake” (9:1).

In Amos 7:17 there is an ironic contrast with the harlot Rahab, who was saved by the cord bound in the window: “Therefore thus saith the LORD [Yahweh]; Thy wife shall be an harlot in the city, and thy sons and thy daughters shall fall by the sword, and thy land shall be divided by line [cord]; and thou shalt die in a polluted land: and Israel shall surely go into captivity forth of his land”.

Sycamore and sheep

It is written of Zacchaeus that, as Christ walked through Jericho, “he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way” (Lk. 19:4). The sycamore tree was in fact a wild fig tree. These figs were eaten by the poor. As Christ looked up at him in the tree, Zacchaeus was, as it were, a wild fig.

Later on, a direct link is made by Zacchaeus with the wild fig. In verse 8 he says, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold”. The Greek word translated “taken . . . by false accusation” is *sukophanteō* (cf. English ‘sycophant’). The first part of this word is derived from the Greek word for fig, *sukon*. The Online Bible provides the following explanation:

“At Athens those were ‘sukophantia’ whose business it was to inform against any one whom they might detect exporting figs out of Attica; and as sometimes they seemed to extort money from those loath to be exposed, the name ‘sukophantes’ from the time of Aristophanes down was a general term of

opprobrium to designate a malignant and base accuser from love of gain".¹

By using the word *sukophanteō* of himself, Zacchaeus was harking back to the origin of the word. The word had originated in relation to the exporting of figs, and he had perched in the tree as a wild fig waiting to be picked. Christ was the one who would harvest this fruit.

The final words recorded of Christ to Zacchaeus were, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (v. 10). Zacchaeus "was the chief among the publicans" (v. 2). Earlier in Luke we read, "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them" (15:1,2). In response to this, the Lord Jesus said, "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?" (v. 4). Here, the publicans are likened to lost sheep. As a publican who was "lost", Zacchaeus was a sheep, and Christ was the shepherd.

In the account of Zacchaeus, we thus see that Christ was, as it were, a picker of figs and a shepherd. This matches the occupation of Amos: "Then answered Amos, and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycomore fruit" (7:14). Christ was spiritually "an herdman, and a gatherer of sycomore fruit". In fact, the role did not simply involve gathering the figs, but also tending to them while they were developing. In the same way, Christ tended to Zacchaeus to encourage his spiritual development.

Little and poor

Christ came in the spirit of Amos. Zacchaeus represented Israel. He "was little of stature" (Lk. 19:3), and this was true of Jacob too. This is stated twice in Amos 7: "And it came to pass, that when they had made an end of eating the grass of the land, then I said, O Lord GOD [Yahweh], forgive, I beseech Thee: by whom shall Jacob arise? for he is small"; "Then said I, O Lord GOD [Yahweh], cease, I beseech Thee: by whom shall Jacob arise? for he is small" (vv. 2,5).

Zacchaeus had shown concern for the poor (Lk. 19:8). This reflects a major theme of the prophecy of Amos. The poor were being downtrodden in Israel, and God, through Amos, rebukes the people for this: "Thus saith the LORD [Yahweh]; For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will

not turn away the punishment thereof; because they sold the righteous for silver, and *the poor* for a pair of shoes; that pant after the dust of the earth on the head of *the poor*" (2:6,7). Again, in 4:1, God says, "Hear this word, ye kine of Bashan, that are in the mountain of Samaria, which oppress *the poor*, which crush the needy, which say to their masters, Bring, and let us drink".

The theme is continued in 5:11,12: "Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon *the poor*, and ye take from him burdens of wheat: ye have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them; ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink wine of them. For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins: they afflict the just, they take a bribe, and they turn aside *the poor* in the gate from their right". In 8:4-6 it is written, "Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make *the poor* of the land to fail, saying, When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit? That we may buy *the poor* for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat?".

Zacchaeus had been like those in Israel at the time of Amos, who oppressed the poor. He then repented, as he responded to the teaching of the greater Amos.

Son of Abraham

The Lord Jesus said concerning Zacchaeus, "This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham" (Lk. 19:9). Why did he call him a "son of Abraham"? Christ had earlier said to the Jews, "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham" (Jno. 8:39). Zacchaeus had done "the works of Abraham", not least in reflecting the hospitality Abraham had shown the angels (see Genesis 18:1-8).

Yet perhaps the link with Amos 7 provides an additional answer. Later in chapter 7 he writes, "Now therefore hear thou the word of the LORD [Yahweh]: Thou sayest, Prophecy not against Israel, and drop not thy word against the house of Isaac" (v. 16). Isaac was the son of Abraham. By calling Zacchaeus "a son of Abraham", and by mentioning his "house", Christ was firmly linking him with the context in Amos 7. The greater Amos had come to a first-century house of Isaac.

1. Online Bible Edition 2.00.02.