



SONS OF

The
PROPHET

a novella

ENCOURAGEMENT



FRANCINE RIVERS



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

*To men of faith who serve
in the shadow of others.*

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The Prophet

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rivers, Francine, 1947–

The prophet / Francine Rivers.

p. cm. — (Sons of encouragement ; 4)

ISBN-13: 978-0-8423-8268-7 (hc)

ISBN-10: 0-8423-8268-2 (hc)

1. Amos (Biblical prophet)—Fiction. 2. Bible. O.T.—History of Biblical events—Fiction. 3. Religious fiction. I. Title

PS3568.I83165P76 2006

813'.54—dc22

2006007811

Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

a c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

FROM the beginning of my writing career, my husband, Rick, has blessed me continually with his encouragement. Without him, I might not have had the courage to send in the first manuscript that began my journey as a writer. He listens to my ideas, makes space for me in his office at Rivers Aviation, brews great coffee, and edits the final draft. He even builds me a fire on cold mornings. I delight in his company!

The Lord has also blessed me with encouraging friends. I want to mention two in particular: Peggy Lynch and Pastor Rick Hahn. I can't even count the number of times I've called Peggy or Pastor Rick to ask where a particular Scripture passage is and/or to check my understanding of God's Word. Both of these friends have loved Jesus since childhood, have a passion for God's Word, and are gifted teachers. Each has played an important part in bringing my husband and me to Jesus, and each continues to teach and encourage us in our walk with the Lord today. May the Lord bless you both for your kindness!

I offer special thanks to Peter Parsons for his great love of Amos. He was the first to encourage me to write this prophet's story. May this rendering of the prophet's story be all you hoped it would be, Peter.

I want to thank my editor, Kathy Olson, and Ron Beers for their continued support and encouragement. I greatly appreciate their willingness to work with me to strengthen each story. There are so many people at Tyndale who have encouraged and prayed for me over the years. From the beginning of our relationship, I have felt part of the team.

And I want to thank all those who have prayed for me over the years and through the course of this particular project. When I'm assailed by doubts, which often happens, I remember you are praying. May the Lord bless each of you for your tender hearts.

May Jesus Christ be glorified in this story that came from His Word. Let this story fire your interest in studying the biblical book of Amos. And may each reader be encouraged to love the Lord with heart, mind, soul, and strength. Jesus is life abundant and everlasting. Take up your cross and follow Him with rejoicing.

DEAR READER,

This is the fourth of five novellas on biblical men of faith who served in the shadows of others. These were Eastern men who lived in ancient times, and yet their stories apply to our lives and the difficult issues we face in our world today. They were on the edge. They had courage. They took risks. They did the unexpected. They lived daring lives, and sometimes they made mistakes—big mistakes. These men were not perfect, and yet God in His infinite mercy used them in His perfect plan to reveal Himself to the world.

We live in desperate, troubled times when millions seek answers. These men point the way. The lessons we can learn from them are as applicable today as when they lived thousands of years ago.

These are historical men who actually lived. Their stories, as I have told them, are based on biblical accounts. For the facts we know about the life of Amos, see the biblical book that bears his name.

This book is also a work of historical fiction. The outline of the story is provided by the Bible, and I have started with the information provided for us there. Building on that foundation, I have created action, dialogue, internal motivations, and in some cases, additional characters that I feel are consistent with the biblical record. I have attempted to remain true to the scriptural message in all points, adding only what is necessary to aid in our understanding of that message.

At the end of each novella, we have included a brief

study section. The ultimate authority on people of the Bible is the Bible itself. I encourage you to read it for greater understanding. And I pray that as you read the Bible, you will become aware of the continuity, the consistency, and the confirmation of God's plan for the ages—a plan that includes you.

Francine Rivers

THEY were coming.

They moved swiftly, keeping low to the ground, silent streaks of black in the fading light. Amos didn't have to see them or hear them to know the enemy was closing in. He felt it, through instinct honed by years of living in the wilderness. Three sheep were missing—the same stubborn dam who so frequently troubled him, and her twin lambs. He must act quickly.

Calling to his flock, he watched them race toward him. They sensed his urgency and followed him into the fold. He closed the gate behind them and secured it. Assured of their safety, he was free now to go after the lost ones.

He ran, and the stones in his pouch rattled. He took one out and fitted it to his sling.

A lamb bleated, and he raced toward the frightened sound. The foolish dam remained intent upon having her own way. Rather than stay in the green pastures to which he led her, she continued to choose brambles and brush.

Amos saw the wolves. He raised his arm, the sling emitting a high-pitched whir before he released the stone. With a yelp of pain, the pack leader went down heavily, but quickly regained his feet.

Amos came on. Snarling, the wolf advanced in a low crouch, hackles raised. The others circled, teeth bared, determined. The dam did not move, frozen in fear, while her helpless lambs bleated in confusion and fear. When one ran, a wolf leapt at it. Before it could sink its jaws into the young throat, Amos sent another stone flying. It

struck hard and true. The wolf dropped, a stone embedded in its skull.

Most of the others fled, but the alpha remained to challenge. Amos hurled his club, and struck it hard in the hip. With another cry of pain, the wolf limped into the brush and disappeared.

The lamb lay still. Amos lifted it tenderly, examining it. No wounds, but it was limp in his arms. Shock and fear had killed it.

He sighed heavily. How many times had this dam led others into danger? How many times had he rescued her, only to have to hunt her down again? He cared deeply for all his sheep, even this dam who habitually caused trouble. But he could not allow her to go on leading others into the jaws of predators.

The other twin bleated pitifully. The dam paid little attention. Safe now, she moved stiff-necked, ruminating as she gazed once at Amos before heading toward the brush. Shaking his head, Amos placed the dead lamb on the ground, unsheathed his knife, and went after her.

When the deed was done, Amos felt only sorrow. If only she had stayed close to him, he would not have found it necessary to end her life for the sake of the others.

He carried the surviving twin back to the fold.

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Another dam accepted the lamb. Having finished nursing, the lamb cavorted with others. He was old enough to nibble tender shoots of grass. Amos leaned on his staff and watched the lambs play. He laughed at their antics. All seemed well.

A bleat of distress drew his attention. One of the rams

had cast himself in a low spot. He lay in a hollow, feet in the air.

“Easy there, old man.” Twice, the ram kicked Amos. Taking strong hold, Amos heaved him over and lifted him.

The ram couldn’t walk.

“Hold on.” Amos held him firm between his knees. He massaged the animal until the circulation returned to its legs. “Go ahead.” He gave the ram a push.

The ram stumbled once and then walked stiff-legged, head up, ignoring Amos.

“Next time, find a flat place to rest.”

Amos turned from the ram and made a quick count of the flock. His mouth tightened.

The lamb was missing again.

Amos called to his sheep and led them to the shade of the sycamore trees. They would settle quickly there in the heat of the afternoon. He scanned the area, hoping the lamb would come scampering back.

A buzzard made a wide circle overhead. It wouldn’t be long until another joined it. There was no time to waste. Leaving the ninety-nine others, Amos headed west. Staff in hand, he wove his way among the rocks and brambles, searching, hoping he would find the lamb before a predator did. The wolf pack had kept its distance, but there were lions in these hills.

Coming to a rise, Amos spotted the lamb standing near some bushes. As he approached, he saw its wool had snagged in a thornbush. One hard tug, and the lamb could have freed itself, but it was not in his nature to do so. Instead, the animal would stand still until rescue came—or a predator, eager to make a meal of him.

Amos stood grimly, considering what to do. Less than

a week ago, he had been forced to kill the lamb's mother. He had known for months he might have to dispatch her, but held off doing so because she was perfectly proportioned with well-set, alert eyes and was one of the strongest sheep in his flock. But her stubborn habits had endangered the entire flock. Half a dozen times he had rescued her and her offspring. He had hoped to give the lambs more time to be fully weaned and on their own. Now, it seemed he had waited too long, for the lamb had learned his mother's bad habits.

"It's this or death, little one." Amos took a stone from his pouch, weighing it in his hand. Too heavy and it would kill the lamb; too light and it would not serve to discipline him. Amos swung his sling and released the stone, striking the lamb in a front leg, just above the knee. With a startled bleat of pain, the lamb went down.

Tears burning, Amos went to the wounded lamb and knelt. "I am here, little one. I would rather wound you myself than see you come to greater harm." He knew after a gentle examination that the leg was broken, but not shattered. It would heal. "You belong with the flock, not out here on your own where death will find you." He worked quickly, binding the leg and tugging the lamb free of the brambles. "I know I hurt you, but better you suffer an injury that will heal than become dinner for a prowling lion." He ran his hand gently over the lamb's head. "You will learn to stay close to me where you're safe." He cupped the lamb's head and breathed into its face. "No struggling or you will cause yourself more pain." He gently lifted the lamb onto his shoulders and carried him back to the flock.

The goats grazed in the hot sun, but the sheep still

rested in the shade, ruminating. Amos sat on a flat rock that gave him a full view of the pasture. Lifting the lamb from his shoulders, he held it close. "You will learn to trust me and not think you can find better forage on your own. I will lead you to green pastures and still waters." He took a few grains of wheat from the scribe he wore at his waist and shared his food with the lamb. "Sometimes I must wound in order to protect." He smiled as the lamb ate from his hand. "You will get used to my voice and come when I call." He rubbed the notch in the lamb's ear. "You bear my mark, little one. You are mine. Let me take care of you."

Amos looked out over the others. They were content. There was still plenty of grass. One more night here, he decided. Tomorrow he would move the flock to new pastures. Too long in one pasture, and the sheep grew restless and would not lie down. They would begin to compete for space. Too many days in one field and the flies and gnats would begin to pester. Conditions must be just right for his sheep to be at peace.

Later in the afternoon, the sheep rose from their rest and grazed again. Two dams pushed at each other. Amos carried the lamb with him as he separated them with his staff. "There's forage enough for both of you." He stood between them until they settled. His presence soothed them, and they lowered their heads to graze.

From Jerusalem to the high country, Amos knew every pasture as well as he knew his family's inheritance in Tekoa. He worked part of each year in the sycamore groves near Jericho in order to pay for grazing rights. Incising sycamore figs to force ripening was tedious work, but he wanted only the best pasturage for his flock. Dur-

ing the winter months when the sheep were sheltered in Tekoa, he went out to clear reeds, deepen or enlarge water holes, and repair old or build new sheepfolds.

A dam jumped, startled by a rabbit that leapt from a patch of grass and bounded off. She started to run, but Amos caught her with the crook of his staff before she could spread panic.

He spoke softly and put his hand on her to soothe her. "I am with you. No need to fear." He carried the lamb with him wherever he went and placed it on the ground where it could sleep on its side in the shade. He fed it wheat and barley and the best grass.

The old ram was cast again. He left the lamb near the quietest dam and went to attend to the old codger. The animal had found another hollow in which to rest. As the ram slept, his body had rolled onto its side. Bleating angrily, the ram kicked as Amos approached, and succeeded only in rolling onto his back, legs in the air.

Amos shook his head and laughed. "A pity you don't learn, old man."

Belly exposed, the ram was helpless. Amos bent to the task of righting the animal and setting it back on its feet. He held it firmly between his knees until he was certain the ram had feeling in his legs.

"You always find the low spots, don't you?" He massaged the legs and gave the ram a push. "Back you go. Find a flat spot in the shade this time."

The ram walked away with wounded dignity, stiff-legged, head in the air. He soon found a good patch of grass.

Retrieving the lamb, Amos carried it around on his shoulders. He felt great peace out here in the open, away

from Jerusalem, away from the marketplace and corrupt priests. But he missed his family. Sometimes he could almost hear his father's voice: *"We tend the Temple flocks, my son. It is a great honor to work for the priests."*

As a youngster, how Amos had reveled in that! Until he learned the truth about his family's relationship with the priest Heled. He sighed. Nearly twenty years had passed, but his disillusionment was as fresh as ever.

When Amos was a child, it had been a common occurrence for Joram, a servant of Heled, to come to Amos's family's home and take several blemished lambs, leaving perfect ones to replace them. When Amos asked his father where the blemished lambs were taken, he said, "To Jerusalem."

"But why does he bring us the same number of lambs he takes away?" Amos had wondered. He could make no sense of it, and his father's answers never satisfied him.

Then, during a visit to Jerusalem for a festival one year, the year he was eleven, he had watched everything that went on around the stalls his older brothers managed, and what he saw greatly disturbed him.

"Father, aren't these the lambs Joram took a week ago?"

"Yes."

"But doesn't God require lambs without blemish for sacrifice? That one has a damaged hoof, and the other over there has a spot inside its ear. I can show you."

"Be quiet, Amos!"

Confused, Amos held his tongue. He watched a priest examine a lamb. Amos went closer and saw for himself the animal was perfect, but the priest shook his head and pointed to the stalls. Frowning, the man carried the lamb he had brought for sacrifice to Amos's brother. Bani put it

in a pen and then caught the lamb with the blemish inside its ear and handed it over. The man argued, but Bani waved him off. When the man returned to the priest, the new lamb was accepted, but not before the man paid a fine for the exchange.

“Did you see that, Father? The priest—”

“Stop staring! Do you want to cause trouble?”

“But the lamb that man originally brought is better than the one Bani gave him. God will not be pleased.”

“Heled rejected the man’s sacrifice. That’s all you need to know.”

“But why? What was wrong with it?”

His father gripped Amos’s shoulders and stared into his face. “Never question what the priests decide! Never! Do you understand?”

Amos winced at the pain. He did not understand, but he knew better than to ask more questions now. His father let go of him. As he straightened, Amos saw Heled scowling at him. He motioned to Amos’s father.

“I must speak with Heled. Wait here.”

Amos watched them. Heled did all the talking, and his father kept his eyes downcast and nodded and nodded.

Ahiam grabbed Amos and spun him around. “Father told you not to stare, didn’t he? Go get feed for the lambs.”

Amos ran to do his brother’s bidding.

When he came back, his father took him aside.

“Remember, priests are servants of the Lord, Amos. They see imperfection where we do not and their decisions are law. If you question their judgment, they will say you question God Himself. They would bar you from the synagogue and Temple. And then what would happen? No one

would have anything to do with you. You would become an outcast with no way to make a living. You would have to sell yourself into slavery.”

Amos hung his head and blinked back tears.

His father squeezed his shoulder. “I know you don’t understand what’s happening here.” He sighed. “Sometimes I wish I didn’t. But you must trust me, Amos. Say nothing about the lambs, good or bad. And don’t watch what Heled does. It bothers him. The priests are very powerful and must be treated with great respect. We are only hirelings paid to tend the Temple flocks. That’s all. Perhaps someday we will have sheep of our own and be free again. . . .”

After that day, Amos had begun to observe everything that went on around the folds of Tekoa, in Jerusalem, and around the Temple.

Discolorations on a lamb would disappear under the care of his brothers.

“We’re miracle workers!” Ahiam laughed, but when Amos surreptitiously examined one, he found the wool stiff with white stuff that rubbed off on his fingers.

“Father will have your hide,” Amos told Bani.

Ahiam overheard and knocked him on his backside.

“Father knows, you little runt.”

The next time Joram came, Amos realized the priest’s servant deliberately chose weaker lambs. As soon as Amos found his father alone, he reported what he had observed.

His father gazed out over the fields. “One lamb is much like any other.”

“But that’s not true, Father. You’ve told me yourself how every lamb is different, and—”

"We'll talk about it later, Amos. We have too much work to do right now."

But *later* never came, and every time Amos went with his father to Jerusalem, he was afraid God would do something horrible when one of those blemished lambs was offered as a sacrifice.

"What's wrong with your brother?" Heled scowled as he spoke to Ahiam.

"Nothing. Nothing is wrong with him. He's just quiet, that's all."

"Quiet . . . and all eyes and ears."

Ahiam slapped Amos hard on the back. When he gripped Amos, his fingers dug in deep and shook him as he grinned down, eyes black. "He's not used to city life yet."

"Get him used to it!" Heled walked away and then called back over his shoulder. "Or keep him away from Jerusalem altogether."

Ahiam glowered at him. "Make yourself useful. Add feed to the bins if you have to hang around here. Do something other than *watch*."

Amos worked in silence, head down, afraid. He kept to himself and kept busy for the rest of the day. He said so little, his family grew concerned when they gathered for the Passover meal.

"What's wrong, little brother? Aren't you feeling well?"

"He's upset about the lambs," Ahiam said grimly. "You'd better tell him, Father."

"Not yet."

"Why not? He's old enough to understand." Ahiam's

expression was grim. "I think he's figured out most of it on his own."

"Later."

Amos wasn't hungry. He felt like an outcast, and fought tears. But he had to know, and so he asked again. "Why does Joram take the weak lambs and leave the good ones?"

His father bowed his head.

Chin jutting, Ahiam answered. "Why slaughter a perfect lamb when one bearing a spot will do just as well?"

Ahiam's wife, Levona, hung her head as she turned the spitted lamb over the fire. "What a waste to kill a prized ram that could reproduce itself ten times over!"

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the pop and hiss of fat as it dripped into the burning coals.

No one would meet Amos's eyes. "Is our lamb perfect?"

"Of course, it's perfect!" Bani burst out. "Do you think we'd offer anything less?"

"But what about those others? the weak ones from our flock?" Amos turned to his father, then to Bani and Ahiam. "The Law says only perfect lambs are acceptable as Temple sacrifices. But Joram brought the weak ones from Tekoa, and they are the ones you exchanged today." Amos's heart beat heavily as the tension built.

Levona kept her eyes on the roasting lamb. Mishala, Bani's wife, placed the bitter herbs on the table. Bani looked at their father, expression pained.

Ahiam banged his fists on the table, making everyone jump. "Tell him, Father, or I will!"

"Who decides if the Law has been fulfilled, Amos?"

"God."

"And who speaks for God?"

"The priests."

“Yes!” Ahiam glared. “The priests! The priests decide which lamb is fit and which isn’t.”

His father sighed. “You saw who sent those people to our pens, Amos.”

“The priests. But is this the way it’s supposed to be?”

“It is the way it is.” His father sounded worn down, defeated.

Fear filled Amos. “What will the Lord do? Is He satisfied?”

Ahiam poured wine. “What sign do we see that the Lord is not pleased with what is given to Him? The priests get richer each year. We are close to paying off all our family debts. The nation prospers. The Lord must be satisfied.”

Bani grimaced as he ate the bitter herbs. “You have been taught as we all have, Amos—riches are the reward of righteousness.”

God said He would bless those who obeyed His commands, making sure those who loved Him would have lives of abundance. Amos’s father had taught him that meant a fine home, flocks and herds, orchards of fruit trees, olive trees, a vineyard, and lots of children. The priests had all of these things and more, and his father and brothers were working hard toward the same end. Should he question things he didn’t understand?

Confused, disheartened, he fought against the thoughts that raced through his mind.

When his father stood, Amos did also. Tunics girded, sandals on their feet, they ate the Passover meal standing in memory of God’s deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt.

Where is God now? Amos wondered.

“Eat, Amos.”

“I’m not hungry.”

His father dipped unleavened bread into the salt water that represented the tears the Hebrews shed while slaves in Egypt. Everyone ate in silence. When the meal was over, Amos’s father, Ahiam, and Bani sat while Levona and Mishala cleared the table and the children went into another room to play.

Ahiam glared at nothing, a muscle twitching in his cheek. Bani sat with head down.

Amos’s father cleared his throat and turned to Amos. “It is time you understand what we do. You must know the whole story to understand.”

Amos’s heart began to beat loudly.

“Your great-grandfather fell into debt. It was a time of war, and the priests levied higher fines on guilt and sin offerings to raise money for the army. Grandfather paid what he could, but each year, the interest increased and debt grew rather than diminished. When he died, my father continued to pay on the debt. By then, we owed so much that there was no hope of ever paying it off. When my father died, the debt fell to me. Heled came to me in Tekoa and offered me a way to pay off our family disgrace. Because I did not want it to fall upon your brothers or you or any of your children, I agreed.”

Ahiam’s eyes darkened. “If Father had not agreed, we would all be slaves. Do you understand now, little brother?”

“There is no reason to take your anger out on him, Ahiam.” His father put a hand on Amos’s shoulder. “Heled hired us to tend the flocks of lambs that were brought as gifts for God.”

Amos's stomach churned. "So the priests take the perfect lambs intended for God and give them to us to tend, and they give the weaker ones to people to sacrifice at the Temple."

His father's hand fell away. No one spoke.

"Yes," Ahiam said finally. "Yes, that's exactly what we do. Because we have no choice."

It was all becoming clear to Amos. He shuddered as he thought aloud. "So the priests keep the perfect lambs. They will produce valuable wool year after year. Then they force the people to buy imperfect lambs to sacrifice, so they make money that way too." He looked up at his father. "And on top of all that, they make the people pay a fine for the exchange!" Why weren't his father and brothers as outraged as he was?

Bani leaned his arms on the table and clasped his hands. "We have our inheritance back, Amos, the land that God gave our fathers who came across the Jordan River."

"The debt is almost clear," his father added quietly. "By the time you are sixteen, it will be paid off."

Ahiam stood and turned his back.

Bani glanced up at Ahiam and then spoke softly. "They are priests, Amos. We dare not question them. Do you understand?"

"We serve the Lord!" Ahiam said loudly. "We tend the Temple flocks. There is honor in that."

Honor? Amos hung his head. *We're stealing from God.* Tears burned his eyes.

Their father rose and left the room.

Bani sighed. "Father had no choice. None of us have a choice."

"We're not the only ones," Ahiam said. He met Amos's

eyes, face hard. "It's been done for as long as I can remember."

"Do all the priests do the same thing?"

"Not all," Bani said.

Ahiam snorted. "But you don't hear them saying anything against those who do. God gave the tribe of Judah the scepter, but he gave the Levites the priesthood. And that's where the real power is. They can interpret the Law any way they want. They even add to it on a daily basis. They use it to squeeze the people for as much as they want. Better we stand with them than against them."

"When you're a little older, you'll be free of all this, Amos." Their father had come back into the room. "By the time you're a man, we will be done with it."

"We live better now than we did before our agreement with Heled," Ahiam said, but his eyes were dark with bitterness.

Anger grew inside Amos. "It's not right what the priests did to you, Father. It's not right!"

"No, it isn't. But we adjust to the way things are, my son. And they have been this way for a long, long time."

Shaken, Amos was left to wonder whether God was truly holy. Was He truly just? If so, why did He allow these things to go on in His own Temple? Why would a righteous, holy God reward corrupt, scheming men who misused His Name?

The revelations of that night had sowed seeds of anger that sent shoots of bitterness into Amos's heart. From that day on, Amos hated the required visits to Jerusalem. He paid no more attention to the priests and what they said, focusing instead on visiting his brothers, their wives and children. He gave the offerings required by Law only

because they were necessary for business. Amos always chose the best lamb and sought out a priest who examined the animal properly. He did it to save the fine, rather than to please God.

In his mind, it was a small rebellion, a way of getting back at Heled without risking retaliation against his father.

These days, he didn't think about God anymore. With all he had seen around the Temple pens, he believed God had forgotten about them, and all the rituals were to profit men rather than to honor a silent monarch who reigned so far up in the heavens. Did God see? Did God hear? Did He care what went on in His own Temple?

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Amos's father had not lived long enough to see the family debt paid off. Long after he was buried, Bani and Ahiam continued to work for the priests at the stalls in Jerusalem. Years of habit, convenience, and prosperity choked honesty. Amos remained among the shepherds of Tekoa, tending his flock of goats and sheep.

He felt at peace in the hills and dales of Judah, alone with his sheep. Each year, he had grown less able to tolerate the busy streets of Jerusalem—the chattering crowds, shouting street vendors, and arguing scribes. Relieved when his obligations were completed, he would eagerly depart the confines of those great walls, returning to the open fields where the sun blazed and the wind blew, where he could breathe fresh air again.

Life was not easy, but it was simple without the intrigues, coercion, or pressures he knew his brothers lived with on a daily basis. They had spent so many years

in the stalls, tending corralled animals and dealing with Heled and others like him, that they knew no other way to live. They had become merchants, accustomed to trade, and did not see the result of their labors in the same way Amos did. They did not stand in the Temple, full of questions, angry and anguished.

Amos hated seeing humble men with barely enough to live on cheated by priests who grew richer each year. Men came to pray and instead found themselves preyed upon. Maybe God didn't know what went on in His Temple. Maybe He didn't care.

"You hardly speak, little brother. You have lived too long with your sheep. You've forgotten how to be among men."

"I have nothing to say." *Nothing anyone would want to hear.*

Amos had earned enough from his flock to plant a few olive trees and a vineyard. In time he had hired servants. They received a share of the crops as payment for overseeing the vineyard, the olive trees, and the small fields of wheat and barley.

Amos did not have a wife, nor any desire to find one. He was too busy working near Jericho for grazing rights, tending his growing flock, and pruning and incising the fruit of his sycamore trees. He kept what he needed and sold the rest as cattle fodder. At least, he was free now. Free of Heled's hold, free to make his own choices. He knew better, though, than to show disrespect—lest a fine be created to enslave him again.

As his flock had grown, Amos asked Bani and Ahiam to send their sons to help. "Within a few years, each will

have a small flock of his own. What they do with it will be up to them." But it was an opportunity to break free.

Bani sent Ithai, and Ahiam sent Elkanan, and Amos taught them all he knew about tending a flock. When he felt they were ready to be sent out alone, he gave them each a ram and ten ewes with which to start.

"Whatever increase comes shall be yours." Maybe they would take to the life as he did and not follow in the ways of their fathers.

He knew little of what happened in the kingdom while he tended his flock, but when he made his pilgrimages to Jerusalem, his brothers told him what they had heard during the months he had been in distant pastures.

Judah was prospering under King Uzziah's rule, though relations with the ten tribes of Israel were still hostile. The tribes that had broken away from Solomon's foolish son continued to worship the golden calves in Bethel and Dan. Jeroboam II now ruled, and Samaria had become a great city a mere two-day journey from Jerusalem. King Jeroboam had taken back lost lands and cities from Lebohamath to the Dead Sea, expanding Israel's boundaries to those from the time of King David and King Solomon. In a bold move to gain more power, he captured Gilead, Lodebar, and Karnaim, all important fortress cities along the King's Highway, thus controlling the major trade route from the Tigris-Euphrates river valley to the Gulf of Aqaba and Egypt. Trade now flourished with the safe passage of caravans from Gabal and Syria to the north and Egypt and Arabia to the south.

From boyhood, Amos had witnessed King Uzziah's work going on throughout Judah. The king mended Judah's defenses, reorganized and better equipped his

army, built towers in Jerusalem at the Corner Gate and the Valley Gate, and fortified the buttresses. He had also built towers in the wilderness to keep watch over the Philistines and Edomites. Work crews made cisterns so that there would be water wherever the army moved. When Uzziah went to war against the Philistines, he triumphed and tore down the walls of Gath, Jabneh, and Ashdod. Slaves now bent to the task of rebuilding fortress cities that would guard the trade route called the Way of the Sea.

Amos's home, Tekoa, was only seven miles from Jerusalem, but far enough away for him to turn his mind to his own endeavors. Amos saw the changes in Jerusalem and in the countryside as he moved his flock from one pasture to another, but he spent little time contemplating the ways of kings and nations. What use in leaning on his own understanding when he had none? Why trouble his mind with matters over which he had no control? Could he change anything that happened in Judah, let alone Assyria or Egypt or Israel, for that matter? No! While his brothers praised Uzziah or fretted over the threat of enemies, Amos concentrated on his sheep. He brought tithes and offerings to the priests, visited briefly with his brothers and their families, and then returned to Tekoa, then out into the pasturelands with his flock. He felt at home there.

Out in the open with his sheep, he felt free, even though he knew that freedom could be easily stripped from him. Out in the open Amos could believe in God. In Jerusalem, seeing and hearing the priests living any way they chose while claiming to represent God, Amos grew disheartened. Why study the Law when the priests could add to it any day they pleased? And then there were the

traditions to add an even greater burden! He preferred a few select psalms written by David, a king who had grown up as a shepherd. David had understood the pleasures of walking over the land, tending his sheep, sleeping under stars scattered across the night sky.

Sometimes, when the sheep were restless or disturbed, Amos would play his zamoora, the reed flute he'd made, or sing psalms to comfort them.

Each time he ventured inside the walls of Jerusalem, he tucked away his uneasy faith, lest a priestly heel crush it. Private, protected, precious, he kept it hidden.

And it grew in ways he did not expect.

+ + +

"Come, sheep!" Amos called as he headed for the fold he had made last year. The sheep came in a rush, clustering and following close behind him. He opened the gate and used his rod to separate the goats into another area, then checked each sheep carefully for injury or hint of illness.

He stretched out across the entrance while the sheep slept safely in the fold. Amos would awaken at the slightest change. He knew the sound of every insect species and listened for predators. When a wolf howled from a distant hilltop, he sat up. A lamb bleated. "Be still. I am here."

Rising, he kept his eyes on the wolves running in the moonlight. When they ventured closer, he used his sling to send a well-aimed stone flying at the leader. The wolf retreated with a yelp. The pack followed, disappearing over the hill. The sheep rose and moved around, nervous, trembling.

Entering the fold, Amos lifted his wounded lamb to

protect it from further injury. He held it close in his arms, stroking its head and kneading its soft ears as he spoke softly to the others. "Rest now, sheep. You've nothing to fear. I will never leave you."

He stood for a long time in their midst, waiting for them to settle and sleep like the lamb in his arms. His presence calmed them. One by one, they lay down again. He set the lamb down and went back to the narrow gate, making himself a barrier against anything that might threaten his flock. Amos closed his eyes then and slept, staff and club close at hand.

Rising with the dawn, Amos opened the gate. As each lamb passed under his rod, he stopped it and examined it. Parting the wool, he checked the skin for scabbing and ran his hands over the animal to feel for any signs of trouble. He rubbed a mixture of oil, sulfur, and tar around the eyes and nose to keep the flies away. One limped, and Amos removed a rock embedded in its hoof. Straightening, he tapped the animal with his staff and watched it bound out into the field. One tried to sneak past him. He hooked the crook of his staff around its neck and turned it back. "One day you'll learn to stand and wait."

When the last sheep was examined and tended, he lifted the wounded lamb to his shoulders, closed the gate, and went out with his flock. He led them to new green pastures. Amused, Amos watched them kick up their hooves and spread out to graze. The sheep loved finding thick tufts of grass. The lambs frolicked while the dams and rams grazed.

Leaning on his staff, Amos kept watch, finding pleasure in the contentment of his flock.



Spring came, bringing with it swarms of nasal gnats hatching in vast numbers near the streams and water holes. Amos rubbed oil over the sheep's faces to repel the insects. But even with that remedy, the sheep shook their heads and stamped their feet, bothered by the constant buzzing. When one bolted, others followed. Amos usually managed to stop them before they tangled themselves in the brush.

He led his flock to the more arid pastures near Tekoa, knowing the best place, for he had spent a long, cold winter month clearing rocks, tearing out brush and roots so that more grass could grow. Rich grazing away from the torment of flies renewed the strength of the tired sheep, and there were trees enough to provide shade from the heat of the day.

The lamb's leg had healed. After so many weeks of being carried and tended, the animal had bonded to Amos. It grazed close to him and followed wherever he went. When he sat, the lamb rested in his shadow and ruminated.

The water holes dried in the heat of summer, but the sheep had enough water by grazing at dawn hours when the grass was drenched with dew. The ewes produced plenty of milk to fatten the lambs.

Amos led the flock into Tekoa for shearing. The heavy wool had become so thick, the weight of it could make an animal unable to get up from the soft ground they so often sought out for rest. Cast sheep were easy prey. Though the sheep hated being sheared, they bounded away with renewed vigor when the work was done. Amos handed

over the thick bundles of lanolin-scented wool to workers who would remove the burrs and debris, wash the wool, and prepare it for sale.

Amos let the sheep into the fields he had planted with grains and legumes. The animals feasted for a week, and then he led them out again to cooler pastures higher in the mountains. He knew every gully, ravine, and cave between Tekoa and the mountain meadows where he kept the flock for the rest of summer. When he found lion spoor, he put himself between the flock and the brush where the beast might hide.

Girding his loins so he could move more quickly, Amos filled his pouch with stones. A lion was the most cunning of animals—patient, watchful, seizing the perfect opportunity for a kill. Staff in hand, Amos kept close watch on the brush where one might be lying in wait. Sheep had no defense. They could not run like a gazelle, nor had they teeth or claws to fight back. Attacked, they often became so frightened and confused they scattered or, worse, stood still. He had seen sheep freeze at the roar of a lion, but run in terror when startled by a rabbit.

Listening to every bird sound, watching every movement of grass, Amos stood guard over his flock. If one of his sheep strayed even a short distance, he called. If it didn't turn back, he used the crook of his staff or threw his club.

Quail burst into the air on the opposite side of the flock. A spine-tingling roar brought Amos around.

Half the sheep scattered; the rest stood, feet planted, too terrified to move as a lioness burst from the high grass and headed straight for one of the lambs.

Amos used sling and stone to stop her. The rock struck

the lioness, and she went down heavily amid bleating, scattering sheep. Dazed only, she sprang to her feet. Amos ran at her, club in hand. Crouching, she roared in fierce frustration. When she charged him, he clubbed her. She raked her claws across his right arm as she fell. He drew his knife and ran at her, but she gained her feet, scrambled back, and clawed at him. When he did not back off, she roared in defiance and disappeared into the brush.

Panting, heart pounding, Amos sheathed his knife and retrieved his club before he checked his wounds. He staunched the blood flow quickly while keeping his eye on the bushes. The lioness would return at any opportunity. "Come, sheep!"

The flock raced to him. Rams, ewes, and lambs clustered close as he led them to safety. He kept looking for signs of the lioness. If he had one of his nephews with him, he would have tracked and killed her. But alone, he would not leave his flock unprotected with a lion so close.

The sheep quickly forgot the danger and spread out to graze. Amos tended his wounds while keeping watch, walking around them to keep them close together. The lamb followed at his heels. A domineering ewe butted another away from the best grass, and stood her ground, defending her spot. When a lamb came too close, the ewe lowered her head and charged.

Amos tapped her with his staff. "There's grass enough for all."

Looking disgruntled, she ruminated for a few minutes, but lowered her head again when the lamb came close. Amos tapped her harder. Startled, she bleated, moved to one side, and lowered her head again. This time, Amos thrashed her. When the discipline was done, the ewe

walked away with stiff-legged pride to another patch of grass. Shaking his head, Amos kept an eye on her.

Bumping and shoving tended to cause the others to grow nervous and then irritable. When discontent set in, appetites waned, and the entire flock suffered. A bullying ewe could cause more trouble to a flock than a lion.

+ + +

As the end of summer approached, Amos led his sheep to the most distant pastures in the lowlands. He had paid for grazing rights with long hard hours, days, and weeks of incising the sycamore fruit. Now his animals benefited from his labors, growing fat and content.

Nights became cold. Nasal flies and insects disappeared. Leaves turned crimson and gold. Amos built fires to keep warm at night.

The rams came into rut. Necks swelling, they strutted like proud monarchs among a harem. To prevent them from injuring one another, Amos rubbed their heads with thick grease before releasing them into the pasture. They ran, banged heads, and glanced off each other. Often they stumbled and landed in a heap. Confused, dazed, they would rise, looking almost embarrassed as they stood. All those rams could think about were the ewes! And it wasn't long before they charged again. Stubborn, they tried to lock horns, and Amos had to get between them with his club.

The days grew colder, nights longer. Amos led the flock back toward Tekoa where the sheep would spend the winter in corrals. Though he moved the flock each day, he gave them time to lie down in green pastures and rest. He

led them through the valleys, keeping them away from the shadows where predators lay in wait. He anointed each sheep's head with oil and treated every wound, most having been inflicted upon one another.

The first sight of Tekoa always filled Amos with mixed emotions. It was refreshing to come home after long months of solitude. His time of living off the land came to an end, and he looked forward to enjoying his sisters-in-law's hot meals. But in Tekoa, he would have to tend to business, meet with other herders, deal with the market in Jerusalem as well as the corrupt priests who controlled it, and face his brothers, who complained and fretted and yet never changed their ways. He would rather spend his days tending sheep and his nights beneath the star-studded canopy of the heavens than live in the confines of a house. But even a house was preferable to the chaos and cacophony of the crowded markets near the Temple.

Amos comforted himself by making plans.

As soon as the animals were wintered and tended by trustworthy servants, and the business dealings and religious obligations over, he would go back out and survey the route for next year. He would spend a month plowing and planting the pasture near Tekoa, then move on to work in the sycamore groves in Jericho. He would pull poisonous plants, remove debris from water holes, repair folds, and hunt down and kill that troublesome lioness.

Come spring, the route would be ready for his flock.

+ + +

"Ithai and Elkanan left eight days ago," Eliakim told Amos. "Their lambs have already been taken to Jerusalem."

Amos trusted Eliakim, his servant, over his own family members.

“Who bought them?”

“Joram. He said he would return tomorrow in the hope you would be here.”

Amos despised Joram. He was as corrupt as his master, Heled. “Did he cheat us again?”

“No.”

Though Eliakim said nothing more, Amos knew he had stood by as an advisor and probably saved Amos’s young nephews their profits. Had they bothered to reward Eliakim? Amos would see to it that his servant never lacked for anything. “Where are Ithai and Elkanan now?”

“They returned to Jerusalem, saying they would be back after the new moon festival.”

“Was Joram pleased when he left?”

“Pleased enough.”

That meant trouble had been averted. This time.

Separating the best lambs as they entered the sheepfold, Amos cut out those that had the slightest blemish. He would keep them in other pens until later.

Joram arrived two days later, eager to conduct more business. “What do you have for me?”

Amos showed him.

“These are better than the ones I’ve brought you.”

“These are the best I have.” Amos named his price.

Joram’s brows rose. “We exchange lambs. We don’t pay for them.”

“I know. But I made it clear to you things would change when our debts were paid in full.”

“Your nephews are less exacting.”

“You’re not dealing with my nephews.”

Joram scowled at him and walked to the pen that held the blemished lambs. "What about these?" He pointed. "I'll take that one, and the other over there."

Both had blemishes that could easily be covered. "I've already sold them," Amos lied.

Joram turned, eyes dark. "Heled will not be pleased about this, Amos."

Amos tried not to show how much that news pleased him.

"You know we have had a congenial arrangement for years."

Congenial?

Joram raised his brows. "It has benefited all of us, has it not?"

To say it hadn't would be to declare war on the priests who had used his father and brothers for years. Amos knew he must tread carefully or risk having sin and guilt offerings levied against him for any infraction that wretched priest could find—or invent. Even with family debts cleared, the priest thought he owned them.

Deciding not to press his luck, Amos forced a cool smile and spoke cautiously. "The arrangement stands, Joram. You can have the lambs I showed you." If Joram refused, Amos would be free to offer his lambs to other priests in Jerusalem, priests who examined animals as though the eye of God were upon them.

"I didn't come to trade perfect lambs for other perfect lambs."

"It does seem a waste of time."

Joram's chin jutted out. "So you think you are more righteous than Heled?"

"Me? Only God is higher than Heled. I merely wish to

offer you what the Lord requires for sacrifice: unblemished lambs. Why should you complain?"

"And you are an expert on the Law? You? A shepherd?" He sneered.

Heart drumming, Amos stood still, hoping his anger did not show. *Do You see, God? Do You even care about Your people?*

Dark eyes narrowed at Amos's silence. "Heled has given you every advantage, Amos, and you abuse his kindness. If not for his generosity, your family would still be in debt."

Amos understood the threat, and spoke through clenched teeth. "We paid our debt in full, at a rate higher than the Law demands."

Joram's lips whitened. "You could find yourself in debt again. Easily."

Fear coursed through Amos's body. Joram stalked him like a lion, and all Amos could do was stand defenseless. One word of indignation or rebellion and Joram would pounce, setting the teeth of his threat into motion. He could pull Amos down. The priests had done it before. They could do it again.

Amos raged inwardly while showing nothing on the outside. *So this is the way it is. The way it will always be. Freedom earned can be ripped away. This is how You would have it! Power in the hands of a few who do what they want when they want. And poor men who want to do what is right suffer. The guild of priests decides what's right and wrong. These purveyors of Your Law! They can twist it and use it any way they want. They ignore what they don't like and add what will give them profits. And they keep adding and add-*

ing until the weight of their regulations crushes us! And we are told You are a just God.

Joram smiled, smug. "I will overlook your small show of defiance, Amos. You have served us well—and profited from our relationship, I might remind you. Bring whatever you have to offer us. The other lambs will be ready for you, and the usual stipend for your labors." He slapped Amos on the shoulder.

The wound the lion had inflicted had not yet fully healed and Amos winced. The sharp pain made something snap inside him. "I have nothing for you, Joram." The lambs might not be blemished, but he would be marked by sin for being a party to stealing from men like himself who had worked hard and done what they thought right only to suffer for it.

Joram grew frustrated. "We need to add to the Temple pens! I've brought you perfect lambs."

An indictment of himself and the priest he served. Not that Joram cared. Not that he need care. He was safe, in favor, a Levite born to be a priest, or to serve one. He could play the game any way he chose for the rest of his life and never worry about where he would find his next meal or if he would have to sell himself into slavery to pay an unfair debt levied by a lying priest.

"Go ahead." Amos gestured grandly toward the walled fields surrounding his few acres of land. There were other sheep owners in Tekoa. Perhaps one of them would enjoy the arrangement Joram would offer. Let them add their sheep to the Temple flocks. "Talk to the owners over there and there and there." Thousands of sheep grazed in the pastures of Tekoa. Most belonged to the priests and the king. "These sheep belong to me, Joram. I have built this

flock from the portion I earned. And I've already made plans for them."

"What's wrong with you, Amos? After all these years . . ."

Because he didn't know, he lied. "I guess I feel the eyes of the Lord upon me."

Joram's face went deep red. "Oh, you think you're that important. Well, someone's eye is on you. Mine!" Cursing him, Joram turned on his sandaled heel and strode away.

Amos sat and buried his head in his hands. *Will You allow them to strip me of all I've worked for, Lord? Is that Your justice and mercy?*

+ + +

The next morning, Amos headed for Jerusalem. He carried extra provisions for the poor, and one perfect lamb on his shoulders while driving six goats along the road ahead of him. Beggars sat before the gate, calling out for alms. Some were tricksters who had found an easy way to make a living, but others, in truth, were in dire need.

A crippled man hobbled toward him. "Good Amos. Have you anything for a poor old man?"

"A blessing upon you, Phineas. How is your wife? your daughters?" Amos gave him a pouch of grain and sycamore figs.

"Well. A blessing upon you for asking, Amos. Has it been a good year for you?"

Phineas had once been a shepherd. A boar had wrecked one leg and almost taken his life. Now, he was relegated to begging to survive. "I had to put down a dam. She kept leading others astray."

"I had a few of those in my time."

Amos had placed a few shekels in the bag as well, knowing Phineas would find them later and squeeze them for all the good they could provide. "May the Lord bless and multiply this gift, and make it last a month."

"And a greater blessing upon you, my friend. May the Lord our God smile upon you for your kindness."

Amos had seen no evidence that God smiled on anyone but the priests who stole from poor men like this one. He gave other gifts to the poor he recognized, then entered the city.

The goats brought a good price in the market. From there, he took the lamb to the Temple, where he sought out a priest who didn't know him. The lamb was deemed acceptable. *One honest priest*, Amos thought cynically. His obligations complete, he went to see his brothers.

As Amos left the Temple, he put a shekel in the plate of a blind man.

The man felt the coin eagerly and grinned. "Thank you for your kindness."

"Consider yourself blessed that you do not have to witness what goes on inside this place," Amos said as he walked away.

+ + +

"We've been waiting for you." Bani glared, face flushed with anger. "You were supposed to bring us more lambs!"

Clearly, Joram had assumed he would think things over and capitulate. "I don't have any lambs to bring."

"What do you mean, you have no lambs?" Ahiam stared.

"I'm building my flock. The wool will—"

"Wool?" Bani came to the fence. "Why did you do that? There's more money in—"

“Have you seen the crowds?” Ahiam glared. “There’s money to be made. And we need more lambs!”

“Crowds need to eat. I sold a half-dozen goats in the market.”

Ahiam grabbed Amos’s robe. “Joram said you insulted him. I didn’t believe him. Now, I’m wondering!”

“Don’t wonder.” Amos tried to jerk free. “I offered him the best of the flock, and he refused.”

Ahiam let go of him. “What’s the matter with you, Amos? What’s happened?”

“We removed the yoke, Ahiam, but you and Bani have become accustomed to it!” He stormed away.

Though his brothers called out to him, he didn’t turn back. He wanted to get away from the stalls, away from the Temple, and out of the city. He gave offerings because it was expected, because his father had done it before him, and his father before that back to the time of Moses.

But what did it all mean?

He had heard the stories from the time he was a boy, but now he found himself wondering if God really existed. Maybe the priests taught their lessons merely to exert control over the people.

“God is righteous!”

“God is just!”

“God is holy!”

Amos wanted to shout, *Then why don’t I see it in Your Temple? Why is there so little evidence of righteousness, justice, holiness among the priests who serve in Your name?*

“Look around you, Amos!” his brothers would say. “See how God blesses Judah. See how He blesses us.”

Amos sneered as he strode through the city streets, heading for the Sheep Gate. What about the nations

around Judah? What about Israel? They bowed down to idols and prospered even more, no longer bothering to come to Jerusalem to worship. Jeroboam's golden calf still stood in Bethel and another in Dan, and what had God done about that? Nothing! The apostates grew richer and more powerful each year.

Amos could make no sense of it.

Lying beneath a canopy of stars, it was not difficult to believe God existed. But here, in Jerusalem—God's holy city—the animal pens, the courts, the Temple were all putrid with the stench of sin. The priests levied fines for infractions written the day before. They laid down law after law until not even a camel could carry all their scrolls!

If You are sovereign, why doesn't justice reign? Why are the humble crushed by the proud, the poor impoverished by the rich? Why are those who hold the power never held accountable for anything? Why don't You keep Your word?

Tears almost blinding him, Amos pressed his way through the crowd. "Let me through! Let me out!" All he wanted was to escape, to get away from this place that filled him with such confusion and anguish. Only seven miles to walk and he would be in Tekoa.

Dusk gave way to night, but the moon lighted his way. When he reached town, he didn't go to his house, but to the walled pasture.

Eliakim stood guard. He turned to Amos in surprise. "I didn't expect you back for a few days."

"I finished my business there." He wished he never had to go back, but the Law required . . .

Amos heard a familiar bleat. He put his hand on Eliakim's shoulder. "The Lord bless you, Eliakim."

“And you, my lord.”

Opening the gate, Amos entered the fold. The lamb he had wounded came to him. Hunkering down, he smiled and rubbed its face. “Rest now. I’m here.”

Weary, he stretched out on the ground outside the latched gate. He put his hands behind his head and looked up at the stars. He would leave in the morning and head back out to go over his route. He needed to dig another water hole and stack more rocks for the fold on the mountain. After that, he would work in the sycamore groves to expand his grazing rights near Jericho.

The next morning, he refilled his leather scrip with grain, raisins, and almonds and set out.

And then God spoke to him, shattering all the plans Amos had made.