

## Dialogue II

### Let Justice Flow Like a River: International Business and The Book of Amos

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*Using real-life examples and the words of Amos, Hill addresses five issues of international business ethics and morality: belief in universal moral minimums, emphasis upon group accountability, insistence upon professional holiness, concern for the disenfranchised, and conviction that powerful economic interests must respect the integrity of political and legal systems.*

*Only in special circumstances is it right to do in Rome  
as the Romans do.*  
—Norman Bowie

*Bread for myself is a material problem: bread for other people  
is a spiritual problem.*  
—Nikolay Berdyayev

*If the whole structure and organization of an economic system is  
such as to compromise human dignity,  
to lessen a man's sense of responsibility  
or rob him of any opportunity for exercising personal initiative,  
then such a system ... is altogether unjust—  
no matter how much wealth it produces.*  
—Pope John XXIII

*[You have violated a] treaty of brotherhood ...  
you trample on the poor ... you ... take bribes ...  
But let justice roll on like a river,  
righteousness like a never-failing stream!*  
—Amos

At first glance, an attempt to link the Old Testament book of Amos with modern international business may seem quixotic. After all, the prophet lived in an agrarian society nearly three millennia ago. His nation's entire gross national product was probably worth less than the total assets of a single multinational corporation today. Deeper analysis, however, reveals that many of his themes are highly relevant to current global business practices.

Amos was not a member of the professional clergy, but rather a layman who engaged in horticulture, husbandry, and commerce. As such, he spoke with familiarity regarding the common issues of daily life. In addition, he was clearly well-versed in international affairs. A native of the southern nation of Judah after the division of Solomon's empire, he traveled north to deliver stinging rebukes to the kingdom of Israel and six surrounding nation-states. Prosperous, smug, and enjoying relative political strength vis-à-vis its neighbors, Israel was not responsive to his message. As one author notes, "The people saw that they were bigger and better than any nation around them."<sup>1</sup>

Amos addresses five issues which pertain directly to the practice of international business today: belief in universal moral minimums, emphasis upon group accountability, insistence upon professional holiness, concern for the disenfranchised, and conviction that powerful economic interests must respect the integrity of political and legal systems.

#### 1. Universal Moral Minimums Must Be Met

##### *Double Standards*

*Drilling off the coast of Africa, a multinational oil company segregates its Western and Angolan workers. Whereas 30 of the Westerners live comfortably on the rig with gourmet food, baths, and a game room, 120 Angolans dwell on another floor in comparable space and are tacitly not permitted in the Westerners' quarters.*

*Medical attention also differs widely. If a Westerner loses a finger, a helicopter rushes him to a mainland medical facility. On the other hand, an Angolan worker with a similar malady has an amputation operation performed by a medic on the rig. Westerners wear red coveralls and Angolans gray. If a worker*

*falls into the turbulent sea, the bright red is much easier to spot for a rescue. Angolan government officials periodically visit the rig, enjoy a first-class meal, and depart. Concerns about the disparity in living, working, and safety conditions have never been raised.*<sup>2</sup>

Cultural relativism posits that each social group defines its own moral code. What is morally “right” in one nation may be “wrong” in another. For instance, while it would be inappropriate for Americans to permit racial discrimination or disparate safety standards on an oil rig in the United States, such behavior might be acceptable in Angola. Needless to say, the theory provides great moral latitude for transnational corporations.

Amos is remarkably forthright in his rejection of such ethical relativism. Joining other Old Testament prophets—such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Nahum, and Obadiah—he teaches that all societies, not just the covenant people, are subject to universal moral minimums. Observes a theologian, “Amos is a universalist. He proclaimed Yahweh’s activities within the history of all nations ... He believed that these nations

should recognize God’s sovereign control over them.”<sup>3</sup>

In particular, Amos holds six Gentile countries—Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab—morally accountable. Rather than utilizing the covenant as the ethical baseline, he refers to several moral minimums such as common sense of morality, conscience, and international treaty rights below which no group should venture.<sup>4</sup> As such, he charges non-covenantal peoples with violating basic human rights: “disregarding a treaty of brotherhood,” “stifling all compassion,” committing sins, exploiting others for economic gain, and perpetrating crimes against humanity.<sup>5</sup>

Suffice it to say, Amos would deem cultural relativism as an ethical paradigm to be clearly deficient. Any ideology that posits ultimate moral authority in cultural groups rather than in God is theologically abhorrent. As the ultimate judge of all peoples, the Lord is the final arbitrator of what is right and wrong. An attempt by the Syrians, for example, to defend brutality against neighbor states under the guise of custom would be summarily rejected.<sup>6</sup> Yahweh, not Syrian mores, establishes moral standards. It is sufficient to say that Amos’

stirring cross-national moral comparisons would be an anathema to cultural relativists. His analysis of the Angolan oil rig case would commence with neither a review of Western or Angolan customs, but with the divine imperatives of equal treatment of the affluent and the poor. His belief in a common moral language would put him at loggerheads with those who rely solely upon cultural norms.

During the first half of the 20th century, cultural relativism garnered much support in Western philosophical circles. As it became more apparent, however, that the theory led to moral chaos, many voices—both religious and secular—began to call for the creation of a “common morality.” After the horrors of World War II, the desire to form an international canon governing shared values such as promise-keeping, respect for persons and property, avoiding harm to others, and providing mutual aid took on new impetus.<sup>7</sup> In 1949, the United Nations issued its Declaration of Human Rights which enumerates universal rights guaranteed to the people of all nations. Echoing Amos’ call for a “covenant of brotherhood,” the Declaration speaks of the “spirit of

brotherhood.” Moral minimums include equal protection under the law, due process, non-discrimination, a minimal standard of living, and security in the event of unemployment.<sup>8</sup> Recently, when nations such as China, Iran, and Myanmar (formerly Burma) challenged the notion of universal rights as a threat to their national sovereignty, America’s Secretary of State smartly retorted, “We cannot let cultural relativism become the last refuge of repression.”<sup>9</sup>

International business leaders have also attempted to develop a universal framework for conduct in the global marketplace. One such initiative is the Caux Round Table. Bringing together corporate leaders from Europe, North America, and Asia—including companies such as Siemens, the Chase Manhattan Bank, Canon, Matsushita, and 3M—the group has identified two overarching principles. First, all businesses must respect human dignity, and second, they should seek the common good. The Round Table’s mission statement reads: “Business can be a powerful agent of positive social change ... It has a role to play in improving the lives of customers, employees, and

shareholders ...”. In particular, business leaders are called to be truthful, keep promises, not condone bribery, compete fairly, improve employee living conditions, avoid discriminatory practices, take reasonable safety precautions, disclose all relevant information to investors, and respect intellectual property rights.<sup>10</sup> Amos would no doubt applaud this list.

The Levi Strauss Company is a positive case in point. About a decade ago, the company developed “Global Source Guidelines” to define standards expected of suppliers, including specifications for maximum hours, prison labor, employee safety, environmental protection, and child labor.<sup>11</sup> When Levi auditors first visited suppliers’ plants, nearly half of the existing contracts were terminated. Among these was a Mariana Islands supplier who forced 1,200 Chinese and Filipino women to work 74 hours per week in a guarded compound.<sup>12</sup> A senior Levi vice president noted an unexpected side-benefit of the terminations: “This enabled us to focus more efficiently on our remaining supplier base.”<sup>13</sup> Levi’s

guidelines have subsequently been adopted by Reebok, Sears, and Wal-Mart.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note that when Amos deals with the people of Israel and Judah, the moral floor is raised. In other words, while all societies (and presumably all transnational corporations) are expected to meet universal ethical minimums, covenant people are held to a higher standard. This is particularly clear in Amos’ call to professional holiness, social justice, and compassion towards the poor, which are topics discussed below.

## 2. Groups Are Morally Accountable

### *Making a Killing in the Market*

*H.B. Fuller Company, based in Minnesota, manufactures adhesives, sealants, and coatings. The company has been criticized for marketing practices relating to two of its products sold in Latin America. First, it continued to sell lead-based paints south of the border as recently as 1995 even though they were banned in the United States in 1978 because of brain damage caused in children.*

***Amos’ oracles are replete with group accountability and God’s judgment.***

*Second, its product Resistol, a shoe glue, has become the drug of choice for many street children in Central America. The result, irreversible harm to the brain, has led to a call to alter the product either by changing chemicals or by adding mustard gas to make sniffing an unpleasant experience. Despite pledges to act quickly, Fuller made no changes for more than four years.*<sup>15</sup>

Business ethicists are divided as to who bears moral responsibility when a corporation misbehaves. Who, for example, is culpable for the harm caused to Latin American children by H.B. Fuller products? The executive management team? Board of directors? Marketing division? Chemists? Shareholders? How far does such accountability spread in a large company where many employees have little, if any, knowledge about the details of work in other divisions? For example, should a part-time H.B. Fuller janitor be held morally responsible for harm caused to a Honduran?

Amos’ oracles are replete with group accountability and God’s judgment. Collective sins of various nation-states—ranging from war crimes to slave

trading—are categorically condemned. Punishments are also distributed collectively, particularly in the form of urban destruction and exile. Nations are addressed both as wrongdoers and as recipients of God’s wrath. The treatment of Tyre is typical:

*This is what the Lord says: “For three sins of Tyre, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she sold whole communities of captives to Edom, disregarding a treaty of brotherhood, I will send fire upon the walls of Tyre that will consume her fortresses.”*<sup>16</sup>

In addition, Amos holds individuals responsible for their actions. Kings, government officials, and judges bear particular scrutiny. For example, in his diatribe against Moab, Amos first recites the collective punishments—fire, destruction, and war—and then focuses upon the leadership: “I will destroy her ruler and kill all her officials with him,” says the Lord.<sup>17</sup> Individuals are held fully accountable while serving as agents.

Ethicist Richard De George describes two divergent approaches to group moral responsibility.<sup>18</sup> First, the

“Moralistic View” contends that groups—such as nations and companies—are morally responsible for their actions. Likewise, individuals who make unethical decisions are personally accountable. According to this view, moral culpability is held both collectively and distributively. By way of illustration, responsibility for the atrocities committed in World War II would be borne both by the entire German nation as well as by the individuals who carried them out. At first glance, Amos would clearly fit within this school of thought. The second perspective, the so-called “Organizational View,” posits that a corporation is not a moral being, but a mere legal fiction. As such, it is illogical to speak of the H.B. Fuller Company as acting morally or immorally. Corporations simply lack the capability to operate in the realm of ethics. Likewise, corporate employees are not morally accountable because they act as agents, not on their own behalf. So long as their acts are legal—and selling Resistol and lead-based paint in Latin America was certainly within the bounds of law—they should not be condemned. Rather, as agents, they should be praised for

increasing the company’s return on investment. For obvious reasons, Amos would reject this approach.

Jesuit ethicist Manuel Velasquez seeks middle ground between these two views. He argues that while individuals always have moral responsibility for their actions, it is a fiction to talk of corporate accountability. For example, when Union Carbide employees negligently permitted toxic gas to escape from their chemical plant in Bhopal, India, killing 2,000 and injuring another 200,000,<sup>19</sup> Velasquez would not hold Union Carbide ethically responsible. It is simply not a moral being. Only those employees who were directly responsible for releasing the poison can be deemed culpable. Thus, while he would hold individual Nazis accountable for their atrocities, he would exculpate the German housewife who knew nothing of the death camps. Likewise, he would deem it erroneous to speak of collective German guilt. He concludes:

*It is only by way of a convenient fiction that acts performed by others are conventionally attributed to the corporation ... It violates our moral principles to impose blame*

*and punishment on those in whom a wrongful act did not originate.*<sup>20</sup>

How would Amos react to Velasquez’ viewpoint? No doubt he would disagree with the notion that only individuals—and not groups—may be deemed morally culpable. As noted above, God’s judgments and the resultant punishments are collective in nature; no indication that nation-states should be regarded as “convenient fictions” is provided.

Though it would be easy to terminate the discussion at this point, two qualifications exist. First, there is a significant difference between moral and compensatory responsibility.<sup>21</sup> By way of analogy, an abusive father bears his own sins, but the effects of his actions—public embarrassment and private fear—are borne by every family member. In a similar manner, while innocent shareholders and ignorant employees may not be morally responsible for immoral corporate behavior, they are still economically impacted by the fallout.

From this perspective, Amos could be interpreted to read that God’s judgment falls upon nations because of poor choices of their leaders. While moral culpability resides upon the elite,

the ill effects of their bad choices fall upon everyone in the group. For example, Union Carbide’s misbehavior led to lawsuits, bad publicity, governmental fines, falling stock prices, and layoffs. In this sense, everyone was held accountable. To say that someone has compensatory responsibility, however, is quite different from concluding that he or she has moral guilt.

Second, Amos introduces the concept of a “remnant.” In a rare note of hope, he points to a future time when God would return a segment of the Jewish exiles who would “call upon the name of the Lord” and have their land restored. While everyone would feel the effects of God’s judgment, some would return and prosper. In this way, Amos subtly segregates individuals from the group.<sup>22</sup>

Using these two qualifications, it is possible to contend that Amos would not hold the H.B. Fuller janitor or the Union Carbide shareholders morally culpable for corporate actions. However, caution is urged on this point. The fact that it was common knowledge that H.B. Fuller continued to market its glue in Latin America without changing its odor raises the ethical bar. If the janitor knew or

should have known of the harm being caused, a stronger argument for personal moral responsibility exists. Granted, the relative powerlessness of the individual and the fact that all organizations are tainted by sin makes assignment of individual guilt imprecise at best. However, Amos' sense of group moral accountability must not be underestimated. By focusing upon the individual, Western ethics often miss the Eastern emphasis upon collective guilt. Clans, companies, and nations are viewed quite differently from this perspective.

### 3. Practice Professional Holiness

#### *Killed by Conscience?*

*For five years, Eli Black was CEO of United Fruit, a large multinational corporation. He was also an ordained rabbi, the descendant of ten generations of rabbis. Among other things, he used his executive role to improve the lot of poor farm workers in Third World nations by raising their wages to nearly six times that of competitors and by significantly upgrading their housing. He was also highly regarded by his New York City staff as a kind and highly principled manager.*

*After initial success during his tenure as CEO, United Fruit experienced a series of unexpected problems. A major hurricane caused significant crop damage, and several Latin American nations sharply increased their banana taxes. Nevertheless, it came as a great shock when Eli Black jumped 44 floors to his death. A writer for "The Wall Street Journal" queried: "Can a sensitive person with high moral standards survive in an uncompromising financial world?"*

*Three days later, two senior vice presidents disclosed that Eli Black had approved a \$2.5 million bribe to a Latin American official in an attempt to reduce the banana tax. At the time, such payments were not illegal.<sup>23</sup>*

A cynic might ask if Eli Black would be alive today if he hadn't tried so hard to integrate his personal and professional lives. Rather than feeling guilty about having dual moral standards, the cynic contends, Black should have accepted the fact that the marketplace tolerates nasty choices such as the payment of bribes. Author Albert Carr goes so far as to pity religious employees who misguidedly attempt to bring their spiritual

values to work. Not only is such integration hopeless, Carr argues, but ultimately harmful to those who attempt to do so.<sup>24</sup>

In a similar vein, oil baron John D. Rockefeller was taught at an early age to separate the personal and professional realms of his life. On the one hand, influenced by his devout Baptist mother, Rockefeller developed a strong personal religious ethic. He taught Sunday school and donated nearly half a billion dollars to a countless variety of worthy causes—

to missionaries in China, the University of Chicago, a retreat for migratory birds, and war victim relief. On the other hand, his shrewd father taught him to win at any cost in business, once boasting, "I cheat my boys every chance I get. I want to make them sharp."<sup>25</sup> His eldest son learned his lessons well. Ruthless in business, he gave kickbacks to railroads, violently suppressed labor unrest, and bribed competitors' employees to give him inside information.<sup>26</sup> He resolved this apparent contradiction by compartmentalizing his life into two separate spheres. As one author sarcastically observes, Rockefeller was a "conscientious Christian who struggled to end

the livelihood of his every rival."<sup>27</sup>

Amos confronted similar attitudes in his day. On the one hand, members of Israel's business class were quite religious: they regularly attended temple services, tithed, made sacrifices faithfully, and diligently observed the Jewish festival calendar.<sup>28</sup> On the surface, they

***This religiosity was only skin deep ... Their real love was profit, not piety.***

appeared to be quite devout, faithful adherents of the Hebrew faith.

This religiosity was only skin deep, however, and had no real impact upon their business practices. Their priorities were clear: even during temple services, they focused not upon the Lord, but on their next business transaction. Amos mockingly portrays them as thinking, "When will ... the Sabbath be ended so that we may market wheat?"<sup>29</sup> Their real love was profit, not piety. Worse, they used false weights and measures, supplemented their legitimate products with useless fillers, and, like Rockefeller, mercilessly crushed their debtors. Contrary to

the Old Testament law which humanely required debtors' coats to be returned before nightfall, Israel's business class kept such necessities until all debts were paid. They even attended temple services wearing debtors' garments. In turn, they forced the poor into slavery over the smallest amounts owed—"they sell ... the needy for a pair of sandals."<sup>30</sup>

Amos demands holiness in business practices—no cheating, no exploitation, no dual morality. God expresses his contempt and wrath for those who separate their religious and professional lives—"I hate, I despise your religious feasts ... I will not accept [your offerings]. ... Away with the noise of your songs!" Instead, God seeks those who "hate evil, [and] love good"<sup>31</sup> in the rough and tumble of daily life in the marketplace. His desire is nicely summarized in one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s favorite passages: "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"<sup>32</sup>

As such, Amos would vehemently disagree with Albert Carr. A life which compartmentalizes faith into one category and the marketplace in another is inconsistent with God's purposes. Amos condemns such

ethical schizophrenia and calls for holy living in every aspect of life. The marketplace is not a "moral sanctuary,"<sup>33</sup> a place exempt from God's expectations. Rather, it is an environment in which the Lord places great significance. While the business leaders of Amos' day assumed that faithfulness to religious traditions was their chief obligation, he reversed the priority—without holiness in one's professional life, fellowship with the Lord is impossible. Notes one author, "God requires just and righteous living as a prerequisite of worship."<sup>34</sup>

Amos would no doubt applaud modern companies such as AES Corporation, the world's largest privately owned electricity company, which attempts to apply a higher set of ethical norms to the marketplace. Observes AES Chairman Roger Sant:

*We want to debunk the idea that you could be a dirty rotten scoundrel in business and yet be a saint at home. We want to elevate people's behavior at work to a higher moral plane.*<sup>35</sup>

In a similar vein, AES President and CEO Dennis Bakke strives to find a holistic unity in his personal and professional life. Notes Bakke, "The mission of the

company is to give glory to God by stewarding the resources of the world ... That's our calling."<sup>36</sup> So compelling is the leadership team's commitment to four core values—social responsibility trumps profit, integrity is never to be compromised, all stakeholders must be treated fairly, and the company should be a fun place to work—that the Security and Exchange Commission required AES to provide the following unusual disclaimer in its initial prospectus:

*If the company perceives a conflict between its values and profits, the company will adhere to its values even if it means a diminishment of profits or foregone opportunities.*<sup>37</sup>

Amos' call to the integration of personal and business ethics is demonstrated in one of his visions. Near the end of his book, the prophet sees the Lord standing next to a wall with a plumb line.<sup>38</sup> The plumb line symbolizes God's covenantal expectations; the wall represents Israel's compliance with these expectations. Unfortunately, its wall is crooked and hence subject to destruction. Notes a commentator, "God's plumb line exposes the true state of his

people ... He is testing their moral character and faithfulness."<sup>39</sup> It is sufficient to say that the Lord is not pleased with those who practice dual morality. All of life—including behavior in the marketplace—will be judged. Holiness in business will be rewarded, and impure dealings will be sanctioned.

#### **4. Be Sensitive to the Poor *Death for Sale***

*Tons of toxic wastes have been dumped by Western nations in western Africa. For example, five European ships recently unloaded highly dangerous wastes containing, among other things, PCBs. The workers were not told of the danger. Most wore thongs and shorts. For their work, they were paid \$2.50 a day. In a similar situation, the government of Guinea-Bissau agreed to bury 15 million tons of toxic waste from European pharmaceutical companies and tanneries. The payment of \$120 million was nearly the equivalent of the gross national product.*<sup>40</sup>

Amos has no patience for those who take advantage of the disenfranchised: "you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land."<sup>41</sup>

One biblical scholar paraphrases Amos to say, “the powerful push them around, control their lives, determine how they will live, and deprive them of their rights.”<sup>42</sup>

Wealth created by exploitation is thoroughly condemned. Many large homes had been constructed with funds acquired unethically through deception, usury, and corruption of the legal system. Amos warns, “You trample on the poor ... Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them ...

You oppress the righteous ... you deprive the poor of justice ...”<sup>43</sup> Little ambiguity exists in his message: leaders are duty-bound to not harm the poor.

Though Amos’ main thrust is to condemn exploitation, he also attacks wasteful luxury in the face of great need. He chides upper-class women of Israel:

*“I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house; the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished,” declares the Lord. Hear this word, you cows of Bashan ... you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, “Bring us some*

*drinks!” The Sovereign Lord has sworn by his holiness: “The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks.”<sup>44</sup>*

Bovines of the Bashan region were renowned for their girth.<sup>45</sup> In using this image, Amos points to the relative prosperity of the affluent in contrast to the poor, who could be purchased for a pair of shoes.<sup>46</sup> In this, Amos echoes fellow prophet Ezekiel, who noted that one of Judah’s major sins was being “overfed and

***... Amos would be critical of international firms that impose avoidable harm on innocent third parties.***

unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.”<sup>47</sup>

It follows that the prophet would praise groups, such as pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co., that improve the lot of the poor. After investing millions of dollars developing the drug Mectizan, Merck scientists realized that the product’s best use was to prevent river-blindness. In Africa alone, 340,000 people had been blinded by the disease and another 85 million were at risk. In some

villages, the majority of adults over the age of 45 were without sight. Merck faced a moral dilemma: while the potential users lacked sufficient funds to make the purchase, the need was great. The company continued to test Mectizan and eventually gave it away free to health organizations. This unprecedented generosity has been met with universal acclaim.<sup>48</sup>

Likewise, Amos would be pleased by the values of the Freeplay Group, a South African company that manufactures self-powered radios. Rather than relying on traditional energy sources such as electricity and batteries, Freeplay’s radios utilize a hand-crank to wind an internal generator. A half-minute of winding produces up to an hour of playing time. While the company markets its radio to First World markets at full price, it has set up a foundation to distribute them at cost in rural Third World areas. Many villages have no reliable source of electricity, and reliable batteries are not available. In addition, Freeplay has established partnerships with Third World radio stations to provide educational programming. Quips the company’s CEO, “I’m no great humanitarian. I suppose I’m an

accountant with a vision.” Freeplay’s supporters include Jimmy Carter and Nelson Mandela.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, Amos would be critical of international firms that impose avoidable harm on innocent third parties.<sup>50</sup> He certainly would not countenance the callous disregard for human life in the dumping of toxic wastes in Africa. At minimum, warnings should have been provided to the workers and adequate storage facilities provided. The rights of Africans to safe living and working environments were clearly violated. Return on investment and “legality” are not the only issues involved. All stakeholders, especially the poor, must be included in the decision-making calculus. Laments Kenya’s minister of the environment:

*There is no question that the industrial nations and the companies which are manufacturing these things are guilty of promoting and sponsoring dangerous chemicals in countries where they think people don’t care.<sup>51</sup>*

Likewise, Amos would be displeased with the continued

distribution of the painkiller Dipyron in Mexico, which found its way into Mexico for 14 years after it had been banned in the United States because of its scientifically documented impact in causing a fatal blood disorder.<sup>52</sup> Nor would Amos approve of the apathy demonstrated by Western toy manufacturers towards their suppliers' overcrowded Asian sweatshops. A recent fire in Bangkok resulted in nearly 200 deaths—the worst industrial fire in history. Simple safety precautions such as providing fire extinguishers and cleared safety exits were not taken. Several large Western companies—including Toys “R” Us, J.C. Penney, Fisher-Price, Hasbro, and Gund—had their toys fabricated at the factory. Had they followed Levi Strauss' example in hiring auditors to enforce even minimal safety standards, the outcome would have been quite different.<sup>53</sup> Or consider Nike, which, as of 1996, contracted with Indonesian suppliers that did not enforce child labor laws and forbade workers to organize. One author wryly speculates that Michael Jordan receives more income per year for endorsing Nike shoes than all the Indonesian workers earn collectively for making them.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, in an imperfect world the range of abuses fits on a wide spectrum. Where exactly should the line be drawn? Take, for example, Unocal's decision to contract with the Myanmar government to help build a \$1 billion pipeline across the nation. Critics of the deal allege that the project will provide cash to prop up a corrupt and brutal regime, displace several ethnic groups, and destroy a large rain forest. Unocal, on the other hand, points to the economic benefits the project will generate for the nation and the moral leverage it will have with the government.<sup>55</sup>

Amos would no doubt have several questions. How significant are the risks to the poor? Are revenues from the pipeline likely to be used to improve public health or to line bureaucrats' pockets? What is the likelihood that the regime will use the revenue stream to purchase more weaponry to suppress its own people? Has Unocal factored the poor into its decision-making calculus? In other words, the prophet would insist upon consideration of their rights, needs, and aspirations.

### **5. Powerful Economic Interests Should Facilitate the Integrity**

### **of Political and Legal Systems *Dialing for Dollars***

*When Kenya became an independent nation in 1963, it was regarded as Africa's shining economic star. One of the first American companies to invest was Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. Over the years, however, governmental corruption has begun to take its toll. Special “licenses” became the norm and “contributions” to public causes such as education were required. In practice, these funds were rarely accounted for and went into the private bank accounts of Kenyan politicians.*

*One Western banker observes, “I don't know of any American businessman here who isn't completely demoralized.” Notes an economist, “Corruption may have reached a critical mass ...”. Firestone has followed the lead of other companies by cutting its ownership share to 19 percent. Many others have simply left the country. International investment has dropped from \$6 to \$1 billion over the past two decades.<sup>56</sup>*

Paying bribes to influence government officials is certainly nothing new. Amos pulls no punches in his condemnation of the corruption of his day:

“You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts. ... Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts.”<sup>57</sup> Judges in Israel perverted the impartiality of the judicial system by awarding judgment to the highest bidder. Business leaders were among those paying bribes. As one commentator observes, “The wealthy made a concerted effort to control and manipulate the legal process to the advantage of social interests instead of justice.”<sup>58</sup>

Bribery is dangerous to a society not only because it stacks the deck against the disenfranchised, but, as in Kenya, it also destroys incentives to compete on quality and price, undermines market predictability, and corrupts the political process. In a recent “Corruption Index,” nations ranked as among the worst in business ethics—Nigeria, Pakistan, Kenya, Bangladesh, and Russia—are also among the poorest countries in the world. This comes as no surprise: investment, both internal and foreign, dries up in the face of official corruption.<sup>59</sup> As one author notes, “The best foreign assistance which developed nations can provide ... is the



systematic refusal to engage in bribery or to yield to extortion.”<sup>60</sup>

Vietnam provides another negative example. While economic growth has been rapid in recent years, long-term prospects are questionable. An overly complex taxation system—14 different rates on import duties and 16 on turnover taxes—opens the door for bureaucratic graft. Bribery is rampant. Local officials regularly ask up to 15 percent for “quick processing” and “favorable treatment.” Obtaining business licenses can take up to two years, and political channels are often the only mode of appealing adverse decisions.<sup>61</sup> Such practices could greatly stunt Vietnam’s vast potential.

Bribery is prohibited by virtually every nation.<sup>62</sup> However, only a few nations—including the United States—prohibit their companies from making under the table payments overseas. Several American firms, such as General Dynamics and Motorola, have developed ethical codes which aspire not only to meet the laws of the host nation and the United States, but to operate with full integrity in all settings.<sup>63</sup> Amos would laud such corporate codes for being consistent with a universal moral minimum.

Dealing in nations where bribery is common requires what one author calls “moral imagination.” Coca-Cola, for example, turned down repeated requests by Egyptian officials for secret payments. Instead, the company sponsored a tree planting program in Cairo and in the process earned sufficient political capital to be exempted from mid-level bureaucratic pressures.<sup>64</sup> It is important to note that Coca-Cola retained control of the program funds, enabling it to avoid a situation similar to the vague “contributions” formula practiced by public officials in Kenya.

### Conclusion

The prophet Amos serves as an important voice in articulating the biblical call to social justice. For nations outside the Hebraic covenant, he sets a moral minimum below which no group or individual should venture. For those under the covenant, the minimum is raised—mere avoidance of harm to others is insufficient. An affirmative duty exists to live holy lives and to regard the disenfranchised as significant stakeholders in any decision. As such, Amos’ message is highly relevant in today’s global marketplace.

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### ENDNOTES

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