

Golden Nuggets from Really Old Books:

The Permissive Sense of Amos 3:6

*Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in a city, and **the LORD hath not done it?*** (Amos 3:6; King James Version)

Some really bad and quite disturbing teaching has come from misunderstanding this Bible passage. For example, Calvinist pastor John Piper wrote an article where he defends his belief that God was behind the tragedy that occurred on September 11, 2001 (famously know as 9-11). Piper cites Amos 3:6 among other passages of Scripture in an attempt to validate his position:

From the smallest thing to the greatest thing, good and evil, happy and sad, pagan and Christian, pain and pleasure - God governs them all for his wise and just and good purposes (Isaiah 46:10). Lest we miss the point, the Bible speaks most clearly to this in the most painful situations. Amos asks, in time of disaster, "If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?" (Amos 3:6).¹

Many more examples of preachers who misuse Amos 3:6 to teach a warped and distorted view of God's sovereignty that makes His character questionable could be cited here. However, what they all have in common is an inability to properly interpret passages of this nature in light of God's character as revealed to us by Jesus – the God who taught that inflicting natural catastrophes represented a spirit (or attitude) that does not reflect Him (see Luke 9:51-56).

This is especially true of modern day ministers who are ignorant of or altogether ignore the "permissive sense" of the Hebrew language in which these passages were written. Rev. J. H. Titcomb, who was the vicar of St. Stephen's South Lambeth and rural dean of Clapham, wrote this in 1874 in defense of the moral teaching of the Bible:

And now let me briefly note a third and final canon. You may not admit it, or if you admit it you may laugh at it, but as a matter of Biblical criticism, and of Hebrew composition it is simply indisputable :—viz., "*That Jewish writers were frequently in the habit of attributing to God Himself the evils which He permitted in His Providence.*"

Let me first give, you one undoubted illustration. "Shall there be evil in a city, and I have not done it? saith the Lord" (Amos iii. 6). The morality of the Old Testament might indeed be truly impeached, if this were intended to teach that God was the actual author of evil. Indeed, the notion is so preposterous, that

¹ Piper, John **Why I Do Not Say, "God Did Not Cause the Calamity, but He Can Use It for Good"**
<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-i-do-not-say-god-did-not-cause-the-calamity-but-he-can-use-it-for-good>
(Last accessed: April 11, 2017)

nothing but the glaring impossibility of such an idea could have permitted this Jewish method of phraseology to approximate so apparently close to it.

Falling, however, as it did, within this well-known line of Hebrew style of composition—viz., that what God was known to have *permitted* without any arbitrary intervention of providence, He was often said to have *done*—that statement of the prophet Amos was liable to no misconception. We ourselves, in these western countries, may pronounce such a method of speech both awkward and loose; but in eastern lands, our own more precise and formal habits of expression are not by any means the law.

You are not, therefore, to deny this Jewish style of writing, because it does not square with your own laws of thought. You must accept it as a peculiarity of the country to which it belongs, and of the nation in which it was followed, where verbal criticisms, like those in vogue among ourselves, were altogether unknown. And this being so, it supplies us with a canon of Scripture criticism which at once takes off the edge from several serious impeachments of the moral teaching of the Old Testament.

Thus, in 2 Samuel xii., 8, God is actually described as saying to David, “I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom;” words which appear to make the Deity responsible for David's concubinage; and which, although unsuited to *our* methods and habits of speech, were, nevertheless, perfectly well understood by the Hebrew nation. So in that passage where the Lord is represented as sending forth a “lying spirit in the mouths of the prophets” (1 Kings xxii. 23). According to the accurate phraseology of western countries, this language seems appalling; but, under the familiar canon of criticism to which I now refer, it becomes easy and unimpeachable. The same is to be said of the corresponding scene in Job i. 6—12. In both these places we have merely certain conceptions of moral truth thrown into a dramatic form, for the sake of impressiveness, rather than the record of historical facts. Criticised with literal rigour, the language in each case may be made to prove that God holds communion with evil spirits, which is contrary to the whole tenor of Scripture; but, properly interpreted, according to the genius of Hebrew literature they are free from any such impeachment.²

Seeing that “permission” is the proper understanding of passages such as Amos 3:6 then some alternative translations and paraphrases of the passage are appropriate:

² Titcomb, J. H. “*The Moral Teaching of the Old Testament*” in **Popular Objections to Revealed Truth** (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1874), pp. 171, 172

Does the trumpet alarm sound in the city, without the people being scared? Does anything evil happen to a city, and yahweh hasn't let it happen? (Yahweh God's Word: an Old and New Testament Paraphrase by Go Fish Ministries)

Does the trumpet sound the alarm in the city without frightening the people? Does disaster come to a city unless the Eternal One has permitted it? (The VOICE Translation)

If we keep this understanding of Amos 3:6 and other passages that appear impugn God's character, we will not have trouble with so many "Bible difficulties". Furthermore, John Piper's theology, which does God a great disservice, can be recognized for its distorted picture of Him. Jesus gives us the perfect picture of God—One who comes to rescue people rather than hurt them. However, when we reject God as the Israelites did during the time of the prophet Amos, God will have no choice but to remove His protection and permit the disaster He tried to protect us from. This is how passages of this nature must be read and understood.