

UPSTART PROPHET RUN OUT OF TOWN

What happens when two religious leaders lock horns? The fight which follows can take the starch out of the whole establishment.

Now suppose that one of them is the duly constituted authority and the other is an upstart trouble-making outsider. Will the local leader get dethroned? Or will the intruder be sent packing?

Such a premise has the making of a good story. It's got all the elements of vested interests *versus* reform agitation, insiders *versus* outsiders, good guys *versus* bad guys.

The Bible contains dozens of incidents like this. Sometimes the establishment boys win; sometimes the intruders come out on top.

In the case of King David and his rebel son Absalom, for example, the insurrection was crushed and the rightful king kept his throne. But in the case of the local priest Amaziah *versus* the alien prophet Amos, the results were reversed.

Regrettably only a snippet of what must have been a longer story is in the Bible. It's in the Jewish scriptures at Amos 7:10-17.

This short report of the conflict is only loosely sandwiched in between other accounts of the prophet's various visions.

But it's a classic case of religious leaders butting heads. Weeks before this incident, a fellow named Amos left his home territory in the southern Kingdom of Judah and wandered north across the border into the Kingdom of Israel.

From place to place he preached against the royal family and predicted that the entire nation would suffer military defeat and deportation.

Sermons like that are not calculated to rate high in the political popularity polls. So when Amos got to the national shrine at Bethel he was not welcomed with open arms.

Apparently he set up his soap box right in the middle of the worship arena and continued his tirades against the king's oppressive policies.

So somebody tattled. Amaziah, the top priest at the royal shrine, reported Amos'

treason. "He's predicting that the king will be killed," he complained, "and that the nation will be removed from its land."

After sending his dispatch to headquarters, the priest confronted the intruder. "Get out of here! Go back home and do your prophesying there. But you can't keep on upsetting the peace here at the king's own place of worship."

But before he left, Amos got in the last word. "I'm no prophet," he retorted. "I herd sheep and prune fruit trees for a living. But the Lord interrupted my career to send me here."

Then he got personal. "So here's to you, fella! Your wife will end up as the town whore. Your kids will end up dead.

"Your country estate will end up as a subdivision. And you'll end your own days in a foreign land, along with the rest of the country."

How did this altercation turn out? We can't be sure about the details. Apparently Amaziah won the first round, and Amos was run out of town.

Whether he kept on preaching elsewhere or returned to his flocks and orchards we don't know. But in the long run he won.

Forty years later enemy troops had overrun the capital, the official shrine, and most of the countryside in between. The tribes which made up the Israelite confederation were deported and for all practical purposes lost from history.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of this whole affair is that somebody bothered to remember Amos' speeches.

In fact, he was the first prophet whose oracles were written down and later included in the official collection of biblical documents.

That's probably because the strident tone of his moral outrage had a way of speaking to later corrupt eras.

By maybe it's just because here's a case in which a crusading upstart got the best of the entrenched honchos. The underdog was vindicated, and in the process the whole establishment was turned upside down.