
Amos

Getting Started

- 1 Read Amos 1:1. What information regarding the date of Amos's activity does this superscription provide?
- 2 Read Amos 5:1–6:14. What sort of practices does Amos seem to condemn in this passage?
- 3 Read Amos 9:11–15. How does the tone of this prophecy differ from that of the material you read from chs. 5 and 6?

Preliminary Comments

The book of Amos has the reputation of focusing in particular on the social injustices committed by the elite of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) in the middle of the 8th century B.C.E. While this was a primary focus of the prophet, his critique was also directed against associated religious practices of those northern elites. Indeed, Amos could not have addressed social injustices and avoided religious practices, for the two were inextricably tied together in ancient Israel. Thus only when we take into account both dimensions of this prophet's speech do we come to an understanding of him and his book.

A Walk through Amos

Like Joel, the book of Amos is divisible into three major parts.

Amos 1–2: Oracles against the Nations

Like Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah (and other prophetic books we will address later), the report of Amos's speech begins with a superscription that includes a regnal dating formula. Amos prophesied to Israel "in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake" (1:1). This places Amos in the latter portion of the first half of the 8th century, perhaps in the decade 760–750.

The same verse also tells us that Amos was a "shepherd of Tekoa." As we see below, this professional designation for Amos has puzzled more than a few commentators. What is nonetheless apparent is the fact that he lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, but was elected to speak to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. One should keep this in mind in reading the following series of oracles against the nations that culminates in a tirade against Israel itself!

Amos introduces the oracles with the bold announcement that the "Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither,

and the top of Carmel dries up” (1:2). The geographical markers in this charge should not go unnoticed: God speaks from the heart of the Southern Kingdom — Jerusalem — to devastate the north, signified by Carmel. In any case, then follow oracles against Damascus (1:3-5), Philistia (1:6-8), Tyre (1:9-10), Edom (1:11-12), Ammon (1:13-15), Moab (2:1-3), Judah (2:4-5), and finally Israel itself (2:6-16). Each oracle is introduced with the statement, “For three transgressions . . . and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.” The thrust of the formulaic phrase is that God’s decision to punish the nations for their wrongs is final. The most striking thing about this set of oracles, though, is the way it surely built credibility for Amos, the southerner, as he addressed a crowd of northerners. Moving from condemnation for one enemy of Israel to another, Amos must have won for himself an increasingly enthusiastic audience, and assuming that the oracle against Judah is from Amos (and not a later editor; see “Critical Issues” below), the throng of auditors might even have cheered out loud at the prospect of their most despised enemy facing defeat. But then he turned his attention to Israel itself, condemning its citizenry for corrupting justice and oppressing the poor in order to feed their idolatrous practices (2:6-8) and disdaining God’s great deeds and servants provided on their behalf (2:9-12). For their sin the people of Israel faced a terrible day of reckoning ahead (2:13-16).

Amos 3-6: Oracles Against Israel’s Injustice and Apostasy

This series of oracles takes careful note of Israel’s sins so as to condemn them roundly. The first oracle, ch. 3, begins with a reminder that Israel was God’s elect (vv. 1-2). Then follows a series of rhetorical questions regarding the irresistible conclusion from certain kinds of evidence. Where two walk together there must be agreement; when a lion roars in the forest it must have caught prey; when a bird falls to a snare on the ground there must have been a trap for it (vv. 3-5). Likewise, proclaims Amos, if the warning trumpet is blown in the city the people fear, if disaster befalls a city God is at work, and if the Lord has spoken, fear among the people and prophecy from God’s chosen ones are inevitable (vv. 6, 8; v. 7, as we see below in “Critical Issues,” is surely a later addition). Amos 3:9-11 then reports what the chosen one has to say: the enemies of Israel are summoned to Samaria to assail it for its oppression, violence, and robbery of its own citizens. The aftermath of this attack will be a plundered and destroyed Israel, symbolized by the fragmentary remains of one of the couches used by the rich as they reclined at their outlandishly expensive banquets (v. 12). The chapter closes with God testifying that, indeed, on that day of reckoning he will attack in

Reading Guide to Amos

Oracles against the Nations (1-2)
Oracles against Israel for Social Injustice
and Religious Infidelity (3-6)
More Oracles of Doom for Israel
and a Hopeful Vision (7-9)

particular the accoutrements of the elite’s idolatrous and wastrel practices, breaking down the altars of Bethel and destroying the ostentatious buildings that housed the rich in their costly apostasies (vv. 13-15).

Amos 4 moves to an even more explicit linkage between Israel’s excesses and false religion. Calling them “cows of Bashan” (a breed known for its extraordinary fatness), v. 1 denounces even the wives of the wealthy for their demands upon their husbands for good drink and sustenance (who likely had to oppress their poor farmer tenants to obtain such items). As a result, says Amos, they will be led away bound through the city’s broken walls after Israel’s enemy (likely Assyria) defeats her as God’s punishment (vv. 2-3). In the meantime, Amos mockingly invites the elites to continue with their empty worship of the God of Israel at Bethel and Gilgal, insisting that their sacrifices in the wake of such injustices are nothing but further transgressions against the Lord (vv. 4-5). To indicate how stubborn this people was, Amos recalls that God tried before to discipline Israel: he caused famine, he made crops fail and towns and cities suffer drought, he visited various plagues on Israel’s agricultural complex, and he sent violent foes into their midst, and still they did not turn from their wicked ways (vv. 6-11). Thus the oracle concludes with God announcing his intention to bring all of the same upon Israel again, apparently in a final display of anger and of his utter sovereignty over all creation (vv. 12-13).

The last part of this middle section is 5:1-6:14. It is a collection of fragmentary oracles that further describe the socioeconomic injustices and related religious apostasy of Israel (e.g., 5:10-13, 21-27; 6:4-7), the destruction that shall come to Israel to punish her for these sins (e.g., 5:2-3, 8-9, 16-17), and the resulting devastation that will follow (e.g., 6:9-10). One of the most significant passages in this long section is Amos’s woe oracle for those who look forward to the “Day of the Lord”: because of Israel’s great sin, what was to be a day of vindication will be instead a day of great suffering and disappointment, of darkness and gloom (5:18-20). With only a few words Amos establishes a tradition of reversing the Day of the Lord to work against God’s own people, a tradition we already saw carried on in Joel.

Amos 7–9: Visions of God’s Judgment and a Prophecy of Restoration

The first part of this section is a series of three judgment visions. The first vision entails judgment by locusts, the second judgment by fire, and the third judgment by the measure of a plumb line (7:1-9). Altogether the series signals the failure even of prophetic intercession for Israel. In spite of Amos’s pleading in 7:2, 5, the last vision assures readers that in the final analysis God will execute judgment against Israel in spite of the prophet’s pleas.

The next unit, 7:10-17, is a biographical interlude that reports Amos’s encounter with the priest of the sanctuary at Bethel, Amaziah. Amaziah sends word of Amos’s prophecy of death for King Jeroboam and exile for all Israel and then urges Amos to cease his prophecy in Israel and go home to speak there instead. Amos’s blunt reply to Amaziah’s exhortation is famous: first he rejects the title of prophet and then reports God’s commission of him as a prophet of doom to the kingdom of Israel. God’s command was irresistible in spite of Amos’s own reluctance to preach.

A fourth vision follows in 8:1-3. This time Amos sees a basket of summer fruit (Hebrew *qayits*). In a play on words, the Lord goes on to say to Amos that the end (Hebrew *qets*) has come upon Israel and that the temple songs will become wailing at the multiplication of dead bodies. The rest of ch. 8 announces the consequences attendant to the hastening conclusion of Israel’s existence: those who oppress the needy shall be judged and suffer for their unforgettably horrible deeds, feast will turn to mourning, songs to lamentation, a famine of God’s very presence through the word will befall the land, and the rich young men and women shall faint from thirst (vv. 4-14).

Amos 9:1-6 opens the closing chapter with the fifth and final vision. This time Amos sees the Lord appear at the shrine in Bethel, where its destruction is carried out and its users and personnel are scattered and slaughtered to the very last one of them. The vision closes with a hymn acknowledging God’s sovereign power over creation itself. The chapter continues with the Lord answering those who think themselves immune from such fates as those Amos predicts because they are God’s chosen, brought out of Egypt by his special favor: as it turns out, others are led from place to place by God, so Israel has no special privilege even in this (vv. 7-10).

The book concludes with a belatedly hopeful passage, one that is deeply dissonant with the rest of the book. Amos 9:11-15 is an oracle of restoration, an anticipation of the day when the fallen “booth” of David (implying the Exile) shall be raised again, the people’s fortunes will be restored, and their land will be abundant again.

The Prophets

Critical Issues in Studying Amos

The book of Amos has been fertile ground for scholarly disputes and speculation. We survey only two of those issues. The first has to do with the book’s compositional history, with debate swirling around the degree to which we may reliably assign part or all of the book to Amos himself. The second issue is the question of the precise practices condemned by the prophet.

The Compositional History of the Book of Amos

To any careful reader of Amos it is plain that the dominant message of the work is one of condemnation for Israel. Relentlessly Amos predicts the end of Israel for the sins of its elite, describing their fate in some of the most vivid terms encountered in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., 4:1-3). Seeing the consistency of this theme, most have concluded that the historical Amos was a remorseless preacher of doom.

But precisely that conclusion raises questions about a number of passages in the book. Indeed, 5:4, 6, 14-15; and 9:11-15 provide unusual respite from Amos’s otherwise calamitous notions regarding the future. The first two passages urge auditors to seek the Lord and live, and the last passage clearly presumes the failure of the Davidic line and nonetheless looks forward to its restoration and the renewal of Israel under its banner. The first two passages echo the rhetoric of Deuteronomy and are widely understood to be Deuteronomic redactions of Amos. Editorial interventions of a Deuteronomic hand are also apparent in 3:7, which uses the characteristically Deuteronomic phrase “his servants the prophets” (cf. 2 Kgs 17:23; 21:10; 24:2), and the superscription that dates Amos’s prophecy with a regnal formula (cf. Isa 1:1; Jer 1:1-3; Hos 1:1). This may have been part of a larger effort by the Deuteronomic writers to “co-opt” the prophets, such as we saw already in the editorial history of Jeremiah. As for the last editorial addition, it seems quite likely that 9:11-15 comes from the Postexilic period, when it was feasible — if only remotely — to yearn for a restored Davidic line over the land of Israel. On this reading the book of Amos went through at least two redactional stages before it took its present form.

Of course, some object to this view on the composition history of the book of Amos. Most notably, Shalom Paul insists that the entirety of the book comes from the mouth of the 8th-century prophet himself. Such an argument is often thought to be very difficult to make, especially with regard to 9:11-15; yet it has its proponents.

What Did Amos Condemn?

Amos’s social critique is intense and sharply honed, even more so perhaps than most readers realize. We

attend two of Amos's targets here, and note also his concomitant attack on the religious practices of Israel.

One target is evident in 6:4-7. In this passage we hear that some in Israel "lie on beds of ivory" while they "eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall" and "drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils." This is commonly understood to describe a *marzeach*, a feast associated with the cult of the dead. Those who had the leisure to undertake such feasts were almost surely the landed elite, who, like those condemned in Isaiah 5, had achieved their wealth by taking land from the poor in payment for debts owed; thus they relied not on their own labor, but that of their poor neighbors. In turn, if they were to eat "lambs from the flock" or "calves from the stall," they had to dispossess the same poor neighbors who raised flocks and herds! The depth of Amos's disgust with these rich elites is quite understandable.

Amos also repeatedly condemns the perversion of justice accomplished by the more affluent of the community. For example, 4:1 (the oppressive "cows of Bashan"), 5:7 (woe to "you who turn justice to wormwood"), 10 ("They hate the one who reproves in the gate"), and 12b ("you who . . . push aside the needy in the gate") reflect Amos's concern that the powerful are stealing justice from the poor in property and other sorts of disputes. Even more obvious is the oracle in 8:4-6 that condemns again the falsification of fairness by the rich and powerful against the poor and weak in judgments of disputes.

But Amos was not content just to condemn the social injustices of the powerful; he also calls them to account for their (consequently) false religiosity. In particular, we read in 4:4-5 the prophet's taunt of those who worship with tithes and offerings of leavened bread. After having indicted the same people for their oppression of the poor in 4:1-3, the implication is that God is unmoved by piety that seeks to cover over social injustice. Indeed, in 5:21-24 the prophet announces God's disgust for the "festivals" and "solemn assemblies," "burnt offerings and grain offerings," and "offerings of well-being of . . . fatted animals" provided by the powerful. Instead of receiving these gifts of homage, Amos says that God will instead "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Theological Themes in Amos

The key theological theme in the book of Amos is its linkage of faith with social justice. Closely related to that double emphasis is Amos's reconfiguring of the "Day of the Lord" as a day of judgment on faithless and unjust Israel.



Ivory carving of a sphinx in a thicket, typical of the wealth and luxury assailed by Amos (3:15; 6:4) and showing Syrian and Egyptian influence. (Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority)

Social Justice and Religious Practice

The well-known clarion call from Amos after giving voice to God's antipathy toward Israel's sacrifices, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24), epitomizes the book's sensibilities regarding religious — that is ritual, cultic, or sacrificial — practices and social justice. While the God who speaks through Amos never rejects right worship, to be of any use it must nonetheless be accompanied by just action toward the neighbor, and especially the less powerful neighbor. Indeed, where such justice is lacking, no amount of ritual action will have a positive impact on God's regard for the offering agent; instead it will only deepen God's ire against the offenders.

As a result of this sort of reasoning in Amos, we derive from the book some of the most powerful biblical testimony regarding worship and its relationship to *praxis* in the world. But we also often miss the full nuance of Amos's argument. Readers often take Amos's prophetic speech to mean that God rejects so-called "empty ritual" altogether in favor of social action. Rather, he gives voice to the view that ritual action which connects the human to God does have its place — its essential place — in the divine-human equation, but such action becomes empty if the grounding in the divine does not also produce in

the human community a desire to make it the best it can be, the most just it can be. Likewise, just behavior does not replace ritual action; it merely fulfills the potential ritual action engenders.

The Day of the Lord in Amos

In our survey of Joel we have already seen an instance of making the “Day of the Lord” a day of wrath. Amos is the first prophet we have evidence for having done that.

The concept of the impending “Day of the Lord” provides the background for the book’s oracles altogether. In 1:2 (cf. Joel 3:16) the “Lord roars from Zion,” and in 5:18 Amos speaks a woe over those who desire that day. Throughout the book it is announced as the day when God will execute judgment against Israel through the agency of the Assyrian emperor and his army. It will not be the day of light, glory, and vindication tradition anticipated, but rather a day of darkness, gloom, and shame for Israel, *precisely* because of the nation’s elites who abuse their power to oppress the poor and worship God emptily. The indictment earned by social injustice and empty worship assures a Day of the Lord all would rue.

Thus it is that, apart from the handful of (probably Deuteronomic) calls to “seek the Lord and live,” to “seek good and not evil,” and the concluding verses

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anticipating a restored Davidic line, the book of Amos is considered to be one of the most relentlessly gloomy collections of prognostications. Amos announces the wrath of God in ways not soon forgotten.

Questions for Review and Discussion

- 1 Where was Amos from, and to which kingdom did he preach?
- 2 What were the two concerns of Amos in his preaching, and how do they show up in the speeches preserved from Amos?
- 3 What is the relationship between the two central topics addressed in the prophecy of Amos?

Further Reading

- Carroll R., M. Daniel. “Amos.” In *ECB*, 690-95.
- King, Philip J. *Amos, Hosea, Micah: An Archaeological Commentary*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988.
- Paul, Shalom M. *Amos*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.