

V. Amos

A. The author and his background.

1. His name

The contents of the book are ascribed to Amos (אָמֹס) a herdsman of Tekoa (1:1).

This is confirmed at various places in the book (7:8, 10, 11, 12; 8:2).

The name Amos is used of no other person in the OT (Isaiah's father is Amoz (Isa 1:1, אָמוֹז)). The difference is clearer in Hebrew than it is in English.

2. His place of residence.

He came from Tekoah - a place in Judah about 10 miles south of Jerusalem (cp. Macmillan Bible Atlas, 133) in the wilderness of Judea.

He was a herdsman (1:1; 7:14). The word used (רֹקֵץ) is not that of someone who took care of someone else's cattle, but of someone who owned sheep himself. It is used for example of Mesha, the king of Moab, in 2 Kgs 3:4. This does not mean that Amos was necessarily a rich cattle owner. In 7:15 he speaks of following the flock, which indicates he was a sheep herder. The impression from the book generally is that he was of a plain, simple background. Yet his book is rich in profound thoughts, beautiful poetic expressions and shows enormous literary ability and gift.

3. The place of his prophetic activity.

Amos, in contrast to Hosea, was from the southern kingdom. His prophetic activity, however, was, like that of Hosea, primarily to the Northern kingdom. This appears not only from the introductory sentence (1:1), but also from 7:10-17, where Amos has appeared in Bethel, as well as from the content of a large part of the book. This of course does not prevent him from also occasionally having something to say about Judah (2:4ff; 6:1ff).

Amos is thus reminiscent of the "man of God out of Judah:" of 1 Kings 13 in that the LORD sent him from Judah to the northern kingdom to prophecy.

Whether or not his ministry was confined to Bethel (chapter 7) is not said, he could have also prophesied in Samaria, cf. 4:1,4 where it sounds like he is speaking to those preparing to go to either Bethel or Gilgal.

4. The time of his prophetic activity

1:1 says he prophesied in the time of Uzziah (767-740 BC) in Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel (782-753 BC), two years before the earthquake.

He was thus a contemporary of Hosea, though Hosea prophesied during later kings (cp., Hosea 1:1 which adds Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah) and is thus usually considered to be a younger contemporary and successor to Amos.

Two years before the earthquake: This agrees with Zech 14:5 which also speaks of an earthquake in the days of Uzziah. This is not of great help in further specifying the date. Cf. Freeman, p. 187 who suggests 760-753 BC for the time of his ministry, based on the silence of Amos concerning the death of Jeroboam in 753 BC.

5. The political and social conditions of his time.

The government of Jeroboam II of Israel and of Uzziah of Judah was characterized by important developments in power and prestige on the international scene and by prosperity at home.

In the time between Adad-Nirari II c. 800 to the time of the accession of Tiglath-Pileser II in 734/5 Israel was relieved of pressure from both Assyria and Syria. (Urartu pressed Assyria). Amos 6:13 probably refers to Israelite victories over Syria and vs. 14 corresponds with 2 Kgs 14:25. Nowhere does Amos speak explicitly of Assyria, and during his days there was no indication of imminent trouble from them. Yet he does speak with certainty of the coming fall of the northern kingdom and the taking away captive of its inhabitants (5:27; 6:7,14). In these texts he comes very close to making an identification of the oppressor as being Assyria.

Internally there was prosperity. We see something of this reflected in the references to the extravagant houses of the rich (3:15; excavations at Samaria have uncovered hundreds of ivory inlays) and the feasting and luxuries (6:4-6) which were indulged in. Yet this luxury and wealth is only one side of the picture. Ellison says (p.63), "How are we to judge the welfare and prosperity of a people? Are we to gaze in open-mouthed astonishment at the mansions of the rich and to look with jealous eyes at the wares displayed in the luxury shops, or are we to turn to the houses of the poor and to try to understand how they live? While we may not ignore the rich and mighty, surely it is the level of the poor that will best reveal to us where a country stands." The other side of the picture is one of great contrast, and it was precisely this which forms the backdrop of the

blistering message of Amos. Many of the people lived in the worst sort of poverty (cf. 2:6; 4:1; 5:10-12; 8:4-6). Ellison says (p. 64): "Writers of text-books are fond of describing the prosperity under Jeroboam II, but for the most part they seemingly fail to realize that it was a very small proportion of the population that profited from it."

B. The book of Amos and its content

1. General outline

- I. JUDGMENT PRONOUNCED ON THE SURROUNDING NATIONS AS WELL AS ON JUDAH AND ISRAEL (AMOS 1,2)
- II. MORE SPECIFIC PRONOUNCEMENTS OF JUDGMENT ON ISRAEL AND THE REASONS FOR IT (AMOS 3-6)
- III. FIVE VISIONS CONCERNING THE COMING JUDGMENT (AMOS 7:1-9:10)
- IV. A PROMISE OF FUTURE BLESSING (AMOS 9:11-15)

2. Major theme:

Amos preaches judgment on Israel for social injustice combined with religious formalism and apostasy. In doing so Amos emphasizes the justice of God in bringing judgment. At the end of the book he gives a ray of hope with the promise of a future restoration under the rule of a Davidic king.

3. Some comments on content.

Chapters 1,2

Judgment on the surrounding nations as well as on Judah and Israel.

The first part of the book is a condemnation of six surrounding nations plus Judah and Israel.

Amos follows a regular pattern in introducing each judgment with the phrase: "For three transgressions of _____, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment . . ." The expression is best understood as indicating the fullness of their iniquity. There is no question of their guilt. Moffatt: "for many crimes."

Amos also follows a pattern in the order of the nations of whom he speaks. He speaks first of 3 foreign peoples called by the name of their capitol city (Syria/Damascus; Philistia/Gaza; Phoenicia/Tyre). He then speaks of 3 "cousin" nations (Edom/Gen 25:30; 36:8; Ammon/Gen 19:38; Moab/Gen 19:36,37). He then addresses the brother nation, Judah, before focusing in on Israel herself. The progression was an effective way of getting a hearing, particularly from those who could see the evils of those round about but not the evils in Israel's own backyard.

The sins condemned are not confined to abuses or mistreatment of Israel. They seem to be things generally recognized as evil in themselves not merely in Israel, but by all the nations of the western Fertile Crescent (Ellison p, 72).

Motyer (The Day of the Lion, p.37) says that these "nations were without special revelation but not without moral responsibility; they were without direct knowledge of God but not without accountability to God; they were without the law written upon tables of stone but not without the law written in the conscience."

The means of infliction of the judgment is not given, but in most instances it was carried out by the Assyrians or Babylonians. What is clear is that judgment will come on these nations, and this judgment will be the work of the LORD. This provides a clear expression of the great truth that Jahweh rules over all the nations of the earth, not just over Israel. He is the sovereign LORD of all history (cf. 9:7).

Damascus, 1:3-5

Damascus was the capital city of Syria. The crime was barbarity in war.

"they have threshed Gilead with iron threshing sleds" (vs.3). Threshing instruments of that time were often a wooden sled with stones or iron fragments fastened onto the under side. This was dragged over the stalks of grain to cut them and release the grain. Some feel that Syria had literally dragged such instruments over the fallen men of Gilead in some previous attack of Syria on Israel. Whether or not this is to be taken literally may be questioned (see 2 Kgs 13:1-7, esp. vs.7), but certainly it is indicative of some type of gross cruelty inflicted on Israel by Syria.

For the century prior to the time of Amos, Israel had suffered greatly at the hands of Syria. During the time of Jehu (841-814 BC) much territory was taken by Hazael (2 Kgs 10:32ff). This continued during the time of Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 13:22). But in the time of Amos the situation had changed (2 Kgs 13:25; 14:25).

The Syrian will "go into captivity unto Kir". The people will be deported to the same place from whence they had come (cf. 9:7). According to 2 Kgs 16:9 this was fulfilled by the Assyrians under Tiglath-Pileser III in 732 BC (Rezin, the last

king of Damascus, fell to the Assyrians). The identification of Kir is not known. It must lie to the East.

Gaza: 1:6-8

The second pronouncement of judgment is on the Philistines. Their land was dominated by 5 cities. Gaza is here named as the chief city. Three more are mentioned in the judgment, Askalon, Ashdod, and Ekron. The other city Gath, had already been attacked by Uzziah (cf. 2 Chron 26:6).

Their crime was slave trading, perhaps against Judah when the Philistines made incursions against Judah and then sold the captives to Edom who in turn probably traded them to countries further to the south on the trade routes (cf. 2 Chron 21:16,17; time of Jehoram).

Ashkelon fell to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria in 734 BC. Ashdod to Sargon in 711 BC, and Ashkelon and Ekron to Sennacherib in 701 BC. Gaza and Ashdod were also conquered by Nebuchadnezzar in 605-562 BC and their king taken to Babylon (see, McComisky, Expositor's Bible Commentary, p. 286 and ANET 307,8).

Tyre: 1:9,10

The Phoenicians also engaged in slave trade and forgot "the brotherly covenant" (vs. 9). This may refer to some formal agreement between Israel and Tyre in the days of David and Solomon (Hiram of Tyre, cf. 1 Kgs 5:12; 9:13).

"Tyre became tributary to Assyria, surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar after a thirteen-year siege (585-573 BC), and was eventually destroyed by Alexander the Great in 332 BC" (Motyer, NBC, 730).

Edom: 1:11,12

"his brother" (vs. 11) - most likely refers to Israel and Edom as descendants of Jacob and Esau. Exactly what incident or incidents is in question is difficult to determine. Perhaps the same as Obadiah 10,11. Motyer (Day of the Lion, 42) speaks of Edom's hatred as unreasoned and uncaused.

Edom was eventually driven from their land by Nabatean Arabs and after Roman times disappear as a people.

Ammon: 1:13-15

A war of Ammon against Gilead is not elsewhere recorded in Scripture. The accusation is brutality in a war of aggression and aggrandizement.

The precise fulfillment is not clear, but likely in Nebuchadnezzar's campaign of 582-581 BC.

Moab: 2:1-3

Here the offense is not against Israel, but against Edom. The act of desecration of the body of the Edomite king is singled out. Ellison comments (p. 72): "Moab's sin is to the average modern man so venial and so common - let us think of how many Jewish cemeteries were desecrated by the anti-semitic - that it seems absurdly out of place in the list. For antiquity, however, the desecration of tombs was universally regarded with abhorrence. Here the matter had been made worse because the motive was not greed, which motivated the ordinary tomb robber, but sheer spite, the wish to revenge oneself on one who had passed beyond the conflicts of this life."

In commenting on Moab's history J.A. Thompson (NBD, 835) says: "During the latter part of the 8th century BC Moab was subdued by Assyria and compelled to pay tribute (Is xv, xvi), but after Assyria fell Moab was free again. Moabites entered Judah in the days of Jehoiakim (2 Ki. xxiv.2). At the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC some Jews found refuge in Moab, but returned when Gedaliah became governor (Je. xl. 11ff.). Moab was finally subdued by Nebuchadrezzar (Jos., Ant x.9.7) and fell successively under the control of the Persians and various Arab groups. The Moabites ceased to have independent existence as a nation, though in post-exilic times they are known as a race (Ezr. ix. 1; Ne. xiii, 1,23). Alexander Jannaeus subdued them in the 2nd century BC (Jos., Ant xiii.13.5).

Judah 2:4,5

Amos now makes a significant transition. He pronounces judgment on a segment of the chosen people, namely Judah. Remember he is speaking in the northern kingdom, although he himself came from the south. To have turned directly to Israel may have left him open to the charge of partiality. The north was stronger economically and politically than the south, but the south gloried in the presence of the temple within her territory. Because Judah gloried in having what Israel did not it would be judged for its lack of loyalty to that in which it gloried. Judah is condemned for despising the law of the Lord and not keeping his statutes, and for going after false gods. The fulfillment is recorded in 2 Kings 24,25 (586 BC).

Israel: 2:6-16

Here Amos brings his message to its climax. He has pronounced judgment on the enemies of Israel one after another. No doubt he had Israel's ear in all this, and their agreement as well. Now he directs his message to Israel itself and says that Israel will be the chief sufferer in the judgment to come. The Day of the Lord which the people looked forward to as a day of judgment on all their enemies will certainly come, but it will also be a day of darkness rather than light even for Israel (see 5:18)

In bringing his message of judgment on Israel Amos uses what some have termed the "**covenant lawsuit**."

The features of this legal form that can be seen here are:

1. The accusation or indictment (vss. 6-8)
 - a. Social evils (vss. 6,7a)

The focus here is on the oppression of the poor.
 - b. Moral and religious apostasy (vss. 7b,8)

Sacred prostitution which was thought to magically insure fertility of crops and cattle was a common feature of Canaanite religious practice (cf. Deut 23:17). Specific warning against this had been given to Israel. In such acts the commands against adultery (Exod 20:14) as well as Deut 23:17 were violated. Here the LORD is being worshiped as any other ordinary Baal. This practice was the epitome of moral and religious apostasy. It was a gross violation of the covenant. What made it even worse was that it was done with things obtained through oppression of the poor. Driver says it was "done in the name of religion at the expense of the poor."
2. Recital of the gracious acts of the LORD (vss. 9-11)

The divine suzerain had consistently been faithful to the covenant.
3. Indictment continued (vs. 12)

The prophets sent to call the people to return to covenant faithfulness were rejected.
4. The sentence (vss. 13-16)

The sentence is given in general terms to be made more specific latter. The judgment, however will be inescapable.

Chapters 3-6

More specific pronouncements of judgment on Israel and the reasons for it.

The section consists in 3 discourses each beginning with the phrase "Hear this word which the LORD has spoken to you. . ." (3:1, 4:1, 5:1)

Chapter 3:1-2

Verse 2.

This verse summarizes the essence of the message of Amos. The covenant idea is here central (even though the term ברית is not used).

See: D. Hillers, Covenant. The History of a Biblical Idea, Chapter 6 entitled "Therefore I will punish you."

Hillers points out that for a long time the traditional line of approach to the prophetic use of the covenant idea was to locate all the passages where the prophets used the word *tyrb* and then assess the results on this basis. Since there are relatively few passages where the earlier prophets use the word, the conclusion was predictable. Covenant occupied a very minor place in prophetic thought. Hillers suggests, however, that recent studies show that an indirect approach to this subject yields a very different conclusion.

He notes that in recent years much attention has been given to:

1. covenant terminology in the pronouncements of the prophets
2. the literary pattern of the covenant lawsuit
3. the use of covenant curses

1. Covenant terminology

"to know" (יָדָע)

The term has a wide range of meaning in Hebrew from "to understand" to "sexual intercourse." What does the term mean when it is used of man's knowledge of God, or when God is said to "know" Israel, as for example in Amos 3:2?

In what sense is it true that Yahweh has known only Israel, and why the "therefore" in Amos 3:2? What is the logical connection between God's knowledge of Israel and her doom?

It has become clear that we have here a usage of "know" borrowed from the terminology of international relations. See, H. B. Huffmon, "The Treaty Background of Hebrew 'Yada' ", BASOR 181 (1966) 31-37.

Huffmon points out that Near Eastern kings use "to know" in both Hittite and Akkadian texts in two technical legal senses:

1. to recognize as legitimate suzerain or vassal
2. to recognize treaty stipulations as binding

See Huffmon. (CC 49)

Thus the words of Amos are no longer mysterious. The vocabulary Amos uses was familiar in the ancient world in connection with international relations.

Yahweh had recognized only Israel as his legitimate servants, "therefore", since this sort of covenant involves obligations, and since they had not fulfilled them, "I will punish you for all your iniquities."

Hosea uses "know" in the same way (13:4-6).

Jeremiah speaks in a similar way when describing a future repentance of the people (24:7).

That this kind of knowledge is closely related to the people's conduct is evident from another passage in Jeremiah (22:14-16).

Hillers notes that Samuel Johnson said that "to make dictionaries is dull work." Perhaps this discussion proves his point. But the lexical consideration here is important for two reasons.

1. Simply for the gain in understanding on what the OT means in certain places by the expression "knowing God." This kind of knowledge of God is unmystical and unintellectual. It is not acquired by protracted study or contemplation, or by admission to the secrets of some esoteric lore. Instead it is shown in a life of performance of God's will, a will that is easily understood and common knowledge.
2. We see a connection between prophetic language and thought and the terminology associated with treaty relationships. Even if the term ברית is not frequently used in their writings, the complex of ideas and terminology associated with covenant is present. In this case it forms the foundation for one of their principal concerns, the knowledge of God.

See also J. A. Thompson, 35-37 (CC 51-53).

2. The literary pattern of the covenant lawsuit

Here Yahweh is depicted as taking his people to court.

The features of this literary pattern are:

1. Introduction
2. Address by plaintiff
3. Resume of past benevolent acts of plaintiff
4. Indictment of accused

See Huffmon and Thompson.

3. The use of covenant curses

See Hillers (134); (CC 46, 47).

Hillers concludes:

"This is important for our assessment of the prophets. . . . Much of modern scholarly study of the prophets has been devoted to prophetic psychology and attempts to describe and parallel the abnormal states of mind in which

the prophets received their communications from God. Critical orthodoxy saw in the prophets the great creative figures in Israelite religion, the ones who made of a simple, natural faith a genuine monotheism vitally concerned with righteous living. Others more recently have tried to find the prophets a base in Israel's cult . . ."

From the perspective we have been considering Hillers says (pp. 140,141) that the prophets appear "as sober figures who framed oracles that drew on a conventional stock of ideas and phrases with roots deep in Israel's history rather than in their own consciousness or individual genius. For this reason also we must reassess the once common idea of the prophets as innovators. Without in any way denying their creativity, it would seem from their use of Israel's most ancient religious heritage that they were in great part creative as religious reformers are."

Chapter 3:3-8

Lest his hearers object Amos gives a series of illustrations of the principle of cause and effect in order to impress two things on the people of Israel.

1. The calamity which is coming is from the LORD.

The LORD is behind all such historical experiences. They are not the result of bad fortune, economic determinism, or accidents of history.

2. The message which he brings is also from the LORD.

Amos can not do anything else but speak what is given to him to say. He has spoken because a sufficient cause has impelled him to do so (Driver).

Chapter 3:9-11

Let the heathen nations see the social evils practiced in Samaria. It is as if they were worse there than in the godless nations. Therefore judgment.

Chapter 3:12-15

A description of judgment, pictured in vs. 12 as an ironic deliverance. See Motyer, 84. **(CC 50, A)**

Chapter 4:1-3

Social evil and personal indulgence. **(CC 50, B)**

Chapter 4:4,5

Religious apostasy and formalism. Amos mocks their religious observances ("every morning . . . every three days").

Chapter 4:6-12

God had sent many warnings in the form of covenant curses, but these had fallen on deaf ears. Compare with Deut. 28 and Lev 26 (famine, vs. 6 / Deut 28:17,18; drought, vv. 7,8 / Deut 28:23,24; mildew, vs. 9a / Deut 28:22; locusts, vs. 9b / Deut 28:38,42; epidemic (plague), vs. 10a / Deut 28:21,22; war, vs. 10b / Deut 28:25,26,32,33).

Verse 12.

An unusual and seemingly incomplete expression. Some suggest the last part of the first phrase has been lost and find it in 3:14b. This, however, is totally arbitrary. Here the coming climax is deliberately left vague. The implication is that it will be worse than the warnings of the previously experienced covenant curses and that because of their obstinacy they may expect the climax of the covenant curses - namely the exile. See Lev. 26:27ff. and Deut 28:47-68.