

Introduction to Amos

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Background

Prophet's Name

The name עָמוֹס, *Amos*, is based on the verb עָמַס which means *to load* or *to carry a load*. The meaning of the name, therefore, is probably *burden-bearer*.

Identification

Amos Himself

Amos was from Tekoa, a town about five miles southeast of Bethlehem in the Judean highlands, and thus a citizen of the Southern Kingdom (1:1; 7:12). Since the name of his father is not given, he was no doubt of humble birth. By profession he was both a herdsman and a cultivator of sycamore figs (1:1; 7:14). He may possibly have owned and even tended cattle (according to the word "herdsman" in 7:14); certainly he raised sheep (according to the different word "herdsman" in 1:1). He had not had the privilege of formal education in any of the schools of the prophets (7:14-15).

At the call of God he left his home in Judea as a mere layman to proclaim a hostile message in the proud capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, without any ecclesiastical authorization. Without any status as a recognized prophet, he braved the prejudice of the Ephraimite public to carry out faithfully his commission from God. A man of rugged convictions and iron will, he could not be deflected from his purpose even by the highest functionary of the Samaritan hierarchy (Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 318).

His Call and Mission

God called Amos from his rustic background to be a prophet to the whole family of Jacob (3:1, 13). However, his ministry concentrated particularly on the Northern Kingdom (7:14-15). Although he preached at Samaria (3:9-12; 14:1-3) and possibly Gilgal (4:4; 5:4-5), he was

sent primarily to Bethel (7:10).

His Style

Archer writes,

In the second half of the eighth century B.C., Hebrew prophecy attained its golden age of excellence. After the earliest of the writing prophets, Obadiah, Joel, and Jonah, had done their work, the stage was set for the appearance of the four great figures who dominated the scene from 755 to the opening of the seventh century: Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah" (Archer, p. 316).

Amos was apparently an earnest student of the Torah, the law, otherwise known as the five books of Moses or the Pentateuch. His style shows strong Pentateuchal influence (see the summary in Archer, pp. 319-20). Since the liberal higher critics generally regard most of Amos as genuinely 8th century, this fact is strong evidence for the prior composition of the Torah, as opposed to JEDP documentary theories.

Date

There is general agreement among Old Testament scholars--even liberal ones--that the ministry of Amos is to be dated between 760-755 B.C., toward the latter part of the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753) in the North and the middle of the reign of Uzziah (Azariah) (790-739) in the South.

This was the most illustrious period in the history of the Northern Kingdom. Militarily, Jeroboam II had a brilliant career and had restored the limits of the kingdom to what they had been at the death of Solomon and the beginning of the Northern Kingdom (931 B.C.; cf. 6:14), gaining victories over the Moabites and Aramaeans (Syrians).

The result had been a considerable influx of wealth from the booty of war and advantageous trade relations with Damascus and the other principalities to the north and northeast. But along with the increase of wealth, no share of which was granted to the lower classes, there had come a more conspicuous materialism and greed on the part of the rich nobility. They shamelessly victimized the poor and cynically disregarded the rights of those who were socially beneath them. A general disregard for the sanctions of the seventh commandment had undermined the

sanctity of the family and had rendered offensive their hypocritical attempt to appease God by observance of religious forms" (Archer, p. 318).

See 2 Kings 14:15-29 for the history of this period in Israel.

The earthquake in 1:1, so severe that it was remembered for centuries afterward (cf. Zech. 14:5), cannot be dated any more precisely than the reign of Uzziah.

Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament*, p. 339, suggests that Amos probably recorded his more important sermons and prophecies in written form shortly after returning to Tekoa.

Basic Theme

Archer summarizes the theme of Amos as follows:

The central theme of his prophecy was Jehovah's faithfulness to His covenant and to His holy law, and the strict accountability of His people Israel to a practical observance of their covenant obligations. Amos earnestly stressed their duty of cordial compliance with the legal code of the Torah, both in letter and in spirit. Israel's failure to present to the Lord a true and living faith and their attempt to foist upon Him the wretched substitute of empty profession could lead only to the utter ruin and destruction of the nation (Archer, p. 316).

Outline With Interpretive Comments

I. Eight judgments to fall shortly (1:1-2:16)

A. Prelude: the day of wrath is at hand (1:1-2)

Note the quote from Joel 3:16, an eschatological passage. Joel was speaking specifically of the final manifestation of the Day of Yahweh (2:28; 3:1, 16-17, 18-21). Amos recognizes, however, that the single meaning of the corporate event called the Day of Yahweh includes contemporary judgments on the nations as harbingers or downpayments of that end-time climactic fulfillment. Thus, he could *legitimately* use as his text a verse in an eschatological context and take it as a reference to those contemporary judgments. The first two chapters of Amos therefore list no fewer than eight harbingers of the Day of Yahweh. Add to this the locust plague in Joel--making nine--and it is easy to see that

there is no such phenomenon as "double fulfillment." Rather, a single concept includes a whole series of historical antecedents as downpayments to the final, climactic manifestation. And the corporate term "Day of Yahweh" (not used here) can be applied to the whole series or the final climax or any of the antecedents indiscriminately.

B. Judgment on Gentile nations for crimes of inhumanity (1:3-2:3)

The phrase "for three and for four" is an idiom roughly equivalent to our idiom "this is the last straw." It "is an expression indicating a measure of full iniquity and inevitable judgment" (*New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 932).

C. Judgment on the two covenant nations for neglecting God's word (2:4-16)

1. Judah for having turned from God to false teachers (2:4-5)
2. Israel for sins of exploiting the poor, of incest, thanklessness toward God, and persecuting the faithful (2:6-16)
 - a. Catalog of sins (2:6-8)
 - b. These sins committed against Israel's great Benefactor and Protector (2:9-16)

II. Three messages against Israel: "Hear this word" (3:1-5:17)

A. Against the people at large (3:1-15)

1. The greater the privilege, the greater the accountability (3:1-3)

Note the word "known" in verse 3:2. It is the normal verb *to know* (יָדָע), but when used in a covenant context, it means *to choose*: "You only have I chosen" We have here the doctrine of election. (See the Hoffmon paper cited in the bibliography.) Compare Deut. 4:32-40.

2. Amos' credentials as God's messenger (3:4-8)
3. Israel's crimes of oppressing the poor and their luxuries and self-indulgence to be punished by devastation and depopulation (3:9-15)

B. Against the "cows of Bashan" (high society ladies) (4:1-13)

1. Their pursuit of pleasure and wealth and their carnal forms of worship seal their doom (4:1-5)
2. The unheeded warnings of plagues necessitates judgment (4:6-13)

C. Against the people at large (5:1-17)

A lamentation and final appeal: "Seek Yahweh, and ye shall live."

III. Two woes against Israel: "Woe to you/them" (5:18-6:14)

A. First woe (5:18-27)

1. The Day of Yahweh means judgment for Israel (5:18-20)
2. Their empty ceremonialism only compounds their sins (5:21-27)

B. Second woe (6:1-14)

The doom of exile remains for the pleasure-seeking upper classes.

IV. The five visions of Amos (7:1-9:10)

A. The locust (7:1-3)

Amos prays and judgment is withdrawn. (There is insufficient evidence to conclude that this is a reference to the same locust plague mentioned in Joel.)

B. Fire (drought?) (7:4-6)

Amos prays and again judgment is withdrawn.

C. The plumbline (7:7-9)

Amos does not pray here. God's righteousness is the standard held up against Israel; therefore, Amos cannot plead their case--there simply is no argument.

Historical interlude: the controversy with Amaziah; used to show how far Israel was from God's righteousness (7:10-17)

D. The basket of summer fruit (8:1-3)

This was the last of the fruit and was soon to perish. The end of Israel was at hand. (This prophecy was given about 760-755; Samaria fell to Assyria in 722.) There is a pun in 8:2 in the Hebrew (words that sound similar):

summer fruit = קיץ

(the) end = קץ

Theological interlude: the neglect of God's word brings a subsequent, judicial famine of the word of the Lord (8:4-14)

E. The Lord standing on the altar (of the temple at Bethel) (9:1-10)

Israel is to be judged like the Gentiles.

V. The promise of national restoration (9:11-15)

A. The restoration of the Davidic kingdom (9:11-12)

B. The characteristics of kingdom prosperity (9:13-15)

Important Passages and Problems

Amos 9:11-12

This passage is of singular significance. However, the keys to its interpretation is almost entirely lost in English translation.

The Grammar

Note the distinctions made in the Hebrew. In analyzing the word formation, "m" and "f" stand for *masculine* and *feminine*, respectively, and "s" and "p" stand for *singular* and *plural*, respectively.

1. "*tabernacle*" or "*booth*" (fs noun) = the Davidic *dynasty*
2. "*breaches of it*" (fp) = the *kingdom* which had been split
3. "*his ruins*" (ms) = David ("*seed*")
4. "*built it*" (fs) = tabernacle or booth

5. "*they* may possess" (mp verb) = the people of the united, restored kingdom

Cf. the Davidic covenant in 2 Sam. 7:12-16, especially verse 16.

The Theology

1. The Restoration of National Israel in the Messianic Kingdom

The final, climactic Day of Yahweh, like its historical antecedents, will bring blessing as well as judgment. Based on the grammatical analysis given above, verse 11 makes the following promises. "In that day," when Israel's Messiah returns, national Israel will be regathered back to her own land promised her as "an everlasting possession" (Gen. 17:8). The Davidic dynasty will be restored in the person of the Messiah, the Son of David, the separate nations of Israel and Judah will be reunited (cf. Ezek. 37:15-23), and the rebuilt Davidic dynasty will be "as in the days of old." Verse 12 promises that there will be salvation for the Gentile nations at that time as well (cf. Zech. 2:10-12).

Commenting on verses 13-15, Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 124, has this to say:

Israel will in that day be restored from centuries-long captivity to rebuild her cities and inhabit them with the enjoyment of her vineyards and her gardens. (Cp. Ho 6:11 and 5:11 of this book [Amos].) Then Israel will be planted and rooted in her own land (2 Sa 7:10), never more to be plucked up and uprooted from her God-given land. The day of exile, thank God, will be past. Note carefully Isaiah 61:4; 62:8, 9; 65:21-23.

2. James' Quotation in Acts 15:13-18

The following three points should be noted.

- "The nations . . . *a people for his name*" (us today--Acts 15:14) = those of "the nations *upon whom my name is called*" (Acts 15:17 and Amos 9:12). According to James, then, we are part of the prophesied Gentile *remnant* God is calling out during "these last days" (see notes on Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2:15-21).

- This does *not* mean that the entirety of Amos 9:11-12 finds its fulfillment within the remnant today. The situation is the same as with Joel 2:28-32: not everything to be done during the "last days" is to be done at once--neither text requires this. Thus, the complete reestablishment of the Davidic kingdom--the part of the Amos prophecy in verse 11--is still future even to us (cf. 9:13-15 and the phrase "*as in the days of old*":

בְּיָמֵי עוֹלָם

- For antecedent theology, see Num. 24:15-19 and compare "possess the remnant of Edom."

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