



THE MINOR PROPHET CHALLENGE

The Prophecy of Amos

INTRODUCTION TO AMOS

All introductory material has been excerpted from *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* published by Zondervan Publishing. We highly recommend it for your personal study library.

Author

Amos was from Tekoa (1:1), a village about ten miles south of Jerusalem and six miles from Bethlehem in Judah. He was a shepherd (1:1), a livestock breeder (see note on 7:14) and a dresser of sycamore-fig trees (7:14). His rural background notwithstanding, Amos clearly knew much about international history (1:3- 2:3). He was also familiar with the law of God and the history of God's covenant people. He had not studied to be a prophet (7:14), but the Lord sovereignly called him to this task. He spoke primarily to the northern kingdom (7:15) but also addressed the sins of Judah (2:4-5; cf. 9:11).

Time and Place of Writing

Date: 760-750 B.C.

According to 1:1 Amos prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah of Judah (792-740 B.C.) and Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 B.C.). Amos probably delivered most, if not all, of the oracles of this book in the northern kingdom. From his descriptions of the circumstances of Israel, most interpreters conclude that these oracles were delivered during the decade of great prosperity during the reign of Jeroboam II (760-750 B.C.). During this time there was peace between Judah and Israel. The northern kingdom was enjoying a false sense of security made possible by the weakness of Egypt, Babylon and especially Assyria, which had entered a temporary decline after the death of Adad-Nirari (805-783 B.C.). Israel faced no serious threat from Assyrian armies for about 40 years.

Purpose

To reveal the severity of divine judgment for covenant infidelity in Israel and Judah and to declare the hope of a great restoration after the approaching destruction and exile.

Original Audience

Amos directed his ministry to the northern kingdom (Israel). At the time, many Israelites were maintaining and even exceeding the ritual requirements of the law (4:4-5). Yet the true worship of God was mixed with idolatry (5:26; 2 Ki. 17:14-17), which led to various forms of violence and injustice (2:6-8; 4:1). Although the Lord had already sent warnings to Israel in the form of hunger, thirst, blight, locusts, plagues and military defeat, his people had refused to see his hand in these events and had failed to repent (4:6-11).

Finding Christ in Amos

Amos's prophecies reveal Christ in three ways.

One, the major theme of Amos- judgment against the nations and against the unfaithful of Israel and Judah- foreshadows the judgment that comes in Christ. The New Testament teaches that Christ will judge those who turn against God (Jn. 5:21-27; Ro. 2:12-16), including people in covenant with God (Heb. 10:26-30; 1 Pe. 4:17; Rev. 2:4-5, 14-16, 20-23; 3:1-3, 15-19). Christ ultimately fulfills the themes of judgment in Amos.

Two, Amos 9:11-15 speaks of the restoration promised to Israel and Judah after exile. After the failures of those who returned to the land in 539 B.C. these restoration prophecies began to be fulfilled. The New

Testament explains their initial fulfillment in the giving of the Spirit as the down payment for the believer's inheritance in Christ's first coming (Eph. 1:14), as well as their final fulfillment in the new heavens and the new earth when Christ returns (Rev. 21:1ff).

Three, Amos spoke of the restoration of "David's fallen tent"- David's royal dynasty (9:11). This prophecy is fulfilled by Jesus, the final, royal son of David (Mt. 1:1; Lk. 1:32-33; Rev. 22:16). Jesus rose to the throne of the house of David in his resurrection and ascension (Ac. 2:25-36). He reigns now and engages in holy war against the nations through the gospel (Ac. 15:13-19; 1 Co. 15:23-25). Ultimately, he will defeat all his enemies and establish a worldwide kingdom when he returns in glory (Ac. 2:34-36; Rev. 19:11-21; 21:1-22:5).

IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT AMOS

Road Map: Getting to Know the "Not So Famous Amos"

We will look at the structure of the book as a whole and then look at some themes and big ideas that emerge in each section. The goal of this discussion is twofold: 1) to be a tour guide, pointing out a few things along the way and 2) to whet your appetite on Amos and give you a framework that will help you study it on your own.

Structure of the Book:

- I. Superscription/Introduction (1:1-2)
- II. Judgment Upon the Nations (1:3-2:16)
- III. Judging God's Family (3:1-6:14)
- IV. Five Visions, 1 Event of Judgment (7:1-9:10)
- V. Restoration of Israel Under David (9:11-15)

I. "The Lord Roars" (1:1-2)

Superscription (1:1)—Who, What, Where, When

See the introduction for more biographical details on Amos. Two historical notes of special importance to the book of Amos are the social conditions of the prosperous time of the reigns of Uzziah and Jeroboam (Amos would be a contemporary of Jonah) and the earthquake that happened two years after Amos' ministry.

The social conditions of this time of prosperity saw the emergence of different classes. The upper class would enjoy multiple homes (3:15), elaborate decorations and homes (3:15; 5:11), and parties (6:4-6), while the condition of the poor only seemed to get worse (2:6b-8), as the courts were corrupt (5:12) and the marketplace had corruption (8:5). In some ways, cultic religion was still important to the people, as festivals flourished (2:11), though the people seem to ignore traditional forms of religion (2:11). Much rebuke in the book concerns the wealthy for their treatment of the poor.

The earthquake has relevance in authenticating Amos message. The promise of judgment and the reality of an earthquake within a few years would have authenticated Amos' message of judgment to the original audience. Though scholars have not been able to pinpoint at exact date of an earthquake, there is archaeological

evidence of an earthquake during this period, so it also authenticates the message to us in that it is tied to real history! This earthquake is also mentioned in Zech 14:5.

Introductory Word of the Book (1:2)—Judgment Upon Israel

Like a Pauline epistle, some of the early themes of the book emerge from the first few words of the book. Here, we see the Lord roaring like a lion, in anger. Note, though, the affected area of Carmel—which is in Israel. The Lion is loose against His own people! The book will develop this message of judgment upon Israel.

II. “Hitting Close to Home” (1:3-2:16)

Judgment Upon the Foreign Nations (1:3-2:3)

Damascus, of Aram(1:3-5)

Gaza/Ashdod/Ashkelon, of Philistines (1:6-8)

Tyre, of Phoenicia (1:9-10)

Edom (1:11-12)

Ammon (1:13-15)

Moab (2:1-3)

Judgment Upon the Covenant Nations (2:4-16)

Judah (2:4-5)

Israel (2:6-16)

Though the audience of the book is the nation of Israel, the book starts out with oracles of judgment upon the foreign nations. The primary audience for these oracles is Israel, not the nations! At first glance, it might be unclear what these oracles should mean to the nation of Israel. In some situations, prophets delivered messages of judgment on foreign nations as a means to encourage Israel, reminding them that God will vindicate them. However, here it seems that the purpose is more subversive. By discussing the judgment that comes on the foreign nations, in many ways Amos has swayed the audience to his side; he has “battered them up” for his message. Or, perhaps more appropriately, they think that he is on their side, which allows him to blindside them. The formula used in the oracles of judgment on the foreign nations and the ordering of the nations in relation to their geography and genealogical origin make this section a giant crescendo building up to the judgment on Israel.

There is a specific formula used in the oracles of judgment against the nations. It starts out with the phrase “for three sins of _____, even for four I will not turn back,” but then only seems to offer one or maybe two sins in each situation, and then goes into the judgment that will fall upon the people and the rulers. If it seems like something is missing there, it is! There should be more on the list but they are incomplete, pointing to the fact that something bigger is coming. That judgment is upon Israel. One sees the full expansion of the list of sins when Israel faces judgment. Furthermore, one sees the sheer space devoted to Israel points to an emphasis on that judgment. The emphasis is not the on the foreign nations being judged but on Israel being judged! The foreign nation oracles set it up.



Geographically, there is a movement from northeast to southwest to northwest to southeast of Israel; all the surrounding nations are listed, with Israel in the center. In some ways, a giant X has been painted over Israel! However, Israel will not be immune from judgment as judgment moves to Judah, Israel's southern neighbor. Geographically speaking, Israel is primed for judgment; they are the only people left to receive judgment.

Map from *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands*, by Barry J. Beitzel (Moody Press, 1985). It has many good maps—good reference resource if you need one.

The relationship of the nations to Israel also adds to the judgment coming to Israel. While judgment comes first on the nations with no relation to Israel, it then turns to the nations that are related to Israel, Edom (through Esau), Ammon and Moab (through Lot, see Gen 19:30-36), and Judah (sister nation). Though these nations were technically related to Israel, they had been a constant thorn in their side; they also had a great dislike for Judah and the “Holier than thou” members of that nation. As judgment moves closer to the covenant people in relation to genealogy, they would have been more excited to their neighbors destroyed, but not thinking that judgment could come upon themselves.

In discussing these oracles of judgment, one should note the sort of crimes listed in the indictment of each nation. The non-covenant nations are indicted for war-crimes (see 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1) against other nations (not just against Israel; in fact, it is likely that none of these crimes are against Israel!). They are not judged for idolatry or false worship but for how they relate to other nations. However, Judah, another covenant nation is indicted for their forsaking the covenant with God (2:4-5). When judgment comes to Israel, their lengthy indictment deals more with the way that they have treated one another in the

nation (see 2:6b-8), which has a non-correspondence with the acts of God towards them (2:9-12). The abuses listed in 2:6b-8 relate particularly to how they have treated the poor and downtrodden. They do not seem to be indicted for having a false religious system, but for rejecting God by rejecting His covenant people, people who are helpless and need help, much like the nation when it was in slavery in Egypt (see 2:10).

Three Critical Truths to Note About These Judgment Oracles:

- Even non-covenant nations are judged
 - God's knowledge and sovereignty extends to these lands
 - God holds them responsible for their treatment of other lands
- Judgment can come upon God's people!
- Treatment of other nations and other people forms the basis for judgment

III. "With Great Privilege Comes Great Responsibility and Judgment" (3:1-6:18)

Three "Words of Judgment" Against Israel (3:1-5:17)

Judgment Based upon Breaking the Relationship (3:1-15)

Judgment Based upon Ignoring Past Warnings (4:1-13)

Judgment Based upon Perverting Justice and Worship (5:1-17)

Two Woes Against Israel (5:18-6:14)

Woe to those Longing for Day of the Lord (5:18-5:27)

Woe to those Complacent and Secure (6:1-14)

This main chunk of the book intensifies judgment against Israel through different structures proclaiming judgment. The first section ("words of judgment") features a basic structure of calling Israel to hear a word (3:1; 4:1; 5:1), discussing how the people have done wrong, and then the promise of destruction upon the land (3:13-15; 4:12-13; 5:16-17). The second section ("woes") calls out judgment on more specific members of Israel (5:18; 6:1) and also end with promises of judgment (5:27; 6:14).

The key thought throughout the passage and the whole book can really be seen in 3:1-2 ("Hear this word the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel--against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.") The judgment upon Israel is built upon their covenant relationship with God! Judgment should not come as a surprise, as they have bound themselves to the LORD in a covenant with obligations, blessings and cursings (see Lev 26; Deut 28). The different "words" of judgment are all relate to the covenant. For example, the judgment in Amos 3 is built upon their binding relationship (3:3) and the LORD's communication with them (3:7-8). The word of judgment in Amos 4 relates to the fact that signs of judgment have been given, as promised in Lev 26 and Deut 28, but they have been ignored. The people misunderstand what is important to this covenant relationship, as when God brought them from Egypt, the covenant was not built upon sacrifices (5:25). They have broken their covenant with God and are punished for that!

When one notes the sins for which Israel is indicted, once again, they seem to be social injustices, such as oppression of the poor (3:9; 4:1; 5:12), plundering and looting (3:10), corruption in the court system (5:10, 12), unjust taxes (5:11), and elegant banquets while the poor suffer (6:4-6). While there are references to God not accepting worship (4:4-5; 5:21-23) and one possible reference to idolatry (5:25), injustice rather than idolatry marks the indictment!

If the key verse concerning judgment is 3:1-2, the key verses concerning repentance would be 5:14-15 and 5:24. While 5:24 might be the more famous verse, discussing constantly functioning justice and righteousness by comparing them to bodies of water, 5:14-15 defines seeking and loving good and hating evil as maintaining justice in the courts. This comes after discussion of seeking the LORD (5:4, 6). One seeks the LORD by maintaining justice and being true to His character.

Therefore, the solution, the way to show repentance in Amos does not relate to “getting more religious” but correcting the actions that have constituted the break. This can be seen in sarcastic commands to keep on sinning (4:4-5) and direct expressions where God notes his disdain for their religious festivals (5:21-23). Rather than “getting right with God and then getting right with people,” one “gets right with God” by “treating people right”—in accordance with the character of God. This can be seen clearly in 5:21-24, as God rejects the religious offerings of the people (5:21-23) but then commands to have justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

Other Themes Emerging in this Section:

- The self-deception of God’s people
Israel deceives itself by thinking that God is with them (5:14) for them (5:18) even though he is very much against them (5:18-20) because they believe that certain religious practices constitute covenant faithfulness.
- The complacency of God’s people in times of affluence
While enjoying prospering, the rich ignore that oppression of the poor creates these conditions and their violations of the covenant with God; they ignore the plight of their neighbor and the condition of their hearts.
- The majesty and power of God
Great hymns of God’s power are seen in 4:13, 5:8; one cannot forget the power of the God who has formed a covenant relationship with us; He is Sovereign!

IV. “Times Up!” (7:1-9:10)

Vision 1: Locusts and the LORD Relenting (7:1-3)

Vision 2: Fire and the LORD Relenting (7:4-7)

Vision 3: Plumb Line and Certain Judgment (7:8-9)

Interlude: Amos and Amaziah the priest of Bethel and Certain Judgment (7:10-17)

Vision 4: Basket of Ripe Fruit and Certain Judgment (8:1-14)

Vision 5: Lord Standing by the Altar and Certain Judgment (9:1-10)

As seen by the structure, this section features 5 vision of judgment with a historical interlude. The first three visions of judgment are relented, as the first two features the exact same structure—Amos sees a vision of judgment coming (fire and locusts), he pleads for the LORD to relent because “Jacob is so small,” and He does. The third vision initially appears to follow the formula, as Amos sees something (a plumb line) but one notes a change as Amos does not plead and the LORD will no longer relent. The plumb line is key; while the exact meaning of the plumb line is debated due to its relatively sparse use, it seems that it relates to a correct standard used in construction, like a level. Therefore, this changes the point of the visions from the simple fact of judgment to the necessity or ground of judgment. The idea is that there is a standard (the covenant) and Israel has not lived up to that standard; Amos does not plead for God to relent because the judgment is right.

While Amos’ confrontation with Amaziah the priest of Bethel might seem to be out of place (and it is unclear when it happened historically), it gives the rationale for why Amos does not plead for the people; it is placed here for literary reasons. It shows why judgment will come upon the nation of Israel: the leaders of the nation, including the priest, rejected the message that the LORD gave to Amos. Rejection of the people happens only after they have rejected their covenant making God. In fact, Amazariah’s great disgrace (7:17) is based upon his high position. The nation will be exiled and the leaders will be disgraced because they have rejected God.

The structure of the fourth vision is similar to the first three, building off of the need and certainty of judgment as conveyed by the plumb line and the confrontation with Amaziah. This vision is really a Hebraic wordplay, as “end” and “fruit” sound similar. Time is ripe for judgment, as the LORD has spared Israel punishment on their sins of oppression of the poor and needy and selfish pursuit of wealth (8:4-6). The description of judgment is expanded and heightened, as there seem to be catastrophic effects on the land (8:7-9). The worst part of the judgment, though, is the fact that the presence of the Word of the LORD will leave the people (8:11-12). The message of judgment intensifies.

The final vision features a different structure, as now Amos sees the LORD standing at the altar, ready to bring judgment (9:1). The shaking of the thresholds and tearing down of the pillars discussed in 9:1 could be the earthquake mentioned in 1:1. The nation will not be able to escape this judgment (9:2-4) and it will be great as the LORD is powerful (9:5-6). Just as the LORD has judged other nations, He will certainly judge them (9:7-10). However, there is a glimmer of hope in the judgment, as He will destroy sinners but not completely destroy the house of Jacob. While judgment is certain, it will not be complete—a remnant will be preserved. It is a preview of God’s grace.

V. “Big Tent Revival” (9:11-15)

While doom and gloom has dominated the book, with hints at restoration and grace seen the relenting of the LORD and His promises to Israel (9:8), the book does not end on the promise of judgment but one of restoration, as in the midst of the judgment (“In that day,”

9:11), there will be restoration. This passage proclaims the restoration of the Davidic line, as his tent is restored and he will rule other nations (9:11-12). Not only will the Davidic line be restored, but the prosperity of the nation will be restored as well (9:13-14). The book concludes with a promise that the LORD will permanently keep Israel in the land (9:15). There will come a time when they will not need to face judgment because they have presumably been purified by God.

When was (or will) this prophesy fulfilled? While Israel came back from exile under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, the Davidic line was never restored. Furthermore, returnees did not see great prosperity as promised in 9:13-14. As noted in the introduction, it is quoted by James at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:16-18. They saw the Gentiles coming into the church as part of the fulfillment of the restoration of Israel. Therefore, one could say that this is being fulfilled, as David's house has been restored and the His people are coming to Him.

Amos' Chunks of Wisdom for Us:

- God rejects religious worship that does not practice compassion and justice
- God is sovereign over all the world and all are answerable to Him
- God's covenant people are not exempt from discipline—in fact, they are more likely to face judgment because of their relationship
- While God judges sin, there is grace in the judgment

Concluding Thoughts:

A member of another denomination, one known for social action, lamented the current state of his church, as his church had seemed to have lost the gospel message and only addressed social needs. He pointed out that the first generation of the American church knew the gospel and got involved in social issues because of it. The second generation assumed the gospel and got involved in social issues. The third generation forgot the gospel and only got involved in social situations. American Evangelicals might have a different story. One looks at the evangelicals in the 19th century, who believed in the gospel and got involved in social issues. Evangelicals in the early 20th century fought for the gospel and assumed social involvement. Do Evangelicals in the 21st century know the gospel really well but forget about the social implications of the gospel? Some look at rich Christians in an age of hunger and see this to be true. Perhaps it is—but we know it ought not to be. Amos is a reminder that we need to hear both sides of the Great Commandment—to love God and to love others. They cannot be separated!

Resource: Selections from Westminster Larger Catechism on the 10 Commandments

Question 99: What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments?

Answer: That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded...That: What is forbidden or commanded to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places, to endeavor that it may be avoided or performed by others,

according to the duty of their places.

Question 135: What are the duties required in the sixth commandment?

Answer: The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defense thereof against violence, patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit; a sober use of meat, drink, physic, sleep, labor, and recreations; by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild and courteous speeches and behavior; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent.

Question 136: What are the sins forbidden in the sixth commandment?

Answer: The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense; the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life; sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions, distracting cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labor, and recreations; provoking words, oppression, quarreling, striking, wounding, and: Whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any.

Question 141: What are the duties required in the eighth commandment?

Answer: The duties required in the eighth commandment are, truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to everyone his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof; giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others; moderation of our judgments, wills, and affections concerning worldly goods; a provident care and study to get, keep, use, and dispose these things which are necessary and convenient for the sustentation of our nature, and suitable to our condition; a lawful calling, and diligence in it; frugality; avoiding unnecessary lawsuits and suretyship, or other like engagements; and an endeavor, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own.

Question 142: What are the sins forbidden in the eighth commandment?

Answer: The sins forbidden in the eighth commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are, theft, robbery, man-stealing, and receiving anything that is stolen; fraudulent dealing, false weights and measures, removing land marks, injustice and unfaithfulness in contracts between man and man, or in matters of trust; oppression, extortion, usury, bribery, vexatious lawsuits, unjust enclosures and depopulations; engrossing commodities to enhance the price; unlawful callings, and all other unjust or sinful ways of taking or withholding from our neighbor: What belongs to him, or of enriching ourselves; covetousness; inordinate prizing and affecting worldly goods; distrustful and distracting cares and studies in getting, keeping, and using them; envying at the prosperity of others; as likewise idleness, prodigality, wasteful gaming; and all other ways whereby we do unduly prejudice our own outward estate, and defrauding ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God has given us.

WHY IT MATTERS

The parallels between our times and the time of Amos make this a very relevant book for us to consider today.

How do we overlook matters of social justice like the people in Amos' time? What injustices are we guilty of through sins of commission and omission {Note: the selections

from the WLC on the 10 Commandments might be helpful here)? What can we do to change this? Think in particular on the following levels:

- as an individual
- as a church
- as nation

The people of Amos' time thought that they were exempt from punishment because they were God's chosen people and they were performing religious acts of worship. How do we deceive ourselves so that you do not have to pay attention to our responsibilities towards others?

How can we create a culture of compassion in the midst of an affluent community? How can we pass along the principles of Amos to our children rather than the principles of our community?

Most of the book of Amos dealt with God judging His people. How do we reconcile the message of judgment for our sins with the death of Christ? What is the relationship between obedience and punishment in the New Covenant?

Was there a particular aspect of Amos' message that struck you anew this morning? What was it? How will you walk away from class this morning different because of Amos' message?