

Amos

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A prophet of the 8th cent b.c., and the third book of the Minor Prophets.

I. The Prophet

A. Name

Amos is the prophet whose book stands third among the “Twelve” in the Hebrew canon. No other person bearing the same name is mentioned in the OT. There is an Amos mentioned in the genealogical series Lk. 3:25, but he is otherwise unknown, and although the spelling is the same as that for Amos in the Greek OT, we do not know how his name would have been written in Hebrew.

B. Native Place

Tekoa, the birthplace of Amos, was situated 6 mi (10 km) S of Bethlehem, from which it is visible, on

a hill 2700 ft (820 m) high, overlooking the wilderness of Judah. The name has survived in contemporary Arabic society (Teqû‘), and the neighborhood is at the present day the pasture-ground for large flocks of sheep and goats. From the high ground on which the modern village stands one looks down on the bare undulating hills of one of the bleakest districts of Palestine, “the waste howling wilderness,” which must have suggested some of the startling imagery of the prophet’s addresses. The place may have had—as is not seldom the case with towns or villages—a reputation for a special quality of its inhabitants; for it was from Tekoa that Joab fetched the “wise woman” who by a feigned story effected the reconciliation of David with his banished son Absalom (2 S. 14). There are traces in the book of Amos of a shrewdness and mother wit that are not so conspicuous in other prophetic books.

C. Personal History

The particulars of a personal kind noted in the book are few but suggestive. Amos was not a prophet or the son of a prophet (7:14), i.e., he did not belong to the professional class which frequented the so-called schools of the prophets. He was “among the shepherds (*nōqedîm*) of Tekoa” (1:1), the word here used being found only once again in biblical usage (2 K. 3:4), applied to Mesha king of Moab. An additional reference in the Ugaritic poem of Baal and Anath points to a cultic servant whose function included dictation of poetry in addition to whatever herding may have been required (ANET, p. 141b, colophon). In 7:14 the word rendered “herdsman” is different (*bôqēr*) and from its etymology denotes an owner of cattle, though some, from the LXX rendering, think that the word should be the same as in 1:1. He was also “a dresser of sycamore trees” (7:14). The word rendered “dresser” (AV “gatherer”) occurs only here, and from the LXX (*knízon*) it is conjectured that there is reference to a squeezing or nipping of the sycamore-fig to make it more palatable or to accelerate its ripening.

D. Preparation

Nothing is said as to any special preparation of the prophet for his work: “The Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel” (7:15). In these words he put himself in line with all previous prophets who, in various modes of expression, claimed a direct revelation from God. There is, however, significance in the mention of the prophetic call in association with the statement about his occupation. There was apparently no period interposed between the one and the other, no cessation of husbandry to prepare for the work of prophesying. Amos was already prepared for that task, and when God’s time came he took it up. Such preparation involved both his relationship with God and his awareness of the world in which he lived.

1. Knowledge of God First of all, he had no doubt or uncertainty as to the character of the God in whose name he was called to speak. The God of Amos is one whose sway is boundless (9:2ff), whose power is infinite (8:9f), not only controlling the forces of nature (4; 5:8f) but guiding the movements and destinies of nations (6:1ff, 14; 9:7ff). Moreover, He is righteous in all His ways, dealing

with nations on moral principles (1:3ff; 2:1ff), and, though particularly favorable to Israel, yet making that very choice of them as a people a ground for visiting them with sterner retribution for their sins (3:2). In common with all the prophets, Amos gave no explanation of how he came to know God and to form this conception of His character. It was simply assumed that God is such a Being; and this knowledge, as it could come only from God, is regarded as undisputed and undisputable. The call to speak in God’s name may have come suddenly, but the prophet’s conception of the character of the God who called him was no new or sudden revelation.

2. Acquaintance with History and Geography Amos had a broad knowledge of the affairs of his own nation and those surrounding Israel. His opening words (chs 1f) demonstrate an ability to interact with events outside of the chosen nation, while various references (cf. below) show how well-informed the prophet was in the past and present of Israel’s life. Such careful attention to national and international history has caused speculation to the effect that Amos was not the rustic he is often depicted to be. Further evidence in that direction comes from his acute awareness of the geography of his own country. Whether by personal travel as a wool-merchant or flock-master, or simply as one whose wanderlust led him to many places, the prophet seems to have visited various towns (e.g., Samaria, Bethel, Gilgal, Beer-sheba), particularly those which were religious and market centers.

Basic to all his knowledge is the influence of his own home, the scenery of the barren hills of the Judean wilderness, and the simple occupations of his daily life. The landscape surrounding Tekoa was such as to make a solemn impression on a reflective mind: the wide-spreading desert, the shimmering waters of the Dead Sea, the high wall of the distant hills of Moab. And as he tended his flock, or defended them from the ravages of wild beasts, this sublime setting nourished that exalted view of the divine Majesty which we find in his book, and furnished the imagery in which his thoughts are set (1:2; 3:4f; 4:13; 5:8; 9:5f). Rustic he may be; but his style is one of natural and impassioned eloquence, coming from a mind which saw God’s working in all nature and His presence in every phenomenon.

E. Date

The date of the prophet Amos can be fixed approximately from the statement in 1:1 that his activity fell “in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.” Both these monarchs had long reigns, that of Uzziah (Azariah) extending from 767 to 740/39 b.c. and that of Jeroboam II from 782/1 to 753 b.c. Since Jotham probably acted as co-regent with Uzziah after 750 b.c., we may safely take the years of their concurrent reign and put the ministry of Amos between 760 and 750 b.c. The earthquake reference, though long preserved in Israel’s memory (Zec. 14:5), is of no help to modern chronologists. The period thus fixed was one of peace and prosperity in both north and south. The troublesome Syrians had been reduced in 802 b.c. by the destruction of their capital Damascus at the hand of the Assyrian Adadnirari III, and for the next fifty years Israel was to grow at their expense. In Assyria itself a period of weakness followed Adadnirari’s early successes and no serious threat to Palestine arose until after the accession of Tiglath-pileser III in 745. During the reign of Jeroboam II the northern kingdom reached its zenith of wealth and power with the attendant results of luxury and excess, a situation reflected constantly in the prophetic visions of Amos. Whether those prophecies were spread over a long period of time we cannot tell, though there is some indication that the brief biographical sketch (7:10ff) is set chronologically within a series of consecutive proclamations.

II. The Book

The arrangement of the book is clear and simple, falling naturally into three parts, recognizable by certain recurring formulas and general literary features. The text has been, on the whole, faithfully preserved, and various attempts to find traces of later editorial hands rest mainly on grounds of content rather than style.

A. Divisions

- (1) The first section embraces chs 1 and 2. Here, after the title and designation of the prophet in 1:1, there is a solemn proclamation of divine authority for the prophet’s words: “The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice

from Jerusalem” (v 2). This is notable in one who throughout the book recognizes God’s power as worldwide and His operation as extending to all creation; and it should challenge, on the one hand, the assertion that the temple of Jerusalem was not more sacred than any of the numerous “high places” throughout the land, and, on the other hand, the superficial manner in which some writers speak of the Hebrew notion of a deity whose dwelling-place was restricted to one locality beyond which His influence was not felt. For this God, who has His dwelling-place in Zion, now through the mouth of the prophet denounces in succession the surrounding nations for breaches of a universal law binding on all humanity. It will be observed that the nations denounced are not named in geographical order, and the prophet exhibits remarkable rhetorical skill in the order of selection. The interest and sympathy of the hearers is secured by fixing the attention on the enormities of guilt in their neighbors, and curiosity is kept awake by the uncertainty as to where the next stroke of the prophetic whip will fall. Beginning with the more distant and alien peoples of Damascus, Gaza, and Tyre, he wheels round to the nearer and kindred peoples of Edom, Ammon, and Moab, till he rests for a moment on the brother tribe of Judah, and thus, having relentlessly drawn the net around Israel by the enumeration of seven peoples, he swoops down upon the northern kingdom to which his message is particularly addressed.

- (2) The second section embraces chs 3–6 and consists apparently of a series of discourses, three of which are introduced by the formula: “Hear this word” (3:1; 4:1; 5:1), and two others introduced by a comprehensive: “Woe to them ...” (5:18; 6:1). Some would divide this section into a larger number of subsections (e.g., separating 4:1–3 from 4:4ff); some, indeed, have described the whole book as a collection of ill-arranged fragments. Such views, however, popular with an earlier generation, are now treated with considerable reserve.
- (3) The third section has some well-marked characteristics, although it is even less uniform than the preceding. The outstanding feature is the phrase, “Thus the Lord God showed me” (7:1, 4, 7; 8:1), varied at 9:1 by the words, “I saw the Lord standing beside the

altar.” We have thus a series of “visions” bearing upon, and interpreted as applying to, the condition of Israel. It is in the course of one of these, when the prophet comes to the words, “I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword” (7:9), that the interposition of Amaziah the priest of Bethel is recorded, with the prophet’s noble reply as to his divine call, and his rebuke and denunciation of the priest, ending with a prophetic announcement of the downfall and captivity of Israel (7:14–17).

B. Theology

Amos is sometimes considered to be the prophet of wrath in contrast to his contemporary Hosea, the prophet of God’s love. Such a contrast is inconsistent with a balanced picture of both prophets as men whose theology was grounded in the covenant of love between God and Israel. Even if, as some critics (e.g., Eissfeldt) maintain, the closing passage of Amos (9:11–15) is a secondary addition, there is still no reason to believe that Amos—harsh though his words were—believed that the God of Israel would make a full end of His people in captivity. Judgment is pronounced on the false religion that claimed national security in the Lord but could ignore the ethical demands of the covenant. Woes are called down upon those who looked for the Day of the Lord as a day when Israel would triumph over all enemies. Such a Day, for disobedient Israel, was to be a day of darkness and not light (5:18), a day of national destruction rather than imperial expansion. Although Amos seems to have had no hope for the nation as a whole, he did enunciate the doctrine of the remnant (9:8), begun earlier under Elijah and developed fully by Isaiah. In view of these commitments to the mainstream of prophetic theological thought, it would seem strange if, as some scholars still maintain, Amos 5:21–23 were a rejection of cultic religion completely. One feels, rather, that Amos’ God had rejected both cult and nation in their corrupt form, but any restoration of an Israelite remnant would certainly have included a reformed and revived ritual system.

C. Historical and Critical Value

The book of Amos is particularly valuable as a contemporaneous document from a period of great significance in the history of Israel. It not only gives graphic sketches and illuminating hints of the life

and religious condition of the people, but furnishes a trustworthy standard for estimating the value of some other books whose dates are not so precisely determined, a definite starting-point for tracing the course of Israel’s history.

1. As a Reflection of Social Conditions The book is valuable as embodying a contemporary picture of society and the condition of religion. From the abuses which the prophet denounces and the lifelike sketches he draws of the scenes amid which he moved, taken along with what we know otherwise of the historical movements of the period, we are able to form a fairly adequate estimate of the condition of the age and the country. During the reign of Jeroboam II the kingdom of Israel rose to a degree of extent and influence unparalleled since the days of Solomon (2 K. 14:25), and we are not astonished to read in Amos the haughty words he puts into the mouth of the people of his time, who speak of Israel as the “first of the nations” (6:1). But success in war, if it encouraged this boastful spirit, brought also inevitable evils in its train. Victory meant plunder, an extension of territory and increase of wealth for the warrior-landowner class. The peasant, however, required to take up arms without promise of great spoil, was often taken away from the labors of the field, which at best were for a time neglected, and in the worst event were wasted and rendered unproductive. The wealth secured by men of strong hand led to the increase of luxury in its possessors, and became actually the means of still further adding to the burdens of the poor, who were dependent on the rich for the means of earning their livelihood and for basic justice in society. The opening denunciation of Israel for oppression of the poor (2:6f) is reechoed and amplified in the succeeding chapters (3:9f; 4:1; 5:11f; 8:4–6). The luxury of the rich, who fattened on the misfortune of their poorer brethren, is castigated in biting irony in such passages as 6:3–6. Specially noticeable in this connection is the contemptuous reference to the luxurious women, the “cows of Bashan” (4:1), whose extravagances are maintained by the oppression of the poor. The situation, in short, was one that has found striking parallels in modern despotic countries in the East, where the people are divided into two classes, the powerful rich and the poor oppressed, men who have no helper, dependent on the rich and influential and tending to greater poverty under greedy patrons.

2. As a Reflection of Popular Theology In a northern version of what was later denounced by Isaiah and Jeremiah, the people prided themselves on what they regarded as the worship of the national God, thinking that so long as they honored Him with costly offerings and a gorgeous ritual, they were pleasing Him and secure in His protection. Though lacking the strong prop of a Davidic monarchy and Jerusalem temple, crowds of worshipers resorted to Bethel, Dan, Gilgal, and even Beer-sheba with all the accompaniments of ceremony and ritual which the newly found wealth put in their power. The people seem to have settled down to a complacent optimism, nourished no doubt by a national prosperity; and though there had not been wanting reminders of the sovereignty of a righteous God, in convulsions of nature—drought, famine, pestilence, and earthquake (4:6–11)—these had been of no avail in awakening the sleeping conscience. They put the evil day far from them (6:3), for the Lord was their national God and “the Day of the Lord,” the good time coming (5:18), when God would come to their help, was more in their minds than the imperative duty of returning to Him (4:6, 8, etc.).

3. As Witness to Israel’s Sacred History A past generation of scholars argued that the great historical sources of the Pentateuch which they designated J and E were composed at or shortly before the time of Amos and Hosea. References to events portrayed therein, as reflected in Amos, provided a reliable historical peg for affirming that the accounts in J and E were circulating by the 8th century. It was argued by not a few that the J and E documents were original compositions, bearing little resemblance to whatever history Israel may actually have experienced, and providing no faithful picture of what had really transpired. Contemporary scholarship offers no such facile solutions, and most would agree that the traditions contained in the Pentateuch, if not the actual writings themselves, were very old at the time Amos and his contemporaries appeared. It is not surprising, then, that within the compass of even a small book we should find references to outstanding events and stages of the past history presented as matters known to all his hearers. Such incidental notices as a reference to the house of Isaac (7:16), another to the house of Jacob (3:13), and another to the enmity between Jacob and Esau (1:11), certainly imply a familiarity with a connected patriarchal history such as found in Genesis. Again, references to

the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah (4:11), to the “whole family” whom the Lord “brought up out of the land of Egypt” (3:1), to the divine leading of the people “forty years in the wilderness” (2:10), are not odds and ends of popular story but links in a chain of national history.

4. As a Reflection of Legal Development in Israel The silence of Amos concerning the duties and perquisites of legitimate priests and Levites and the priority of the Jerusalem temple have led many to the conclusion that the prophet was unfamiliar with distinctly Levitical legislation. Adherents of the old JEDP documentary hypothesis have generally held that this material came either from D, written for Josiah’s reformation in 622/621 b.c., or from P, a composition of the priests in the postexilic theocracy.

At the outset we must bear in mind the condition of the people whom Amos addressed, and the purpose and aim of his mission to the northern kingdom. As we are told in Kings (1 K. 12:25ff), Jeroboam I deliberately sought to make a breach between the worship of Jerusalem and that of his own kingdom, while persuading his people that the worship of the Lord was being maintained. The schism occurred some 170 years before the time of Amos, and it is improbable that the worship and ritual of the northern kingdom tended in that interval to greater purity or greater conformity to what had been the authoritative practice of the undivided kingdom at the temple of Jerusalem. When, therefore, Amos, in face of the corrupt worship combined with elaborate ritual that prevailed around him, declared that God hated and despised their feasts and took no delight in their solemn assemblies (5:21), we are not justified in pressing his words into a sweeping condemnation of all ritual. On the contrary, when in the very same connection (5:22) he specified burnt offerings and meal offerings and peace offerings, and, in another passage (4:4, 5), daily sacrifices and tithes, sacrifices of thanksgiving, and free-will offerings, it is natural to infer that by these terms, which are familiar in the Pentateuch, he is referring to those statutory observances which were part of the national worship of united Israel, but had been overlaid with corruption and become destitute of spiritual value as practiced in the northern kingdom. Having condemned in such scornful and sweeping terms the worship that he saw going on around him, what was Amos to gain by entering into minute ritual prescriptions or defining the precise duties of priests and Levites? Having con-

demned the pilgrimages to the shrines of Bethel, Gilgal, Beer-sheba and Dan, what was he to gain by substituting for such meaningless activity an equally insincere attendance at a central sanctuary? Amos' problem was not one of form but one of content. No attempt is made even to reckon with questions of Jerusalem v Bethel, Levite v non-Levitical priest, because none of this could have been meaningful until the prior question of the heart and its attitude was settled. Thus the argument from silence cannot serve as proof of a late date for D or P material, inasmuch as the question simply was not one on which we might expect Amos to comment.

If we sense an ambiguity in Amos' handling of ritual law, there is no such response when we consider his ethical sources. His appeals are in striking agreement with the specifically ethical demands of the law books, and in phraseology they resemble them so much as to warrant the conclusion that the requirements of the law on these subjects were known and acknowledged. Thus his denunciations of those who oppress the poor (2:7; 4:1; 8:4) are quite in the spirit and style of Ex. 22:21f; 23:9. His references to the perversion of justice and taking bribes (2:6; 5:7, 10ff; 6:12) are rhetorical enforcements of the prohibitions of the law in Ex. 23:6–8. When he reproves those that “lay themselves down beside every altar upon garments taken in pledge” (2:8) we hear an echo of the command: “If ever you take your neighbor's garment in pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down” (Ex. 22:26); and when he denounces those who make “the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances” (8:5) his words are in close agreement with the law, “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin” (Lev. 19:35f).

In addition to an affirmation of those ethical parts of the law which lie at the foundation of all prophecy, Amos is remarkable in that his phraseology often agrees with Deuteronomy, the most ethical book of the Pentateuch. He does not, indeed, like his contemporary Hosea, dwell on the *love* of God as Deuteronomy does, but, in sterner mold, citing almost the very words of Deuteronomy, emphasizes the keeping of God's commandments, and denounces those who despise the law (cf. 2:4 with Dt. 17:19). Among verbal coincidences have been noticed the combinations “oppress” and “crush” (4:1; Dt. 28:33), “blasting” (RSV “blight”) and “mildew” (4:9; Dt. 28:22), “gall” and “wormwood” (6:12; Dt.

29:18). In view of this it seems that the silence of Amos with reference to the centralization of worship, on which Deuteronomy is so explicit, is not to be seen as conclusive in judging the critical question of D.

III. Amos and the Prophetic Office

With the possible exception of Joel, Amos is the earliest prophet whose oracles have been collected in written form. This fact, and the apparent dissociation from normative prophecy (7:14), has led some scholars to see in Amos a sharp break with earlier professional prophets and the institution of a new movement. However, Am. 7:14 is still the subject of lively academic discussion, with some translating the pertinent phrase “I was no prophet,” indicating only a lack of early association with the office, while others opt for “I *am* no prophet,” and argue about Amos' relationship with the guild prophets (some of whom may indeed have been ecstatics) and the normative tradition represented by Samuel and Elijah.

What is certainly clear, whatever the meaning of Am. 7:14, is that prophecy was no new thing in eighth-century Israel, and that Amos identified squarely with what he considered a known and accepted office within the nation. He begins by stating boldly, “Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets” (3:7). We need not search further for a definition of the prophet as understood by him and other OT writers: the prophet is one to whom God reveals His will, and who comes forward to declare that will and purpose to man. A great deal has been made of the words of Amaziah the priest of Bethel (7:12), as if they proved that the prophet in those times was regarded as a wandering rhetorician, earning his bread by reciting his speeches; and we must indeed admit that there were prophets whose motives and methodology were less than God-directed (Mic. 3:5, 11). Nevertheless, there were evidently true prophets, well known in the history of Israel, to whose tradition Amos appealed and with whose ministry he identified (2:11; 3:7f). They were called by God to their office, and, far from echoing merely patriotic and nationalistic sentiments of the people, they were unpopular preachers of judgment whose message had, from the first, evoked a negative response (2:12).

Amos also gives a valid picture of prophetic religion. His God is a God of the universe, controlling

the forces of nature (4:6ff; 5:8f), ruling the destinies of nations (6:2, 14; 9:2-6), searching the thoughts of the heart (4:13), inflexible in righteousness and dealing with nations and men on the basis of equal justice (1 and 2; 9:7), but most severe to the people who have received the highest privileges (3:2). This is the God whose laws Israel has broken (2:4; 3:10) and for whose just judgment she is warned to prepare (4:12). There is no rejection of cult except insofar as it has conflicted with God's true law.

There is no exaltation of ethics apart from the ethic of Deuteronomy and the rest of the Pentateuch. There is no false assurance of God's choice of Israel apart from a reiteration of the covenant responsibilities inherent in that choice. In short, prophetic religion is the religion of normative spokesmen for God from Moses onward.

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