

FACTFILE: GCE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

PROPHECY AND THE PROPHET AMOS



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A Summary of Scholarship: Although brief, the book of Amos is very important and has been given significant attention in recent interpretation. It is considered the first written prophetic work. Older scholarship, which has now been superseded, proposed that Amos was the earliest example of Israel's "ethical monotheism". This view argued that God ruled over all peoples and intended a just moral purpose for the whole world. Newer criticism sees Amos as the beginning of a prophetic tradition that finalized the narratives and commands constituting Torah (instruction, guidance, law).

Amos and History: The book of Amos grows from the work of Amos the prophet. He is usually dated to the middle of the eighth century BCE, in the prosperous reign of Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom, and the equally prosperous reign of Uzziah in the southern kingdom (in some texts, Uzziah is also known by his other name, Azariah). From a prophetic perspective, it was clear that this great prosperity was based on the exploitive practice of the rich against the poor, and was denounced as unsustainable. Amos, apparently from Judah but at work in the northern kingdom of Israel (7:12), voices a powerful criticism of society, rooted in a sense of what God requires and what should be possible when a society is shaped by covenantal standards. The judgment that is certain to come is presented as "the Day of the Lord". This is when God will intervene fully and harshly in the corrupt affairs of the nation (5:18–20).

Getting Started in Amos: To appreciate the full impact of Amos' oracles against the nations in chapters 1 and 2, it helps to have a map of the

biblical world. Notice that the speeches are ordered in a very intentional, geographic way, so that the prophet's fierce indictments begin away from Israel but gradually zero in, moving directionally from the northeast (1:3–5) to the southwest (1:6–8) to the northwest (1:9–10) to the southeast (1:11–12) to two close-by locations directly to the east of Judah (1:13–2:3). The prophet then rhetorically moves to the west, delivering an indictment to the southern kingdom of Judah (2:4–5), before finally culminating in the original focus of his concern, the northern kingdom of Israel (2:6–16). Once landing on the map of Israel, notice that the speech lengthens and becomes more detailed, as Amos gets into his stride. Notice that while the foreign nations are indicted for essentially obvious war crimes, Israel is indicted for violation of Torah/Law ethics (compare vv. 6–8 with the laws against economic exploitation in Exodus 21–22 and Deuteronomy 24). The point is clear: in Israel, economic exploitation and social injustice are on equal footing with the worst of violent crimes because Israel (unlike the other nations) has Torah/Law instruction to guide them.

Prophetic Critique—the Heart of the Message: The breakdown in traditional values was particularly striking among the richest in society, who secured considerable luxury for themselves. While some were losing their land and homes and families, others had both winter and summer houses (3:15), lived in stone mansions (5:11), and enjoyed furnishings decorated with fine ivory (3:15; 6:4 – note how archaeological excavations have produced numerous examples of Samarian ivory). There is a graphic description of the lavish banquets enjoyed

by the elite of society in 6:1–6, with choice meats, wine (see also 4:1), body oils and music. Amos castigates those who enjoy such a life of carefree opulence yet remain blind to the violence and oppression from which it derives. In having lost their moral compass by hoarding plunder and loot for themselves, tellingly the elite are also said to be storing up violence for themselves (3:9–11). The heart of Amos' message is that because of these misdeeds, God will obliterate this society. The finality and thoroughness of this coming disaster are a persistent theme: it is inescapable.

Structure: From the material that originated with the historical figure of Amos, the book of Amos has developed through an editorial/redactional process through which the remembered poems and oracles of Amos have been shaped, revised and added to. This process has resulted in a coherent and reasonably integrated literary whole, which can be divided into three primary parts.

1. Chapters 1 and 2 form a series of oracles against the nations, a genre also seen in Isaiah 13–25, Jeremiah 46–51 and Ezekiel 25–32. This genre is a way by which God's sovereignty over all peoples is claimed. Two points should be noted in Amos' oracles:

- (a) The small neighbouring states are listed as coming under God's governance. This list of states contrasts with the oracles against the nations in the Major Prophets, which are primarily concerned with the great powers. Note should also be taken of how in Amos 2:4–5 and 2:6–16, Judah and Israel are named among the peoples soon to be subject to God's harsh sovereignty. This stresses that the "chosen peoples" are to be treated like all others, subject to the same standards and marked out for the same judgments when they fall short, without exception on account of their special status. For Israel this represents a complete overturning of its understanding of its relationship to God and a reversal of its theology. God's "eye", which had been fixed benevolently on Israel, is now fixed malevolently on it (9:4). The Day of the Lord, eagerly anticipated as the time when God would intervene among the nations on Israel's behalf to give it victory over its enemies, would be a day of darkness, not light, defeat, not victory, as God fights against, not for, Israel (5:18, 20). The image of God turning light to darkness recurs in two further passages (4:13; 5:8), and the same reversal opens the announcement of disaster in 8:9–10.

- (b) Recent scholarship argues that the divine indictment of the nations is not based on the Torah/Law associated with Sinai, nor is it assumed that the nations are aware of any such set of commandments. Instead, the appeal is to a much more general ethical standard to which all nations are held. This can be understood as something like "natural law", which all nations have the capacity to work out and attain. On this basis, the oracles against the nations thus assume that all peoples are subject to the intention of God the Creator. They do not need to know the commandments of Sinai in order to know how to behave. In passing it may be observed that later Judaism understood this more general knowledge of the will of God as falling under the covenant of Noah. Notice that the motivation for God destroying creation in Genesis is identified as "violence" (Gen. 6:11, 13); this forms the context to the Noachide covenant to which all nations are held accountable and consequently may be linked to Amos' condemnation of the nations, which also perpetuate violence.

2. Chapters 3–6 constitute a collection of prophetic oracles, structured as indictments for disobedience and the judicial sentence that will be enacted as divine punishment. These oracles form the core of what is popularly thought of as "the prophetic", depicting a seriously failed society that does not adhere to covenantal requirements. Through bringing together the concept of indictment/charge, which arises from a process of sharp social analysis, with that of sentence/punishment, which indicates how seriously God takes the injustice, the prophetic tradition underlines the connection between God and world/God and society. Following Klaus Koch's idea of "metahistory", in prophetic thought history is constituted by more than just human agency for God is posited as being ultimately and determinatively involved; it is God that turns the public processes of power in ways and directions beyond the will or intention of human rulers.
3. The third section of the book, contained in chapters 7–9, is structured around five "visions" that initially arise out of observation of the natural world but are used to portray the intense threat the divine poses in the near future. These are 7:1–3; 7:4–6; 7:7–9; 8:1–3; 9:1. The cumulative effect of the sequence of visions is to stress that the opportunity for repentance is

past and the time for divine judgment is clear, present and ominous. In the organization of the book, the injustices and failures to obey divine requirements outlined in the oracles of chapters 3-6 evoke an anticipation of coming catastrophe. This anticipation specifically refers to the Assyrian attack which, initiated by God, ended the northern kingdom in 721 BCE. Thus in the movement from the oracles against the nations in chapters 1-2, to prophetic oracles in chapters 3-6, to visions of the end in chapters 7-9, the book of Amos presents a powerfully sovereign God, who will finally tolerate no long-term recalcitrance. The demise of Israel in the eighth century at the hands of Assyria gave historical concreteness to the poetic oracles of this prophetic tradition.

Tradition, Redaction and Editing: In reading the book of Amos, we move beyond the person of Amos, though there is no doubt that the person of Amos stands at the beginning of what became the book. Equally, there is no doubt that the composition of the book of Amos occurred through an interpretive process, the purpose of which was to preserve, shape and carry prophetic insights into new contexts. Most clearly, the book of Amos has been redacted/edited to make the proclamation in the north relevant to Judah, most likely after the northern kingdom had been destroyed. The idea is that having seen what happened to Israel, Judah might take similar warnings more seriously. This helps explain the inclusion of the oracle of 2:4-5, which most scholars deem a late development in the tradition: it indicates that Judah too should be listening to the prophetic denunciation. This sense that what is said to Israel is pertinent to Judah is reinforced by how the oracles against the nations in chapters 1 and 2 are now introduced by a Jerusalem reference in 1:2, which has the effect of resituating all of the oracles against the nations in the Jerusalem temple. Amos is in step with the great Jerusalem liturgy and fittingly is made to assert the rule of the God of Zion/Jerusalem over all the nations (e.g., see Psa. 96:10).

The most enduring critical question about the book of Amos revolves around the concluding promise of 9:11-15. It is so incongruent with the tenor of the rest of the book, which is relentlessly judgmental, that many scholars take it to be a later editorial addition. While this assessment may well be accurate, it may be observed that the concluding promise conforms even Amos to the characteristic prophetic pattern of judgment and hope. This twofold pattern is probably part of the traditioning/

editing/redacting process and not the work of Amos the prophet in the eighth century.

Amos and Other Aspects of Human Experience:

Although the book of Amos is a brief piece of literature, it raises many interesting issues that have occupied the imagination of faith communities and relate to other aspects of human experience. Four may be mentioned.

1. Amos 3:2 ("You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities") in an arresting way links the concept of prophetic judgment with the biblical traditions of promise. The verb "know" is the same one used in Genesis 18:19 (there translated "have chosen") to indicate Abraham's special relationship to God. But now in the eighth century the special relationship that distinguishes Israel from "all the families of the earth" (see Gen. 12:3) becomes the basis for the particular judgment against disobedient Israel. This citation in Amos 3:2, with reference to the Abraham text of Genesis 12:3 and 18:19, is a particular way in which the prophetic corpus relates to the tradition of promise in the Pentateuchal narratives. This connection asks questions about election and whether it is always positive; it also raises the issue of whether it is possible for God to completely abandon God's chosen people.
2. Amos utilizes the key phrase "justice and righteousness" three times as the primary prophetic concern (Amos 5:7; 5:24; 6:12; see also Gen. 18:19). In the second of these usages, the prophet voices what has become the decisive summons of all prophetic faith: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Martin Luther King Jr. powerfully used this quotation (it is also used on his memorial), facilitating it to become the impetus for prophetic faith and the ground for prophetic critique of social systems that disregard and violate this most elemental command of God.
3. In three uses the book of Amos reiterates what must have been characteristic doxologies, perhaps used in the Jerusalem temple when celebrating God's sovereignty as Creator (Amos 4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6). These texts root the Amos traditions in Israel's liturgy and worship, and underline the way in which the sovereignty of God dominates the horizon of the book of Amos. It is also possible that this doxological creation tradition is the horizon of the oracles

against the nations, for the nations are treated as creatures who must obey the Creator. It is this overarching and underpinning sovereign power of God the Creator that is the ground of judgment and eventually the ground of hope in the final promise of 9:11–15. This focus on God as Creator, especially in its emphasis on God's will for the nations to follow the ways of justice, may be related to contemporary issues of care for creation and ecological justice: on this vital matter, what is the relationship between religious and political leadership? What is the relationship between "climate chaos" and social justice?

4. The Amos tradition affirms Israel's foundational memory of exodus, but then in Amos 9:7 abruptly deconstructs that claim with the assertion that the God of the exodus does many exoduses even for Israel's sworn enemies, Syria and the Philistines. Israel has no monopoly on God's saving, liberating deeds and therefore cannot claim privilege or imagine itself exceptional. Instead, Israel stands exposed, like every other people, to the demands of God. As in 3:2 or 5:18–20, 9:7 plays down Israel's exceptionalism in drastic ways, laden with threat. Given the doxology of 9:5–6, which may originally have formed the book's ending, the reader is ill prepared for the astonishing claim of verse 7 as well as what follows it. After 9:7, the tradition moves quickly to what now stands as the conclusion: the promise of restoration for the Davidic monarchy and the renewal of all creation (9:11–15). This sequence is designed to make a rhetorical assault on Israel's convictions, held too long in complacency, without critical reflection or obedient action. This may be connected in the modern world to countries or groups or movements that consider themselves exceptional and different and superior to others.

Concept Deepening—The Day of the Lord: This phrase is a technical term in Israel's vocabulary of hope that anticipates a moment when by an act of power God will decisively and fully establish divine rule. Looking forward to this day, Israel:

- (a) Expects it as an actual, this worldly occurrence;
- (b) Regards the coming inauguration of God's rule as utterly reliable and beyond question;

- (c) Refuses to speculate about the time or schedule for such a coming rule, but trusts that through it God will establish justice and well-being, which would remain forever remote and beyond fruition without God's intervention.

This confidently expected hope envisages God judging Israel's rivals harshly and defeating them prior to God's victorious establishment of good governance to Israel's benefit. The Day of the Lord is thus a day of rescue and deliverance for Israel.

Some scholars argue that the phrase "the Day of the Lord" derives from a military context. The day is a time of military activity when God is determining defeats and victories. For example, in Isaiah 9:4, the "day of Midian" remembers the defeat of the Midianites, which then becomes a way of envisioning God's coming military victories through a Davidic leader.

Others say that "the day" is a great liturgical event when in public worship the new rule of God is acknowledged and celebrated. Such festivals may be compared to the important Christian liturgical pageants of Christmas and Easter, when the church celebrates the new reality of God's presence in incarnation and God's rescue through resurrection.

One of the clearest and most eloquent announcements of the Day of the Lord is found in Zephaniah 1:14–16. In and of themselves these verses might refer to any people or foreign nation. In context, however, the subject of the oracle is clearly Judah and Jerusalem. What is being said against Jerusalem and Judah is thus parallel to what has been said earlier against the northern kingdom of Israel in Amos 5:18–20. Evidently convinced of their own privileged status with God, Israelites anticipated that God's coming rule would favour them.

The Day of the Lord may be accented towards judgment of the nations and Israel; but it may also be accented towards the well-being of Israel (Amos 9:11–15) and the nations (Isaiah 19:23–25).

