

# Amos

## 1. Introduction

### 1. Background

Amos ministered during the reigns of Uzziah king of Judah (790-742 BC) and Jeroboam II king of Israel (786-746 BC). He was a contemporary of Hosea, Micah and Isaiah. He from Tekoa, about 10 miles south of Jerusalem, where he was a (pedigree?) sheep-breeder and a cultivator of sycamore-figs (7:14). These professions may have involved him in travel to the northern kingdom of Israel. It was against Israel that he prophesied. He was not a professional prophet but had been called by God to the task (7:14-17).

Amos's ministry was conducted in Israel – 7:10-17 indicates that he delivered at least some of his messages at the shrine centre in Bethel.

The reign of Jeroboam II was prosperous. Egypt, Assyria and Babylon were all relatively weak, and Jeroboam had succeeded in subduing Syria, Israel's strongest neighbour and long-term rival (2 Kings 14:25-28). In the 760s and 750s Israel reached its peak in economic prosperity: agriculture flourished; there was international peace; and Israel gained access to international markets. The new wealth that flowed into Israel enabled large scale urbanisation since the nouveaux riches no longer depended on farming incomes. Urbanisation generated new internal markets for agricultural produce – and new opportunities for sharp business practice (8:4-6).

The new economic order created a leisured upper class who indulged in decadent lifestyles which paid scant regard to the needs of the poor (2:7-8; 4:1; 6:1-6). The weak were denied justice by the strong (5:10-13).

But in the midst of all this, Israel remained a religious nation (2:8; 5:5,21-23).

### 2. Theme: The LORD's indictment of the sinful kingdom

1:2 is a curse announcement and is thematic for the whole prophecy: Israel has broken covenant and is going to be punished.

The prophecy of Amos strikes a discordant note amidst a welter of indulgence and licence. His theme – *the LORD's indictment of the sinful kingdom* – is revealed first in 2:6f (“Thus says the LORD: ‘For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...’”) and carries on unremittingly to 9:8-10 (“Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground... All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, ‘Disaster shall not overtake or meet us.’”).

Hosea ministered also prophesied against Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. But whereas Hosea's prophecy is full of God's yearning love for Israel, Amos's prophecy is full of God's anger against the kingdom. Amos is as full of horror as Hosea is of sweetness. “The mind of the prophet was the seismograph of providence, vibrating to the first faint tremors that heralded the coming earthquake” (J. Skinner, quoted by R.K. Harrison, *OT Introduction*, p. 888).

It is striking that there are almost no imperatives in Amos (ch. 5 is exceptional). This gives the impression that Israel was too far gone in sin, and calls to repentance were now futile. The prophecy of Amos is very dark indeed (5:18).

### 3. Structure and Content of Amos

- 1:1 Superscription. The period into which Amos spoke.
- 1:2 Prelude. The LORD lifts up his voice in judgement.

#### Part 1 (1:3-2:16) *Yahweh's indictment of the nations*

- 1:3-5 Damascus. Violent war crimes
- 1:6-8 Gaza. Ethnic cleansing
- 1:9-10 Tyre. Ethnic cleansing and breach of covenant
- 1:1-12 Edom. Hot angered pursuit of a brother
- 1:13-15 Ammon. Destruction of the next generation
- 2:1-3 Moab. Desecration of the previous generation
- 2:4-5 Judah. Rejection of the Law of the LORD
- 2:6-16 Israel. Oppression of the weak

#### Part 2 (3:1-6:14) *Israel's offences and the God's warning of punishment*

- 3:1-12 Israel liable and judgment unavoidable because of the covenant
- 3:13-4:5 Stately houses to be struck, genteel owners to be exiled
- 4:6-13 Past punishments give a taste of what is in store
- 5:1-27 False religion, false values and false confidence
- 6:1-14 Woe to self-indulgent pleasure seekers

#### Part 3 (7:1-9:10) *Five visions of Israel's fate*

- 7:1-3 #1: Locusts: restrained
- 7:4-6 #2: Fire: restrained
- 7:7-9 #3: The tin wall: groaning will certainly be the midst of Israel
- 7:10-17 Amaziah's doom is typical of what is coming to the whole nation
- 8:1-14 #4: The punishments will fit the crimes
- 9:1-10 #5: No escape from the LORD's indictment of the sinful kingdom

#### Part 4 (9:11-15) *Promises of restoration*

# Amos 1:3-2:16

## 2. Israel is Just Another Sinful Nation

Amos announces eight oracles against Israel's neighbours, indicting each in turn for its crimes. The climax comes when he turns his attention to Israel. The force of the passage is to drive us to the conclusion that Israel is just another sinful nation.

### 1. God and the nations (1:3-2:5)

#### (a) God cares about how nations behave

God indicts seven nations for a variety of serious crimes: war crimes, ethic cleansing, enslavement of people, breach of covenant, violence to pregnant women, desecration of graves, rejection of his Law.

The wording of the indictments ("For three transgressions of X, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment") indicates that God is not dealing with one off incidents, but patterns of behaviour.

"Predictions of judgment against foreign nations are found, in one form or another, in every prophetic book...All such oracles rest on a shared theological assumption: there is one God, Yahweh, who has power over the whole earth, and whose righteousness will not tolerate unrighteousness on the part of any nation. In other words, Yahweh is not merely the God of Israel or Judah, but has an implicit covenantal relationship with all nations, through which he expects obedience to a basic sort of 'international law' and in recognition of which he will enforce that covenant's sanctions against those who rebel against it" (D. Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 308)

#### (b) God indicts the nations in a specific order

##### (i) Decreasing genealogical distance.

- Damascus = capital of Syria; Gaza and Tyre = principal cities of Philistia and Phoenicia. These nations were genealogically distant from Israel.
- Edom, Ammon and Moab were nations with roots in the families of Abraham and Lot.
- Judah (and Benjamin) comprised two of the 12 tribes of Israel.

##### (ii) Tightening geographical focus.

- Movement from Damascus to Moab is roughly N (Damascus), W (Gaza and Tyre), S (Edom), E (Ammon, Moab). It is possible that this inward, anti-clockwise motion of indictment is reversed in 8:12 which describes outward, clockwise motion of judgment (S, W, N, E).



- Alternatively, a line from Damascus to Gaza runs NE-SW, and a line from Tyre to Moab runs NW-SE. These lines intersect over Israel.

(iii) Climactic poetical emphasis.

- Amos loves the  $n, n+1$  pattern (e.g. “For three transgressions...and for four...”). He uses this pattern to put the emphasis on the sins of Israel, i.e. he indicts “seven nations, and eight”.

## 2. God and Israel (2:6-16)

We can imagine the pleasure Israel took in the indictment of its neighbours, and the shock with which it received the eighth, climactic oracle, the import of which is that Israel is just another sinful nation (c.f. the message of the book of *Judges* which describes the gradual “Canaanization” of Israel).

(a) The crimes (2:6-8)

Israel’s crimes relate to social justice (c.f. the international atrocities perpetrated by the other nations), namely (i) sale of the poor into slavery, (ii) denial of justice to the weak, (iii) sexual abuse, and (iv) exploitation of needy debtors. These abuses were endemic, and were committed daily.

(b) The aggravating circumstances (2:9-12)

Israel’s guilt was aggravated by the kindness God had shown (i) in the Exodus-Conquest event, and (ii) raising up Nazirites among the people.

(c) The sentence (2:13-16)

The sentence is announced with Amos’s first use of the word “Behold!” Judgment will be inescapable (vv. 13-15). And judgment will mean being scattered (v. 16).

## 3. Applications

- Whether they like it or not, the nations are in covenant relationship with God (see also 9:7). National covenants are not necessary to create such relationships. But since our nation has covenanted with God (in 1638 and 1643), it is doubly obligated to him.
- God controls the actions of nations and calls them to account (1:3-2:3; 3:9; 4:10; 6:14). God cares about the application of justice and righteousness in domestic and international affairs. War crimes matter to God!
- Amos reminds us that we are members of society. Society may behave in vicious, cruel, abusive or unjust ways, e.g. exploitation of cheap foreign labour, commercialisation of children, widespread acceptance of abortion as a means of family planning. If we acquiesce in these sins, we are guilty by association.
- Although ch. 1-2 climax with the indictment of Israel, there is a deeper structure in Scripture which shows that judgment begins with the household of God (1 Pet. 4:17). We must take this seriously.

# Amos 3-6

## 3. *The Sinful Kingdom has Broken Covenant*

If Amos 1-2 climaxes with the indictment of Israel as “just another sinful nation”, then Amos 3-6 opens with the aggravating circumstances of Israel’s covenanted relationship with the LORD: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). This is not a contradiction: Israel was not in itself better than other nations, but because of God’s sovereign election Israel did enjoy better privileges.

### 1. **Covenant curses for covenant breaking**

The crimes Amos identifies are those identified as crimes by the Mosaic Law, e.g. oppression of the poor (4:1; 5:12), Sabbath breaking (8:4-5), exacting usury (5:11), perversion of justice (5:7,12; 6:12).

The punishments Amos foretells are, therefore, the covenant curses published in Deuteronomy, e.g. rejection from the LORD (Deut. 31:17; Amos 6:8), rejection of worship (Lev. 26:31; Amos 5:21-23), defeat by enemies (Deut. 28:25; Amos 5:3), agricultural disaster (Deut. 28:23; Amos 4:7-9), destruction by fire (Deut. 28:24; Amos 5:6; 7:4), exile (Deut. 28:36; Amos 4:2-3; 5:27; 6:7).

### 2. **Three falsehoods at the heart of the nation**

#### (a) False religion

Israel was a religious nation: see the vocabulary of worship in 5:21-23. The people engaged in costly pilgrimage to Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba (5:5). But it was a sham and God hated it (5:21-24). Amos 4:4-5 is satirical: “Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!” declares the Lord GOD.”

#### (b) False values

There was no “trickling down” of wealth in flourishing economy. In fact, quite the opposite – the wealthy used their influence to enrich themselves yet more at the expense of the poor. Amos depicts the wealthy, both men (6:4-6) and women (4:1), as idle and self-indulgent, and as giving no thought at all to their responsibility towards the poor (2:8)

#### (c) False confidence

Perhaps the prosperity of the nation encouraged the thought that this was blessing from the LORD. Amos castigates the arrogance of the nobility “who rejoice in Lo-debar, who say, ‘Have we not by our own strength captured Karnaim for ourselves?’” (6:13). “Lo-debar” means “Nothing”; “Karnaim” means “Horns” which is a symbol of strength.

It is probable that the people thought that their success was a prelude to the final day of vindication, “the day of the LORD”, and Amos warns that this is a false confidence : “Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light” (5:18).

### 3. Three woes (5:18-6:7)

(a) Woe to those who desire the day of the LORD (5:18-20)

The day of the LORD is (i) darkness and not light (vv. 18c, 20); (ii) inescapable (v. 19); and (iii) destructive of those who flee from it (a lion, a bear, a serpent).

(b) Woe to those at ease in Zion...secure on the mountain of Samaria (6:1-3)

The nobility regarded themselves as the leading men of the leading nation (6:1). But God repeated that they are no better than foreign city-states under Israelite and Judahite control. In fact, the nobility were turning a blind eye to the coming disaster, and engaging in a reign of terror (6:3).

(c) Woe to those who indulge in idle luxury (6:4-7)

The wealthy entertain themselves to death: idle self-indulgence increases in proportion as disaster comes closer: no one care about “the ruin of Joseph”, i.e. the noble house of Israel. 6:7 is a climax – the people who wanted to be first will receive priority when it comes to exile.

### 4. Judgement is unavoidable

The prophecy of Amos is DARK. The message of the list of inseparables in 3:3-8 is that “Yahweh has caused this disaster, has revealed it to Amos, and Amos must proclaim it. Amos’ words are an eloquent defense of the necessity of doomsaying to a people wanting to hear only soothing news” (D. Stuart, p. 326).

### 5. Applications

- The message of the Bible is not all sweetness and light. There is a very dark message of judgement to which we must pay attention. It is notable that the NT does not mitigate this message, but enlarges on it (e.g. Luke 10:13-16; 12:13-21; 13:1-5; 19:26-27).
- The darkness of the coming “day of the LORD” is one of the motivations behind the urgency with which the NT Church evangelised (2 Cor. 5:10-11). It matters to God that people are going to hell (John 3:16-17), and angry if this is of no consequence to us: “Woe to those who...are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” (Amos 6:6).
- Special privileges do not confer special indemnity. Instead they result in greater responsibility (Luke 12:47-48). This responsibility includes (i) humility rather than false confidence, (ii) generosity rather than false values, and (iii) faithfulness rather than false religion.

# Amos 7:1-9:10

## 4. *Five Visions: the Sinful Kingdom will be Punished*

The dark message of Amos continues in chapters 7-9 with five visions of punishment. The first two visions alarm Amos and he intercedes with God, who relents from total destruction (cf. Moses, Exodus 32:10-14). But the judgements depicted in visions 3-5 are not commuted. A confrontation between Amaziah the priest of Bethel and Amos is used to exemplify the coming punishment.

### 1. **Two visions of destruction: Amos prays (7:1-6)**

The Lord GOD showed Amos two visions: a devastating locust plague and devouring fire. Both are covenant curses (Deut. 28:42; 32:22).

Amos responds with terse, one word prayers: “Forgive!” and “Cease!” Unlike the nobility in Israel, he is “grieved over the ruin of Joseph” (6:6).

God relents in response to the intercession of Amos.

### 2. **Two visions of destruction: Amos is opposed (7:7-8:3)**

In the next two visions the Lord shows Amos tin and a basket of summer fruit. The meanings of the visions are related to the sound of the words for “tin” and “summer fruit”.

The Hebrew for “tin” sounds like the word for “moaning”. God will not “pass by” Israel (cf. Exodus 12:12) – he will punish with such devastation and defeat in battle (7:9) that the people will “moan”.

The Hebrew for “summer fruit” sounds like the word for “an end”. Again, God will not “pass by” Israel – instead “an end” has come upon them – “So many dead bodies! Thrown everywhere! Silence!” (8:3).

Between these two visions comes a confrontation between Amos and Amaziah the priest of Bethel. Amaziah exemplifies Israel: Amaziah said to Amos just what Israel had been saying to the prophets, “Stop prophesying here!” (7:12-13; 2:12).

Amaziah also exemplifies Israel’s punishment: his wife reduced to prostitution, his children killed, his land seized, himself exiled to an “unclean” land (7:17).

### 3. **One last vision: there will be no escape (9:1-10)**

Amos’s final vision is the Lord himself standing beside the altar in Bethel, at the very heart of the religious centre of Israel. This final judgement oracle does not introduce new information about the character of the punishment (death, devastation and exile) – instead it stresses the inevitability of the judgement. Everyone is going to be caught up in the punishment (9:9-10). This is a fitting climax to Amos’s announcements of doom.

God pronounces a judgement from which flight is useless (v. 1c):

- Pillar and threshold are destroyed, i.e. the whole shrine complex. The destruction of the shrine brings it down on the heads of all the people (v. 1b).
- Neither heaven nor hell will provide sanctuary, i.e. there is no refuge.
- There is no hiding place on Carmel (a prominent mountain overlooking the Mediterranean) nor in the depths of the sea, i.e. there are no shelters.
- Those who are taken captive by their enemies will be pursued by the sword.

There is no escape: “I will fix my eyes upon them for evil and not for good...Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,” declares the LORD” (9:4,8).

God compares his coming judgement to the use of a sieve which separates stones from soil (v. 9). The stones are the “sinners of my people”, and they shall all die by the sword (v. 10).

At this point, Amos’s announcement of doom is exhausted.

#### 4. Applications

- God listens to intercession. He takes no pleasure in the death of wicked people, and does respond to the prayers of those who “grieve over the ruin of Joseph.” The mystery of how our prayers are woven into the divine decree must not discourage intercession for the lost.
- God is patient. Final judgement is delayed because God prolongs the days of grace (Rom. 9:22-24; 2 Pet. 3:15). But God’s patience is not a reason for presumption (Rom. 2:4) – the end will most certainly come – and it will be unutterably dreadful: “Moaning...So many dead bodies! Thrown everywhere! Silence!”
- God’s judgement finds expression in events which act like a sieve – both good and bad are caught up in the shaking and tumbling (both faithful and unfaithful Israelites were killed or exiled when the Assyrians rampaged through the land in 723-2 BC). Both believers and unbelievers lost jobs and homes in the recent financial turmoil. But God knows how to save his people and keep the godless for the day of judgement (2 Pet. 2:9).
- God will execute final judgement himself – he will not “pass by”. Final judgement is not simply the outworking of natural causes – it is the direct action of God.
- Final judgement is final. No one escapes who has not found refuge in God himself (Ps. 2:12). Punishment is certain and universal.



# Amos 9:11-15

## 5. Restoration of the Kingdom

After 141 verses of unrelenting doom announced against the sinful kingdom, Amos closes his prophecy with 5 verses about the restoration of the kingdom.

Restoration is not promised upon condition of obedience – unlike judgement, which is announced because of a history of disobedience. Restoration is patterned on creation, and like creation it is wholly the product of the Lord's grace.

This means that Israel cannot make its restoration happen – so Amos 9:11-15 does not begin with a “therefore” (unlike the many “therefores” which open passages of judgement). Instead the passage opens with “In that day”. “In that day” intrudes abruptly upon the indictment of sin and the pronouncement of punishment – suddenly God intervenes to do something as amazing as it is unexpected.

### 1. Restoration of the rule of God (vv. 11-12)

God first promises to restore his rule over Israel, through the messianic King.

“David's booth” connects this promise with the Feast of Booths/Tabernacles. This feast celebrated the provision of God for his people during their wilderness wandering on the way to the Promised Land, and the provision of God in that land.

The King is central to this celebration – not the usurped and unstable dynasties of the northern kingdom, but the legitimate Davidic King appointed by God.

“David” is a way of speaking about the supremacy of God's reign once enjoyed in Israel's past. This is emphasised by the mention of Edom in v. 12 – Edom was one of David's great enemies, and it was David rather than any other king who subdued the Edomites (see 2 Sam. 8:11-14; Ps. 60:6-12; 108:6-13).

So the rule of God entails salvation from enemies.

But in Acts 15 James quotes Amos 9:11-12, saying, “And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of *mankind* may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things’” (Acts 15:15-17). James' application is the evangelisation of the Gentiles – God's salvation/rule will be enjoyed not only by the “remnant” of Israel but by the “remnant” of mankind.

This deals with Israel's false confidence, i.e. “We are not like the other peoples.” Not only has Israel been comprehensively shown that she is “just another sinful nation”, but now her elect remnant been united with the elect remnant of all the other nations under the salvation/rule of God's Mediatorial King.

### 2. Restoration of the fruitfulness of the land (v. 13)

God's second promise is the restoration of fruitfulness to the devastated land.

The depiction is that of such unprecedented agricultural bounty that it cannot all be processed in the time available between crops. The picture of the “mountains dripping sweet wine” is typical of the prophetic representation of Eden restored. The whole thing is larger than life and awaits the new heavens and new earth for its fulfilment.

This promise deals with Israel's false values which, in the context of such bounty, are no longer realistic. Such is the abundance of the provision of food that the “new economic order” of Jeroboam II, based on the urban lifestyle, is shunted into a siding – everyone now has more than enough – there can now be no debts, no lending, no usury, no confiscation, no enslavement.

### **3. Restoration of God’s people to the land (vv. 14-15)**

God’s third promise is the restoration of his people to the land. “I will restore the fortunes of my people” = “I will bring back the captivity of my people”.

Verses 14-15 express security of tenure: not only are the ruined cities rebuilt but also inhabited; not only are the vineyards and gardens cultivated but their produce is enjoyed; not only are the people planted in the land but they shall never again be uprooted from “the land that *I have given* them”. The people possess the land by virtue of divine gift.

### **4. Restoration of the covenant relationship**

The salvation/rule of God + the fruitful land + the people = the Kingdom of God (God’s people living in God’s land and enjoying God’s rule/blessing).

The covenant relationship is restored, and Amos closes his prophecy with his only use of the words “the LORD your God”. This is the end of Israel’s false religion – her relationship with the LORD has been healed.

### **5. Applications**

- Promises that were future tense in the days of Amos are now present tense because of Jesus (Acts 15:12-21). We are greatly privileged (1 Pet. 1:10-12).
- Consider and be amazed at what you have in Jesus Christ:
  - a King to deliver you from sin and temptation, and who has the power to make the rule of God a reality in your life;
  - the Holy Spirit to communicate to you the life of your King, so that by him you become fruitful in character, knowledge, and action;
  - a secure home in the house of God (John 14:2-3), an eternal heavenly dwelling (2 Cor. 5:1-5), an inheritance which will never perish, spoil or fade (1 Pet. 3-9).
- Let this be the antidote to false religion, false values and false confidence.