

Background on Amos

Amos, possibly the earliest of the writing prophets, is a contemporary of Jonah and Hosea. He is a Judean shepherd and farmer by trade who goes to the northern kingdom of Israel to deliver his message, warning ~30 years prior of the fall of Israel. During this period Assyria and Egypt are in decline allowing Jeroboam II to expand Israel's borders and take control of trade routes, ushering in a period of financial prosperity. Unfortunately, this wealth is not evenly distributed, widening the gulf between rich and poor.

Amos warns of God's wrath for deliberate exploitation of the poor. He also addresses empty religious activities and, as he prophesies against not only the chosen people but also the neighboring pagan nations, Amos discusses what it means to be God's elect.

Amos' message fits in with the larger scheme of the prophets' teaching on material possessions (Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 71-81):

What God hates

Worshipping costly idols	"In that day people will throw away to the moles and bats their idols of silver and idols of gold, which they made to worship." (Isa 2:20)
Trusting in ritual rather than repentance	"If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever." (Jer 7:5-7)
Oppressing for gain	"They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance." (Mic 2:2; also Amos 5:11-12; 2:6-8)
Boasting in wealth	<i>Those who buy the slaves congratulate themselves for their riches as if they represent God's favor:</i> "Their buyers slaughter them and go unpunished. Those who sell them say, 'Praise the Lord, I am rich!' Their own shepherds do not spare them." (Zech 11:5; Esp. condemned by Amos e.g. 4:1; 6:4-6)
Money influencing leadership	'Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they look for the Lord's support and say, "Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us."' (Mic 3:11)

What to do

Seek justice for the marginalized	"Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isa 1:17; also 58:6-7)
Do not boast in riches but be generous in giving them away	"Let not... the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight" (Jer 9:23-24)
Lament	The hearts of the people cry out to the Lord. You walls of Daughter Zion, let your tears flow like a river day and night; give yourself no relief, your eyes no rest. (Lam 2:18)
Seek the city's welfare	"...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile" (Jer 29:7)
Cling to promises of restoration	"...They will no longer be plundered by the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid. I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations..." (Isa 54-55; 60-66; Ezek 34:25-31)

Notes on Amos

1. Context

- a. During the reigns of Jeroboam II of Israel (782-753) and Uzziah of Judah (767-740), so ~760 (752-767).
- b. Amos was from Judah (Tekoa is south of Jerusalem) and traveled north to Israel to deliver his message.
- c. Amos was roughly contemporary with Hosea and Jonah, and is believed to be the earliest writing prophet.
- d. "Jeroboam was an energetic king, ready to take every opportunity for his country's expansion. The time favored him: in 805 BC Adad-nirari of Assyria had conquered Syria, thus disposing of a long-standing enemy of Israel. Assyria itself then entered into a period of decline and so the way was open for Jeroboam to restore his kingdom to the boundaries it had enjoyed under Solomon. This in turn gave him control of trade routes and therefore commercial prosperity which was reflected in a dominant wealthy class living in great luxury. As often happens this went hand-in-hand with exploitation of the poor (5:11; 6:6)." [NBC]
- e. Amos never uses the word "covenant".

2. Themes

- a. "The assumption that crimes (social offenses) are sins (offenses against God) lies at the heart of Amos' sociology. In every aspect of society it is with the Lord that we have to deal, whether conduct pleases him and comes under his blessing, or offends and merits wrath. Society does not rest on independent, mechanical principles—market forces, money supply, Gross National Product—for its prosperity. Prosperity comes with divine blessing and no matter how efficient the economy it cannot prosper if it is under his curse." [NBC]
- b. "The Lord is concerned with
 - i. how war is waged (1:3, 13),
 - ii. how commerce is carried on (1:6; 8:5-7) and
 - iii. whether obligations solemnly undertaken are fulfilled (1:9).
 - iv. He is offended by the acquisitiveness which allows the end to justify the means (4:1-3),
 - v. when ruling classes become self-important and callous (4:1; 6:1),
 - vi. and when wealth is only a means to luxury for some to the neglect of those less well supplied (3:12-15; 4:1; 6:4-6).
 - vii. The perversion of justice in the courts rouses his animosity (2:6, 7; 5:7, 10, 12, 15)
 - viii. As does commercial dishonesty—the petty fraud of the shopkeeper who tampers with his scales (8:5-7)
 - ix. and the inhumanity of 'big business' when it treats people as commodities (1:6).
 - x. On all these grounds, Amos' people came under judgment and by extension our modern industrialized, post-biblical world falls under God's judgment too." [NBC]
- c. The chosen status of God's people "far from implying impunity from punishment, brings with it a greater level responsibility (3:1-2)". [DOT:Prophets]
- d. God's visit will be a scary thing (ch 3) and "there will be no refuge anymore, since the horns of the altar, which would have guaranteed sanctuary (Ex 21:13-14; 1 Kings 1:50; 2:28), will be cut off". [DOTP]

3. Riches and Poverty in the Prophets [Blomberg]

- a. Prior to the monarch, Israel was defined in opposition to Egypt and other great powers. "Israel was not a state like the Canaanite states but rather a collection of riff-raff without a centralized government, a capital city, a professional army, a class of charioteers. It was a group of alienated peasants with no stake in the stratification of Canaanite society."
- b. "Indeed, the prophetic denunciations against Israel can be connected directly 'with the development of class distinctions under the monarch, the appearance of a commercial, moneyed class and the growth of a partriciate who lived a life of luxury and self-indulgence and gave not a thought to the miseries of the poor who toiled for them.'"
- c. "Again, the loss of ancestral properties to wealthy aristocrats who bought up vast tracts of land forever altered the economic landscape and widened the gap between rich and poor. The concomitant and 'growing love of luxury, pretentiousness and ostentatiousness was in striking contrast to the simple, unsophisticated and natural life, traditional to old pre-monarchical Israel and still fully maintained in the villages.'"
- d. Five categories of sins related to material possessions in the prophets:
 - i. *Worshiping idols made of costly materials* (Isa 2:20)
 - ii. *Trusting in ritual rather than repentance* (Jer 7:5-7)
 - iii. *Extorting, robbing and oppressing to gain more land* (Mic 2:2; Amos 5:11-12; 2:6-8)
 - iv. *Boasting in their wealth* (Esp. condemned by Amos e.g. 4:1; 6:4-6; also, nicely, Zech 11:5—those who buy the slaves congratulate themselves for their riches as if it represented God's blessing)
 1. "All these prophetic references should give well-to-do Westerners pause, especially those who seem largely indifferent to the needs of the poor worldwide."
 - v. *Financial motivation for leaders' ministry* (Mic 3:11)
- e. Five things required by the prophets:
 - i. *Seek justice for the marginalized* (Isa 1:17; 58:6-7)
 - ii. *Do not boast in riches but be generous in giving them away* (Jer 9:23-24)
 - iii. *Lament* (Lam)
 - iv. *Seek the welfare of the city* (Jer 29:7)
 - v. *Cling to promises of restoration* (Isa 54-55; 60-66; Ezek 34:25-31)

4. Structure

- a. See NBC: Three chiastic sections
 - i. 1:2-3:8: **The Lion's roar; why God is going to smash you all**
 1. A: The lion's roaring 1:2
 2. B: Against the pagans 1:3-2:3
 3. B: Against the chosen people 2:4-3:2
 4. The lion's roaring 3:3-3:8 **When disaster comes to a city, has the Lord not caused it?... Surely the Lord does nothing without telling his prophets**
 - ii. 3:9-6:14: **God's mad, and here's why**
 1. A: The shattered kingdom 3:9-15
 2. B: The rich broads 4:1-3
 3. C: Religion without repentance 4:4-13 **I gave you empty stomachs in every city and you have not returned to me; bragging about thank offerings**
 4. C: Religion without reformation 5
 5. B: The rich broads again 6:1-7
 6. A: The shattered kingdom 6:8-14
 - iii. 7-9: **Judgment and hope**

1. A: The devastation that will not be 7:1-6
2. B: Discriminating judgment 7:7-9
3. C: The inescapable word 7:10-17
4. D: 'In that day' 8
5. C: The inescapable judgment 9:1-6
6. B: Discriminating judgment 9:7-10
7. A: The hope that will be 9:11-15

5. Questions to ask in Amos

- a. Is God's priority punishing sin or protecting the vulnerable?
- b. Is Amos' prophecy prescriptive or descriptive (Dennis)? Is God's judgment passive or active?
- c. When God evaluates a city is he satisfied if the Christians have acted generously, or if there are poor and vulnerable not being cared for?
- d. What does it mean to be the elect?
- e. Motyer: Is our God a ravaging lion?
- f. What evidence is there that God is long-suffering and merciful? Is it possible to interpret God's judgment as mercy in this case, the way we do when a father disciplines a child?
- g. Keller: Do we think of our possessions as ours or God's? I.e., is our giving a matter of generosity/stinginess?
- h. Why is Amos condemning war crimes but not war? Is that significant? Is there a "just war"?
- i. What is the role of religious formalism? Is Amos condemning that in general or only when not accompanied by a repentant heart?
- j. Does God punish modern wicked nations?