

# 15

## Amos and Hosea

→ *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: Study Guide,*  
Chapter 15

### Introduction

THE WORD *PROPHECY* COMES FROM THE GREEK *prophētēs*, “proclaimer,” and refers to one who speaks on behalf of a god or goddess. The roles of such spokesmen or spokeswoman vary from one culture to another, and various terms are used to describe them. Prophets typically receive their revelations in a state of ecstasy, either by seeing visions or by direct inspiration. In the Hebrew Bible, the most frequent term for such intermediaries is *nābî*. The etymology of this word is disputed, but it most probably means “one who is called” (from the verb *bō*, “to come”). Other figures, who are called “seers” (*rō’eh*, *hōzeh*) or “men of God,” are also subsumed under the category prophecy. In general, prophecy is distinguished from divination, which attempts to discern the will of the deity by various means, such as the examination of the liver of a sacrificial victim or observing the flight of birds. (In principle, the distinction is between spontaneous inspiration, presumably by a deity, and ritual consultation, which requires human initiative. In practice, the line between prophecy and divination is not always clear.) The book of Deuteronomy condemns anyone “who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead” (Deut 18:10–11\*). It is safe to infer that all of these practices were current in ancient Judah before Josiah’s reform. Moreover, some forms of divination were deemed acceptable in Israel, most notably the use of Urim and Thummim (probably some kind of pebbles or sticks) by the priests (see Num 27:21\*; Deut 33:8\*). Divination of this kind was a priestly, rather than prophetic, function, and the main references to it are in 1 Samuel in stories about Saul and David (e.g., 1 Sam 14:18–19\*; 23:9–12\*). Beginning with David and Nathan, the kings of Israel and Judah seek to know the will of the Lord by consulting prophets rather than by divination.

### Prophecy in the Ancient Near East

Even though prophecy has often been regarded as a distinctively Israelite phenomenon, it was widespread in the ancient Near East, although the actual form of prophecy varied from one society to another. One major source of information is found in the royal archives of Mari on the Euphrates, in northern Mesopotamia, from the eighteenth century B.C.E. Prophetic activity is mentioned in some fifty letters (of a corpus of eight thousand) and in twelve economic and administrative texts (out of twelve thousand). While the proportion of texts referring to prophetic activity is small, the texts in question come from a wide area, from Syria to Babylon. The prophetic figures, who are both male and female, are most often called *āpilu/āpiltu*, “answerer,” or *maḥḥû/muḥḥûtu*, “ecstatic”; but some other terms, including *nabû* (cognate of Hebrew *nābî*), are also used. The manner in which these figures receive their messages from the deities is not always indicated. Several receive revelation in dreams. A number receive them in temples. The *muḥḥû* goes into ecstasy. In one instance, a *maḥḥûtu* eats a raw lamb in public, and then proceeds to deliver his message. Because of the nature of the Mari archive, the oracles of these figures deal predominantly with the affairs of the king. They typically assure the king of success, or warn of dangers. They sometimes warn that cultic acts have been neglected. A few letters remind the king of his obligation to see that justice is done. The messages are presented as being in the self-interest of the king. While these prophecies were taken seriously, they seem to have been regarded as inferior to technical divination, and were subject to confirmation by court diviners.

Another major source of information about Near Eastern prophecy is found in Assyrian archives from the seventh century B.C.E. Here the most common titles are *maḥḥû/muḥḥûtu* “ecstatic” (a variant of the title in the Mari letters), and *raggimu/raggimtu*, “proclaimer.” Here again, the texts come from royal archives and deal predominantly with the affairs of the king. Typically they provide assurance of divine support in time of crisis (e.g., in crushing a rebellion), often telling the king to “fear not.” Unlike the situation at Mari, the Assyrian prophets do not seem to have been subject to verification. They are presented, and apparently accepted, as the words of a god or goddess: “Ishtar of Arbela has said ...” or “the word of Ishtar of Arbela....” We should not think, however, that all Assyrian oracles were favorable to the kings or accepted as authentic. One of the treaty texts of King Esarhaddon requires the vassal to inform the king of any negative utterance by a proclaimer, ecstatic, or inquirer. The Assyrian kings do not seem to allow for the possibility that a negative oracle might be authentic.

One noteworthy feature of the Assyrian oracles is that more than two-thirds of them are preserved in collections on tablets. The oracles were copied for posterity by scribes, who identified the prophetic speakers, but evidently believed that the words retained validity beyond their original situations. These oracle collections provide an important analogy for the biblical prophetic books, which likewise preserve for later generations words that were spoken in quite specific situations. In the case of the Assyrian oracles, the preservation may have been motivated by the desire to remind people of the promises of divine support that had been given to the ruling dynasty.

Apart from these Mesopotamian archives, our evidence for ancient Near Eastern prophecy is sparse, although it is sufficient to show that the phenomenon existed. The tale of the Egyptian Wen-Amon, from the eleventh century B.C.E., reports a case of ecstatic prophecy in the Canaanite or Phoenician coastal city of Byblos (*ANET*, 26). We have already encountered prophets of Baal and Asherah in the books of Kings. A plaster inscription from Tell Deir ‘Alla in Jordan, from about 700 B.C.E., refers to Balaam, son of Beor, a “seer of the gods” (cf. Numbers 22–24). An inscription from Syria from about 800 B.C.E. reports how King Zakkur of Hamath prayed to Baal-shamayn during a siege, and Baal answered him by means of visionaries, and told him to “fear not.” The scantiness of this evidence reflects the general scarcity of material from Syria and Canaan. Nonetheless, the evidence that has survived is sufficient to show that prophecy was a widespread phenomenon throughout the ancient Near East.

## Prophecy in Israel

The study of prophecy in ancient Israel has usually focused on the great personalities of the prophets whose oracles are preserved in the books that bear their names. The sociologist Max Weber defined the prophet as “a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment” (M. Weber, *Economy and Society* [ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich; 2 vols.; reprint Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978] 1:439). The “purely individual” label is misleading, however. As we have seen from the tales of the prophets in the books of Kings, prophets in ancient Israel typically belonged to guilds or groups, and were often maintained and supported by the royal establishment. (Some prophets may also have been attached to the temples.) The prophets who gave their names to the biblical books were exceptional, insofar as they typically stood apart from these guilds (e.g., Amos) and sometimes

were in conflict with them (e.g., Jeremiah). Weber’s definition, of course, was based on these biblical prophets, not on the broader historical phenomenon in ancient Israel. Even the biblical prophets, however, cannot be described as “purely individual.” Some, like Isaiah, worked in close relationship with the royal court and the temple. All operated within the conventions of Israelite society, and presupposed traditions that were shared by their audiences. All were passionately engaged with the events of their time. No prophet could function in isolation from society. The effectiveness of their message required an audience that accepted the legitimacy of prophecy and that shared at least some of their basic convictions.

It is of the essence of prophecy that the prophets addressed specific situations in highly concrete terms. Their message cannot be appreciated without consideration of its historical context. Nonetheless, like many of the Assyrian prophecies, the biblical oracles come to us embedded in collections that were made for later generations. Moreover, the biblical prophetic books are often edited with later situations in mind. There is, then, an inevitable tension between the words of the prophets in their original context, and the “canonical shape” given to their oracles by later editors. Much of the history of scholarship over the last two hundred years has been concerned primarily with the original words of the prophets. In recent years the pendulum has swung toward a focus on the final form of the prophetic books, in their canonical context. Both interests are clearly legitimate, and even necessary, but it is important to recognize the tension between them. The historical prophets whose oracles are preserved in these books were often highly critical of the political and religious establishments of their day. The scribes who edited their books, however, were part of the establishment of later generations. Consequently, they often try to place the older oracles in the context of an authoritative tradition. In some cases, this has a moderating effect on oracles that may seem extreme outside (or even in) their historical context. In other cases, the editorial process may seem to take the edge off powerful prophetic oracles and dull their effect. The preference of an interpreter for the original prophets or for the canonical editors often reflects his or her trust or distrust of political and religious institutions in general.

In the following chapters we try to do justice both to the historical prophets and to their later editors. In order to do this, however, it is necessary to depart from the canonical order of the books, and begin by considering the prophets in their historical context. We shall, however, also take note of the ways in which their oracles were edited,

and at the end of Part Three we shall reflect on the nature and purpose of the collection of the prophetic books.

## Amos

### The Prophet

The preface to the book of Amos identifies him as a shepherd from Tekoa, and dates his prophecy to the time of King Jeroboam son of Joash (785–745 B.C.E.) of Israel and the roughly contemporary King Uzziah of Judah. Tekoa is in Judah, some ten miles south of Jerusalem. Yet Amos seems to have prophesied at Bethel, which was one of the royal sanctuaries of the northern kingdom. Bethel was at the southernmost edge of the northern kingdom, only ten to eleven miles north of Jerusalem, so Amos did not have to travel very far to preach there. Nonetheless, the geography raises questions about Amos's political loyalties. Did he regard the boundary between Israel and Judah as insignificant, because all were one people of YHWH? Or was he a Davidic loyalist, who was especially critical of the cult at Bethel because of the separation of the northern kingdom from Jerusalem? There is no doubt that the book was edited in the southern kingdom, and presents a Judean perspective in its canonical form. This perspective is clear in the introductory saying in 1:1\* ("The LORD roars from Zion ..."; cf. Joel 3:16\*) and in the concluding promise that the Lord will raise up "the fallen booth of David" (Amos 9:11–15\*). It is not at all clear, however, that the eighth-century prophet Amos was promoting Davidic rule, or that he was concerned with the relations between the two kingdoms. He was also critical of "those who are at ease in Zion" (6:1\*). It might have been more difficult, however, for a man from Tekoa to preach in Jerusalem, on the doorstep of the king, than in Bethel, where he was at some distance from the royal court.

The date assigned to Amos raises another intriguing question. Amos prophesied the destruction of the northern kingdom. His prophecy was fulfilled by the Assyrian destruction of Samaria in 722 B.C.E. But the Assyrian threat was not in evidence during the reign of Jeroboam, and developed only in the reign of Tiglath-pileser III, whose reign began about the time of Jeroboam's death. Amos never mentions Assyria in his oracles, but a few passages refer to the punishment of exile, which was typical Assyrian policy (5:5\*, 27\*). Of course, victors had always taken captives in war, from the earliest time, and had used or sold them as slaves. The innovation of the Assyrians was mass deportation, as a way of subduing an area by resettling it. At least some passages in Amos, such as 5:27\*, seem to envision mass deportation. These oracles are

more easily explained if they are dated somewhat later, when Assyria was a threat to Israel. Amos 6:2\*, which invites comparison of Israel with Calneh, Hamath, and Gath, must be interpreted in light of the Assyrian conquest of these regions in the 730s. Alternatively, the allusions to later events and to the specifically Assyrian practice of mass deportation may have been added later, in the course of the transmission of the book.

The prophecy of Amos is also dated "two years before the earthquake." This earthquake is also mentioned in Zech 14:5\*, but it cannot be dated precisely. That such a precise date is given, however, suggests that the prophetic career of Amos was quite short, perhaps no more than a single season. Alternatively, this date may indicate only the beginning of the prophet's career.

Apart from the introductory preface, there is only one biographical notice in the book of Amos. This is found in 7:10–14\*, and relates an encounter between Amos and the priest of Bethel. The placement of this notice is probably due to the fact that the story was transmitted in connection with Amos's visions at Bethel. Some scholars have seen a parallel between this incident and the confrontation between an anonymous Judean prophet and Jeroboam I by the altar of Bethel in 1 Kings 13. If the episode in Amos were invented on the model of that passage, however, we should expect that the prophet would address the king directly. The account of the reign of Jeroboam II in 2 Kings makes no mention of Amos, and gives a relatively benign account of Jeroboam.

Whatever its origin, the story of the encounter with the priest of Bethel is remarkable in several respects. Amos was preaching that divine punishment was about to befall the kingdom of Israel. The priest, Amaziah, was understandably nervous about this, and worried lest the king think that he endorsed the preaching of Amos and was party to a conspiracy. He is all the more irritated by the fact that Amos is a Judean. Therefore he tells him to go back to where he came from, for Bethel is a royal sanctuary and loyal to Jeroboam. The response of Amos has given rise to much commentary: "I am no prophet, nor the son of a prophet." The Hebrew literally reads: "No prophet I" (the term for "prophet" is *nābī*). Some scholars translate, "I was no prophet," since Amos goes on to say that he was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamores until the Lord called him. But Amos does not say that he became a *nābī*, and Amaziah calls him not a *nābī* but a *ḥōzeh* (seer). The point is that Amos is not a member of a prophetic guild, of the "sons of the prophets" who ate at the king's table (such as we saw in the story of Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22). He is a freelancer, so to speak, and therefore he is not beholden to the king, and does not care whether Bethel is a

royal temple. He was also probably a person of independent means. We do not know how extensive his flocks or trees were, but he is evidently not in the service of anyone else, and he seems to be well informed on the affairs of Israel, and to some extent on international events. The translation “I am not a prophet” is somewhat misleading. Amos certainly claims to be a spokesman for YHWH. The issue is what kind of prophet he is.

The style of Amos’s prophecy is in the tradition of Elijah rather than that of Nathan. He is confrontational and abrasive. There is no attempt to win over the people he condemns. The prophecy that Amaziah’s wife would become a prostitute could only enrage the priest. It may also have functioned as a curse that was intended not only to predict but to bring about what was predicted. We do not know what happened to Amaziah. It is unlikely that he lived long enough to be taken into exile. Jeroboam certainly did not die by the sword. That this prophecy was not fulfilled argues strongly for its authenticity. Why would a later editor have ascribed to Amos a prophecy that was manifestly incorrect? The editors may have felt, however, that Amos’s prophecies were substantially fulfilled by the Assyrian conquest, and may have added the references to the exile of Israel to clarify the point, or interpreted them in this light.

### **The Oracles of Amos**

The book of Amos can be divided into three parts. After the introductory verses, the book begins with a series of oracles against various nations, concluding with Israel (1:3–2:16\*). The middle part of the book (chaps. 3–6) contains a collection of short oracles. The last part (chaps. 7–9) consists of a series of vision reports, with the account of the confrontation with Amaziah.

**The Oracles against the Nation.** Oracles against foreign nations were the stock-in-trade of ancient Israelite prophets. We have seen an illustration of the situation in which such oracles might be uttered in the story of Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22, where the prophets conduct a virtual pep rally before the start of a military campaign. There are long sections of such oracles in other prophetic books (e.g., Isaiah 13–19; Jeremiah 46–51). The nations mentioned here are Israel’s immediate neighbors. The list has been expanded in the course of transmission. The most obvious addition is the oracle against Judah. The focus on “the law of the Lord” is Deuteronomic, and stands in sharp contrast with the highly specific charges in the other oracles (e.g., “they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals”). The oracles against Tyre and Edom are also suspect (both have shortened endings, and the oracle against Tyre repeats language from the previous oracles).

Regardless of the number of nations included, the structure of this section is clear enough. Israelite prophets were expected to denounce foreign nations. The shock comes when Amos denounces Israel just like all the others.

The oracles are formulaic (“For three transgressions and for four” is an idiom meaning “for the numerous transgressions”). The grounds for the denunciations are generally humanistic. Damascus threshed Gilead (in Transjordan) with sledges of iron. Gaza sold entire communities as slaves to Edom. The Ammonites ripped open pregnant women in Gilead. Each of these cases could be read as instances of aggression against Israel, but Amos’s concerns are not nationalistic. So he condemns Moab “because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom” (2:1\*). This is a crime of one Gentile against another, and can only be viewed as a crime against humanity. Amos operates with a concept of universal justice, such as we often find in the wisdom literature. His horizon is broader than the specific revelation to Israel.

The accusations against Israel are likewise humanistic in nature: they trample the poor into the dust of the earth (2:7\*). To be sure, they also evoke the laws of the Pentateuch; specifically, the reference to garments taken in pledge (2:8\*) recalls Exod 22:25\* and Deut 24:17\*. The condemnation of father and son who sleep with the same girl (2:7\*) is at least in accordance with the spirit of the laws in Leviticus 20. The entire condemnation of Israel has been read as an example of a “covenant lawsuit” or *rib* (the Hebrew word for disputation). YHWH reminds the Israelites of the favors he has shown them (“I destroyed the Amorites before them”), and threatens them with punishment because of their disobedience. The structure of the argument, which appeals both to the recollection of history and to the consequences of obedience or disobedience, is similar to the “covenant form” derived from ancient Near Eastern treaties, especially in the book of Deuteronomy. Some scholars suspect, however, that the similarity to Deuteronomy is due to Deuteronomistic editors. The concern for prophets and nazirites in vv. 11–12\* seems out of context in Amos. The oracle against Israel is similar to those against the other nations except for vv. 9–12\*, precisely the verses that give the passage a Deuteronomic, covenantal flavor.

The point at issue here is important for understanding the ethics of a prophet such as Amos, and his place in the history of Israelite religion. One view of the subject regards the covenant as foundational, and assumes that such a covenant was known already in the beginnings of Israel, before the rise of the monarchy. On this view, prophets such as Amos were traditionalists, calling Israel back to the observance of its original norms. This view has generally

been favored in American scholarship, under the influence of the Albright school. The other view sees the covenant as found in Deuteronomy as a late development, influenced by the preaching of the prophets. On this view, the prophets were highly original figures who changed the nature of Israelite religion and influenced its ultimate formulation in the Bible. This view has been championed by many (but by no means all) German scholars, from the time of Wellhausen. The second view does not deny that the exodus was celebrated in the Israelite cult before the rise of the prophets, or that there was a concept of the election of Israel from early times. The issue is whether that concept of election entailed moral obligation, or was tied to a corpus of laws in the earlier period. The originality of the prophets need not be exaggerated in any case. The concepts of justice and righteousness were well established throughout the ancient Near East long before the rise of Israel (cf. the Code of Hammurabi). The preaching of the prophets certainly drew on ancient tradition. The issue is whether these traditions were formulated in a way similar to what we now find in the book of Deuteronomy.

The sources of Amos's thought are likely to remain controversial, but we can at least get a sense from his oracles of the nature of the cult at Bethel, which he criticized strongly, and of the popular understanding of the exodus tradition in the northern kingdom. It is clear that Amos differed sharply from his contemporaries on the role and nature of the cult, and on the implications of the election of Israel. The people of Israel in the mid-eighth century B.C.E. did not share the understanding of exodus and covenant that we find in Deuteronomy. If there was an older covenantal tradition, it had been lost from view. The preaching of Amos can be understood as shaping the development of a covenantal tradition more easily than as harking back to a tradition that had been forgotten.

**The Central Oracles.** The understanding of the exodus and of the election of Israel is brought to the fore immediately in Amos 3:2\*: "You alone have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." This brief oracle could be read as an abbreviated covenant lawsuit: "You alone have I known; therefore you should have kept the commandments, but since you did not, I will punish you." It is more likely, however, that Amos is alluding to and subverting the common Israelite understanding of the exodus. If YHWH has known Israel alone, this should be good news. It should lead to a promise of divine blessing and support, such as was given to Abraham and David. As in the series of oracles against the nations, Amos subverts the expectations of his hearers. There is no doubt that the exodus had been celebrated at Bethel from the time of Jeroboam I. Amos

does not dispute that YHWH brought Israel out of Egypt, but he questions the significance attached to it. For him, election only means greater responsibility. Israel has less excuse for its misconduct than other peoples.

The sayings in Amos 3:3–8\* are a rare quasi-philosophical reflection on the premises of the prophecies. Amos does not claim that his revelation is a bolt from the blue or that he is telling his audience anything that they could not know by themselves. The reasoning is similar to what we often find in Near Eastern Wisdom literature, and that we shall meet again in the book of Proverbs. Things do not happen randomly. Actions have predictable consequences. Consequently, disaster does not befall a city "unless the Lord has done it" (3:6\*). In the context there is no reference to any specific disaster but the comment is ominous. Disaster will surely befall Samaria and all of the kingdom of Israel. It is the contention of Amos that this can happen only because of the Lord, presumably as a punishment. Amos may be described as a mono-Yahwist, if not a strict monotheist. He believes that everything that happens can be attributed to the Lord. He acknowledges no other forces that might be responsible. The passage also offers a brief but evocative comment on the compulsion that led him to prophesy: just as one cannot help but be afraid if a lion roars, so one cannot help but prophesy if the Lord speaks (3:8\*). We shall find a similar sense of compulsion in the case of Jeremiah, where we shall have occasion to reflect further on the nature of the prophetic vocation.

Two themes predominate in the central oracles of Amos. One is social injustice, a topic already broached in the condemnation of Israel in chapter 2. Colorful examples are found in 4:1–3\*, which caricatures the women of Samaria as "cows of Bashan" (Bashan was a fertile area in Transjordan), and 6:4–7\*, which derides those who lie on beds of ivory and drink wine from bowls. The latter passage describes an institution called *marzēah*. (A form of the word is found in Amos 6:7\*, where it is translated "revelry" in the NRSV.) This was an old Canaanite institution, known at Ugarit in the fourteenth century B.C.E. It involved a banquet that lasted several days, with copious drinking of wine. At least in some contexts, the occasion was the commemoration of the dead and possibly communion with them. Such celebrations involved great expense. The luxury of Samaria is confirmed by archaeology. One of the most spectacular finds was a collection of ivories, which came from furniture and inlaid walls in the royal palaces (cf. the "beds of ivory" of Amos 6:4\*). Amos even condemns music as part of the excessive luxury. Those who were at ease, whether in Zion or Samaria, enjoyed their leisure at the expense of the poor,

who were forced into slavery when they could not pay their debts. It should be noted that Amos's objection to the *marzēah* was not based on its Canaanite origin, but on the extravagance and indulgence associated with it.

The other recurring theme is condemnation of the cult, especially at Bethel. "Come to Bethel and transgress; to Gilgal and multiply transgressions" (4:4\*). It is possible to read this pronouncement from a Deuteronomistic perspective: the cult at Bethel was inherently sinful, because it was not in Jerusalem. No doubt, this is how the passage was read by many after Josiah's reform. The original concerns of Amos, however, were different. They emerge most clearly in 5:18–27\*. This famous passage pronounces woe on those "who desire the day of the Lord" (5:18\*). There has been much debate as to what is meant by "the Day of the Lord." In later times it came to mean the day of judgment. Already in the time of Amos it could refer to a day of divine intervention in battle. In this context, however, it clearly refers to a cultic celebration, perhaps the Festival of Tabernacles or Sukkoth, which was known as "the feast of YHWH" in later times. Tabernacles was celebrated at the end of the grape harvest. It was a joyful festival, marked by drinking wine. The "Day of YHWH" was also a celebration of the greatness of YHWH, and by implication, the greatness of his people Israel. It was a day of light, in the sense of being a joyful occasion and a celebration of the blessings of Israel.

Amos, however, was not one to join lightly in a celebration. For him the Day of the Lord was darkness and not light, gloom with no brightness. The festival was not a joyful occasion, and insofar as it evoked the presence of the Lord it should carry forebodings of judgment rather than confidence of salvation. Amos is sweeping in his rejection of the sacrificial cult, in all its aspects. He rejects grain offerings as well as animal sacrifice, and dismisses the liturgical music as mere noise. Instead, he asks that "justice roll down like waters."

Criticism of the sacrificial cult is a prominent theme in the eighth-century prophets, and it was directed against the cult in Jerusalem as well as that in Bethel (cf. Isa 1:12–17\*; Mic 6:6–8\*; Hos 6:6\*). Debate has centered on the question whether the prophets wanted to abolish the cult entirely or only to reform it. It is difficult to imagine that anyone in antiquity could have envisioned the worship of a deity without any organized cult, or without offerings of some sort. But the prophets are not addressing the problem in the abstract. They are reacting to the cult as they knew it. In the case of Amos, the rejection is unequivocal. He does not say that sacrifice would be acceptable if the people practiced justice. The rhetorical question, "Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness?"

clearly implies the answer no. Amos presumably did not know the priestly laws of Leviticus, which envision an elaborate cult in the wilderness. More fundamentally, however, the question implies that people could serve God satisfactorily without sacrifices and offerings. This is not to say that Amos would necessarily have objected to any form of cultic worship, only that he considered the actual cult that was practiced in Israel to be offensive in the sight of the Lord.

The critique of the cult puts in sharp focus the question of what is important in religion. For many people, in both ancient and modern times, to practice a religion means to go to the temple or church and to participate in the rituals. For Amos, however, to serve God is to practice justice. The slaughter of animals, and the feasting and celebration that accompanied sacrifice, did not contribute to that goal. On the contrary, it gave the people a false sense of security, since they felt they were fulfilling their obligations to their god when in fact they were not. For this reason, sacrifices, even if offered at great expense, were not only irrelevant to the service of God, but actually an impediment to it. To call for the reform of the cult might still give the impression that it was important and perpetuate the misplaced values of Israelite society. Consequently, Amos is radical in his rejection. The service of God is about justice. It is not about offerings at all.

**The Visions.** Chapters 7–9 report a series of five visions, each of which warns of a coming judgment. In the case of the first two visions (locusts and fire), the prophet appeals successfully on behalf of "Jacob" (Israel) because "he is so small." The locusts, we are told, would eat "the latter growth after the king's mowing"—the share of the crop that was left for the people after the king's taxes. The preaching of Amos is directed against the upper classes, because of their exploitation of the poor. Yet the poor would suffer, even more than the rich, from a punishment that might be inflicted on Israel as a whole. But while the Lord relents in two cases, he does not relent forever, and the prophet eventually acquiesces. In 7:8–9\*, however, he places the emphasis on those elements in Israel that he held responsible for the coming disaster—the sanctuaries that would be made desolate, and the house of Jeroboam. Jeroboam himself did not fall by the sword, but his son Zechariah was murdered, and the kingdom remained in turmoil for the short time that it survived.

The message of Amos is summed up concisely in 8:1–2\*. The vision involves a wordplay in Hebrew. He sees "a basket of summer fruit" (Hebrew *qāyṣ*), and is told that "the end" (Hebrew *qēṣ*) is coming on Israel (the Hebrew root, *qāṣaṣ*, means "to cut off"). The expectation of "the end" later comes to be associated especially with apocalyptic

literature, such as the book of Daniel. (The word *eschatology*, the doctrine of the last things, is derived from the Greek word for “end,” *eschaton*.) Eventually it comes to mean the end of the world. In Amos it means simply the end of Israel. In fact, a few decades after Amos spoke, the kingdom of northern Israel was brought to an end by the Assyrians and was never reconstituted.

The reasons for this judgment on Israel are familiar by now. The leaders of Israel trample on the needy and bring the poor to ruin. To a great degree, Israel was defined by its ruling class. These were the people who identified themselves as Israel and celebrated the special status of Israel in the cult. Amos does not charge them with cultic irregularities. They observe new moon and Sabbath, even if they do so impatiently. Their crimes are committed in the marketplace, where they cheat, and in their dealings with the poor. For Amos the marketplace rather than the temple is the place where the service of God is tested. The idea that the land itself is affected by the sin of its inhabitants is one that we shall meet again in the later prophets.

The final vision concerns the destruction of the temple at Bethel. According to Amos, the Lord would strike his people precisely where they gathered to worship him in their mistaken way. The most striking passage in this chapter, however, is found in 9:7–8\*: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?” The cult at Bethel clearly involved the celebration of the exodus as the defining experience of Israel. The people who celebrated it either did not think it entailed covenantal obligations or paid no heed to them. The significance of the exodus was that it marked Israel as the special people of YHWH, who would guarantee their well-being. Amos does not question the tradition that God brought Israel out of Egypt, but he radically questions its significance. It was the same God who brought the Philistines from Caphtor (Crete) and the Arameans from Kir (location unknown, but cf. Amos 1:5\*; 2 Kgs 16:9\*, each of which refers to Syrians being taken captive to Kir). For Amos, YHWH is the God of all peoples and responsible for everything that happens, good and bad. The movements of the Arameans and Philistines were just as providential as those of the Israelites. In the eyes of God, Israel is no different than the Ethiopians.

The final word of Amos is found in 9:8a-b\*: “The eyes of the Lord are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth.” It is unthinkable that the prophet from Tekoa would have added “except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob.” To do so would have taken the sting out of the oracle of judgment. For a later editor, however, the addition was necessary. After all, Judah was also part of the house of Jacob. Amos did not dilute his oracles of judgment with any glimmer of hope. In

this he was exceptional. Most of the prophets alternate between words of doom and words of consolation. The oracles of Amos, however, were like the Day of the Lord, gloom with no brightness in them.

### **The Judean Edition of Amos**

Amos found little acceptance from the political and priestly leadership of the northern kingdom, naturally enough. His oracles were preserved in Judah. No doubt, people were impressed that the destruction he had predicted was actually brought about by the Assyrians, a mere generation later. The final edition of the book was probably after the Babylonian exile. A few passages stand out as editorial markers. These include the superscription in 1:1\*, explaining who Amos was, and the verse asserting the priority of Jerusalem as the abode of God in 1:2\*. The oracle against Judah, “because they have rejected the law of the Lord” (2:4\*), betrays the influence of the Deuteronomic reform. The book is punctuated by doxologies, short passages giving praise and glory to God (4:13\*; 5:8–9\*; 9:5–6\*). Perhaps the most notable editorial addition, however, is found in 9:11–15\*, which promises that “on that day” the Lord will raise up the booth of David that is fallen. The phrase “on that day” often indicates an editorial insertion in the prophetic books. Such passages give the whole book an eschatological cast, insofar as they purport to speak about a time in the indefinite future when the conditions of history will be radically altered. That the booth of David is said to be fallen indicates that this passage dates from a time after the Babylonian exile, when the Davidic dynasty had been brought to an end. This passage is rightly considered messianic. It looks for a restoration of the kingship in Jerusalem under the Davidic line, and expects that this restoration will be accompanied by a transformation of nature (the mountains will drip sweet wine). A similar transformation of nature is predicted in another messianic oracle in Isaiah 11.

The oracle against Judah in Amos 2 gives a good indication of how the book was read in the Deuteronomic tradition. Amos had spoken of specific situations in the northern kingdom, but above all he had established the principle that wrongdoing is punished by the Lord. The fate of Israel stood as an example for Judah, an example that was more fully appreciated after Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians. But unlike the original prophet, the editors ended on a note of hope. Judah, after all, survived its destruction, and the hope remained that YHWH would yet fulfill his promise to David.

One interesting modification of the prophetic message is found in 9:9–10\*, which says that only “the sinners of my people” will die by the sword. Amos made no such

discrimination, and neither, indeed, did the Assyrians. By the time of the Babylonian exile, however, more consideration was given to the merits of the individual, as we shall see especially in Ezekiel 18. In the postexilic period, the fate of Israel became an example not only to the people as a whole but also to individual Judeans.<sup>1</sup>

## Chapter 15. Amos and Hosea

→ *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Chapter 15

### Questions for Review and Discussion

1. What evidence do we have for the phenomenon of prophecy in the ancient Near East outside of Israel and Judah?
2. What do we know about prophecy in Israel before the eighth century B.C.E.?
3. What evidence is provided by the Book of Amos about the career of the prophet?
4. How do you understand the structure of the Book of Amos?
5. How does Amos use the convention of oracles against other nations?
6. How does Amos use the tradition of the Exodus?
7. What is the attitude of Amos toward the sacrificial cult?
8. In what ways has the Book of Amos been shaped by a redactor?
9. How do you understand the accounts of Hosea's marriage to Gomer?
10. How is the religion of northern Israel depicted in the Book of Hosea?
11. How is YHWH's relationship with Israel depicted in the Book of Hosea?
12. In what ways was the Book of Hosea shaped by a Judean editor?<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Collins, J. J. (2004). *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: an inductive reading of the Old Testament* (pp. 282–295). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

<sup>2</sup> Collins, J. J. (2004). *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: study guide*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.