

# AMOS

## 1:1-2:5

### Judgment on the Nations

**1:1. Tekoa.** The farming village of Tekoa has been identified with Khirbet Tequ'a, about seven miles south of Jerusalem and five miles south of Bethlehem. Because of its location on the edge of arable land, its inhabitants presumably had to work very hard to maintain their existence as farmers and shepherds (see 2 Chron 20:20). For additional information on this small village in the Judean hill country see the comment on 2 Samuel 14:2.

**1:1. earthquakes.** Seismic activity in Syro-Palestine is a common occurrence. The region lies over the Jordan Rift, which stretches from Damascus to the Gulf of Aqabah, and is therefore subject to periodic shifts of the earth. There is evidence of a sizeable earthquake in the stratum 6 excavations at Hazor, dating to approximately 760 B.C. It is possible that this is the one referred to here, but additional corroborating evidence needs to be sought at other sites, especially Bethel and Samaria. The fact that this earthquake is used to date both Amos's prophetic activity and the reign of King Uzziah (see Zech 14:4-5) suggests that it must have been massive and therefore an event that would have stuck in the minds of the people. If Amos actually predicted the earthquake (as is suggested by Amos 9:1), then it would have authenticated his role as a true prophet of Yahweh.

**1:1. chronology.** The kings named in Amos's date formula provide a range of time for his prophetic mission. Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel ruled for most of the first half of the eighth century B.C. The earthquake cited here may be the same as that attested by excavations at Hazor (stratum 6) dating to approximately 760. Since Amos claims not to be a professional prophet, many interpreters believe that the oracles of this book would have covered a short span of time rather than stretching over several decades.

**1:2. top of Carmel.** Mount Carmel overlooked the Mediterranean from the northern coast of Israel. The sea breeze and an annual rainfall of twenty-eight inches made it one of the most flourishing sections of the country. In antiquity its lush slopes were covered with olive trees, vineyards and rich pastureland (see Jer 46:18). Amos and other prophets create a contrasting image with this area's normal fertility and the drought brought on by God's wrath. The prophet also provides a sense of the geographic extent of the disaster, spreading from Jerusalem in the south to Carmel in the north.

**1:3. oracles against foreign nations.** For this common theme in the prophets see the comment on Jeremiah 46:1.

**1:3. Damascus in early eighth century.** The eighth century began disastrously for the kingdom of Aram and its capital city of Damascus. The Assyrian king Adad-Nirari III successfully besieged Damascus in 796. According to

the Assyrian Annals the Syrian king Bir-Hadad (Mar'i in Assyrian) was forced into vassalage. He was also required to make a huge tribute payment, including twenty-three hundred talents of silver and five thousand talents of iron, to save the city. There is even some suggestion that the weakened Syrian monarchy and its territory were subject to the Israelite king Jeroboam II during the mid-eighth century (see 2 Kings 14:28).

**1:3. threshing Gilead.** The Assyrian Annals of Tiglath-Pileser III give a thorough description of how another nation was defeated and left as though it had been run over by a "threshing sledge." The event mentioned here by Amos may relate to the mid-ninth century invasion of Gilead and the Galilee region by the Syrian king Hazael (see 2 Kings 8:12 and the recently discovered Hazael inscription from Tel Dan). For other examples of the use of a threshing sledge, see the comments on Deuteronomy 25:4; 2 Samuel 24:22; and Isaiah 28:28.

**1:4. house of Hazael.** Because of his achievements in the ninth century (see 2 Kings 10:32-33), the royal dynasty of Aram/Syria became known as the "house of Hazael." This phrase appears in the annals of Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 B.C.), who reigned a century later than Hazael. Thus Amos is not referring to a specific king but rather to the dynasty and by extension to the country of Aram itself.

**1:4. fortresses of Ben-Hadad.** See the comment on Jeremiah 49:27.

**1:5. Valley of Aven.** Because *aven* means "wickedness" or "idolatry" in Hebrew, it is quite likely that this is not a city site but rather a region where Baal was worshiped (compare Beth-Aven = Bethel in Hos 10:8). It is possible that the fertile Beqa' Valley is the target of the prophet's barb.

**1:5. Beth Eden.** Ninth-century Assyrian annals from the time of Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III both mention Beth Eden (Bit Adini) as a rebellious Aramean kingdom located about two hundred miles northeast of Palestine, between the Euphrates and the Balikh rivers. Since it was subjugated and renamed in the reign of Shalmaneser III, the appearance of Beth Eden in the eighth-century prophecies of Amos raises the question of whether this is the same place. However, Tiglath-Pileser III's annals continue to use Beth Eden for an area containing Syrian cities, and Amos may just be using that traditional geographic designation. The ruler at the time of Amos was Shamshi-Ilu.

**1:5. Kir.** See the comments on Isaiah 22:6 and Amos 9:7 for this site designated as the homeland of the Arameans. It is also mentioned in 2 Kings 16:9.

**1:6. Gaza in early eighth century.** Since Amos uses Gaza as the synonym for all of the Philistine city-states, it was presumably the most prominent at that time. Because of its alliances with the Arab tribes that controlled the trade routes south to Arabia, Gaza was a major commercial competitor of Judah during the reign of King Jehoram (see 2 Chron 21:16-17). After the Assyrians began to expand

their influence into Syro-Palestine, however, the political situation became more complicated. Amaziah and Uzziah were able to defeat the Edomites and regain control over the major port on the Gulf of Aqabah (Elath) in the beginning decades of the century (see 2 Kings 14:7, 22). Uzziah also gained victories over the Philistine cities and the Arabs during this time (2 Chron 26:6–7). It is possible that Amos is reflecting on the enmity between Gaza and Judah in this oracle. In any case, the Assyrian Annals of Tiglath-Pileser III (734 campaign against the Philistines) show that as the century wore on the city of Gaza was forced to pay heavy tribute and serve as an Assyrian vassal state.

**1:6. selling captives.** One of the most lucrative aspects of warfare and border raiding was the slave trade. Captives were easily sold to dealers, who would transport them far from their homeland (see Ezek 27:13; Joel 3:6–7). Note that Mesopotamian administrative texts as far back as pre-Sargonic times (early third millennium) contain ration lists describing persons “belonging to” or “attached to” households or establishments (weaving shops). The actual number of such persons, who are perhaps better described as serfs or service laborers, is not large. Certainly it does not compare to the huge numbers of slaves found in Greek and Roman cities.

**1:8. Ashdod in early eighth century.** The size of the lower city and its fortifications, built during the tenth century in the Solomonic style found at Gezer and Hazor, suggests prosperity for this Philistine city-state during the ninth and eighth centuries. Excavations in stratum 9 demonstrate that the huge city gate of Ashdod was partially destroyed around 760. This may be attributed to the campaign of Judah’s king Uzziah against the Philistines (2 Chron 26:6–7). Prior to Assyrian control over Syro-Palestine, the smaller states of Philistia, Judah, Israel and Transjordan vied for control of trade routes and periodically staged military campaigns as a means of gaining political hegemony in the region. After 750, however, Assyria and Egypt will use these smaller states as part of their own political maneuvering.

**1:8. Ashkelon in early eighth century.** Like Ashdod, Ashkelon was one of the five major Philistine city-states (see the comments on Judg 1:18 and 14:19). Most of what we know of the site during the eighth century comes from Assyrian Annals and tribute lists. However, there is not much mention of Ashkelon until the time of Tiglath-Pileser III’s 734 campaign. The exotic nature of some of the tribute paid by Ashkelon to the Assyrian ruler (including roles of papyrus and elephantine hides) suggests it had commercial links with Arabia and Egypt.

**1:8. Ekron in early eighth century.** The site of Ekron shrank in size during the first two centuries of the first millennium. This may be due to Israel’s domination of Philistia starting in the reign of Solomon. Some new construction does take place in the eighth century,

including a fortress tower, suggesting a resurgence during the period when Judah’s king Hezekiah controlled the region (2 Kings 18:8). Excavations have not demonstrated any remarkable wealth or prosperity during the early eighth century, and it may be that its name in this oracle is simply part of the usual listing of Philistine cities (see Jer 25:20).

**1:9. Tyre in early eighth century.** During the first quarter of the eighth century, King Pygmalion ruled Tyre. This was a time of great prosperity for the Phoenicians, who controlled most of the commercial activity in the Mediterranean. They had just expanded their colonial presence by founding Carthage in North Africa in 815. Interestingly, the Assyrian tribute list of Adad-Nirari III from this period includes the king of Sidon, but not that of Tyre. Apparently Tyre, like a prosperous Israel (see Amos 3:15; 6:4), was able to avoid Assyrian entanglements for the time being.

**1:11. Edom in early eighth century.** After being added to David’s kingdom (2 Sam 8:11–13), Edom eventually rebelled and gained its independence from Judah during the reign of Jehoram (2 Kings 8:20–22). Amaziah was able to recapture at least a portion of Edom’s territory (2 Kings 14:7) at the battle of Sela (= es-Sela on Edom’s northern border), and by the reign of the Israelite king Jeroboam II (789–749) border clashes and tension continued to exist between Edom and its neighbors.

**1:12. Teman, Bozrah.** See the comments on Jeremiah 49:7 and 49:13 respectively for these Edomite sites.

**1:13. Ammon in early eighth century.** Like Edom, the Transjordanian nation of Ammon periodically rebelled against Israelite rule (2 Chron 20:1) and during the eighth century was forced to pay tribute to Judah (in Uzziah’s reign, see 2 Chron 26:8). The shift in political fortunes is evidenced in one Assyrian source that refers to Ammonite ambassadors coming to Calah (Nimrud) in the eighth century to present tribute. However, the first king of Ammon to be listed in the Assyrian texts is Shobi, son of Hahash (Tiglath-Pileser III’s 733 list).

**1:13. treatment of pregnant women.** The practice of ripping open pregnant women is mentioned very rarely. It is attributed to Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (about 1100) in a hymn praising his conquests. It is also referred to in passing in a Neo-Babylonian lament.

**1:14. Rabbah.** See the comment on Jeremiah 49:2 for this city, which served as Ammon’s capital.

**2:1. Moab in early eighth century.** The mid-ninth-century Moabite inscription of Mesha is the only extrabiblical documentary evidence (compare 2 Kings 3:4–27) currently available about this Transjordanian nation prior to Tiglath-Pileser’s campaign into the area in 734. The hostilities that may have existed between Moab and the nations of Judah and Israel can be speculated on, but there is no concrete evidence. The crime of desecrating the bones of the king of Edom may be an indicator of Edom’s alliance with Judah.

However, without a historical context within which to place the event, it remains a mystery.

**2:1. burning bones.** The outrageous nature of this act centers not only on defiling the graves of the kings of Edom, but also on the further step of burning their bones to make lime (see Is 33:12). In this way all honor and respect is removed from the bodies, and the Moabites could actually point to walls or houses that had been painted with the resulting lime mixture. On the exhumation of human remains see the comment on 2 Kings 23:16.

**2:2. Kerioth.** Also mentioned in the Mesha inscription as a city where the Moabite god Chemosh had a shrine, this Moabite city has been identified with el-Qereiyat and Khirbet Aleiyan (see Jer 48:41).

## 2:6-16

### Sins of Israel

**2:8. nature of irony.** The great irony in Amos's charges against the rich is that they display their excesses before sacred altars in a shrine dedicated to God. It is possible that they were within their legal rights to seize a garment in default of debt or to purchase wine with funds that had been generated by fining the poor for some offense. However, Yahweh had said (Ex 22:25–26) that the outraged cries of the poor would be heard, “for I am compassionate.” As in the case of the worker in the Yavneh Yam inscription, the creditor is to not only obey the law but also take into consideration what seizure of property will do to prevent the debtor from earning a living (see Hammurabi's Code, which forbids seizure of a debtor's ox).

**2:9. destroyed Amorite.** Israel is reminded of the deeds of the Divine Warrior. Prior to the beginning of the conquest, Yahweh had given the Israelites a victory over the Amorite kings Sihon and Og (see the comments on Num 21:21; 21:24–30). Subsequently, the name Amorites becomes synonymous with the inhabitants of Canaan (see Judg 1:34–36 and 7:14).

**2:9. fruit above, roots below.** Amos uses a literary device known as a merism—paired polar opposites—to depict the total destruction of the Amorites. This is a common practice in prophetic speech (see Is 37:31; Hos 9:6). It is also found in a Phoenician curse formula (fifth-century *Eshmun asor* inscription): “May they have no trunk below nor boughs above.”

**2:11. Nazirites.** See the comments on Numbers 6:1–21 for this special class of Israelites who impose on themselves an oath of purification.

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**ECONOMIC CHANGES AND SOCIAL CLASSES IN EIGHTH-CENTURY ISRAEL** In the light of the political changes that took place at the beginning of the eighth century (Assyrian expansion and the capture of Damascus), Israel was able to widen its economic

interests and restore its hegemony over a greater area of the Transjordan. In addition, both Israel and Judah were ruled during the first half of the century by strong kings (Jeroboam II and Uzziah respectively) with long reigns. This made it easier to establish a comprehensive economic policy that concentrated on the mass production of export items such as grain, olive oil and wine. Large areas of the Shephelah and the lowland valleys had already been given over to wheat production (2 Chron 26:10). Now, in the eighth century, the elite were able to impose this economic policy on the small hill country farms and villages. As a result, previous agricultural strategies that attempted to distribute potential risks between herding and farming were overturned, and the land was given over to specific cash crops. The smaller holdings of the peasant farmers, overburdened with debts, were enclosed into large estates. This very efficient use of the land, however, eliminated the mixed crops that had formerly been grown in the village culture and more quickly exhausted the soil. Leaving fields fallow and grazing animals on harvested fields would have been eliminated or rigidly controlled. Under this new policy, an attempt was made to increase exports to the extent that there was a real hunger problem for the peasant class, while the nobility and merchant-class were able to indulge in the luxury goods supplied by their Phoenician trading partners. Thus in addition to facing rising prices at home on basic goods, such as wheat and barley, the impoverished peasant farmers now found themselves forced into debt servitude or day labor. Seeing them ground under the heel of exploiting employers and cheated by greedy merchants who sold them adulterated or inferior grain for their meals, it is no wonder that Amos harangued the rich for their lack of concern for the poor. In such an atmosphere of social injustice, agricultural specialization and economic speculation, the prophet reminds the Israelites of their covenant obligations. Like the “eloquent peasant” of twentieth-century B.C. Egypt, Amos warns them that corrupt judges and dishonest businessmen can expect no mercy from an angry God.

## 3:1-15

### Legal Case Against Israel

**3:2. choosing family.** The verb used in the Hebrew text is “know.” The same idiom of a god knowing a family is used in Akkadian texts to describe the care that family gods provide for their worshipers.

**3:4. lion behavior.** During the hunt a lion will roar to freeze its prey with fear as the lion makes its rush. Following a successful hunt a lion may drag a portion of the kill back to its den to be eaten later. It may growl while lying there as a sign of pleasure at its success or as a warning to other predators to stay away. See similar examples of lion behavior in Isaiah 5:29 and Ezekiel 22:25.

**3:5. bird hunting.** See the comment on Hosea 7:12 for the details of ancient bird hunting with traps and snares. It has been persuasively set forth by S. Paul that the word NIV translates “snare” should be rendered “bait,” thus establishing what everyone knows, that the bird must be lured into the trap.

**3:9. mountains of Samaria.** Although the city of Samaria was located on a single hill, it was surrounded by a group of hills that were actually higher than the capital city (see the comment on 1 Kings 16:24). If the prophet is talking about affording a vantage point from which to see the ultimate destruction of Samaria, then these hills would be appropriate.

**3:11. time between prophecy and fulfillment.** Amos, speaking in the 760s, may have assumed that the Assyrians would ultimately serve as God’s instrument to punish Israel, but he does not state this explicitly. In any case, Samaria and the nation of Israel will fall to the Assyrian armies of Sargon II in 722, and much of the population will be deported to other portions of the Assyrian empire.

**3:12. shepherd’s responsibility.** The legal codes of ancient Mesopotamia (including the Sumerian Law Code, Hammurabi’s Code and the Hittite Laws) each contained a clause designed to aid shepherds who have lost an animal to a lion or other predator. The shepherd gave his testimony and took an oath before the gods. Presumably, if there was any physical evidence to display, such as “a piece of an ear,” then this would also have been brought forward. In that way the shepherd would be above suspicion of theft. The pieces he brought did not suggest survival but were proof of destruction.

**3:12. beds/couches.** In the midst of the coming destruction the homes of the rich merchants and nobles of Samaria will be looted. The fleeing refugees will only be able to carry away with them fragments of their wealth. Amos satirizes their plight as they scavenge portions (the headboard and footpiece) of their beds. The irony of this is found in Amos 6:4, where the prophet condemns the rich for luxuriating on the ivory inlaid beds and couches.

**3:14. altars of Bethel.** See the comments on 1 Kings 12:29–30 for the establishment of Jeroboam’s royal sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel at the time of the division of the kingdom. Despite Bethel’s association with the altars of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob (Gen 12:8; 35:7), it served as a rival to Jerusalem in Amos’s time, and thus its altars are now to be condemned as part of Israel’s apostasy.

**3:14. cutting off horns of altars.** The horns on the altar represented the place of sanctuary (Ex 21:13–14) and they were also associated with absolution and atonement (Lev 16:18). Cutting off these horns removed the altar’s special qualities, desecrated it and transformed it into nothing more than a damaged stone. Israel is thus deprived of any hope for asylum or expiation for their sins in the face of the coming destruction.

**3:15. winter and summer houses.** One of the signs of luxury displayed by the rich of Samaria was two residences. A summer residence in Samaria took advantage of the cooler climate of the central hill country of Israel, and a winter home, possibly in the warm Valley of Jezreel, allowed residents to escape the extremes of weather and temperature. There are a number of examples of kings being able to indulge in climatic migration from one official residence to another, including the eighth-century Aramean king of Sam’al, Barrakub, and Cyrus, the king of Persia.

**3:15. ivory adornment.** Excavations at the site of ancient Samaria have revealed fairly large quantities of ivory that had been used to decorate furniture and the walls of the Omride palace (see the comment on 1 Kings 22:39). There are both Egyptian and Phoenician/Syrian decorative styles employed, including representations of the god Horus, lotus blossoms and the “lady in the window” motif. The Iron Age ivories differ from those of the Late Bronze (best represented by those found at Megiddo) with the addition of glass paste and inlaid semiprecious stones. It is possible that some of these ivories were carved and decorated by native Israelite craftsmen, but more likely they are expensive imports.

#### 4:1-13

#### Judgments with No Effect

**4:1. cows of Bashan.** Once again demonstrating his background as a herdsman, Amos uses the finely bred cattle of Bashan as a metaphor. These prize animals grazed on the lush grass available in this region in Transjordan on either side of the Yarmuk River (see Deut 32:14). Amos compares these fine cows to the self-indulgent wives of the nobility and wealthy merchants of Samaria. Neither these cows nor these women are capable of seeing beyond their own personal needs and desires (compare Is 3:16). The women, like totally self-absorbed grazing cows, cannot even imagine that people may be starving while they call for another cup of wine or another extravagant meal. It is difficult to say for sure whether the reference is to domesticated pampered cattle or to undomesticated ferocious cattle. Both could be found in Bashan and either picture can make sense of the analogy.

**4:1. upper-class women.** The prosperity that had come to Israel’s merchant class and nobility during the first half of the eighth century B.C. is the direct result of the spreading Assyrian hegemony. In 802 the Assyrian king Adad-Nirari III captured the city of Damascus and effectively removed Syria from its position as chief political and economic rival of Israel. For a brief time, therefore, the city of Samaria and the rest of Israel enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity that brought wealth and allowed for amazing self-indulgence in luxury goods and new construction projects. Amos targets the wives of these prosperous individuals, singling them out as a base cause for the oppression of the

poor. The covenant had placed obligations on the Israelites to care for the less privileged, but what Amos sees are persons who do not count the human cost that pays for their high living.

**4:2. hooks, fishhooks.** The Hebrew here is very uncertain. An attractive suggestion has been made that the verse describes not what fish are caught with but what they are transported in (baskets and pots). This metaphor is known from the prophetic literature of Mari, where the king's enemies are portrayed as wriggling like fish in a basket. Fishing in Mesopotamian streams and rivers was done with woven baskets (sometimes made from thorn bushes). In fact there is no evidence of the use of fishhooks in Mesopotamia after 3000. Amos's metaphor of the capture of the Israelites after the siege of Samaria may be better translated as "fish baskets." If hooks are in view, however, it is possible that he is referring to the grappling hooks that were used during the siege and that might have been used to impale and drag prisoners.

**4:3. Harmon.** Since this word occurs only here, there have been a number of suggestions on its meaning. Some scholars consider it a place name and thus the place where the captives are exiles. Among the suggestions here are Mount Minni in Assyria (see Jer 51:27) or Hermal near Kadesh on the Orontes River. For those who emend the text, the translation of "dung heap" for *hadmon* (exchanging a single letter for one that looks similar) is the most likely since it is a suitable place for the disposal of the bodies of prisoners.

**4:4. cult sites at Bethel and Gilgal.** Bethel has a long history of cultic activity, ranging back to the construction of an altar there by Abraham (Gen 12:8) and Jacob's dream there (Gen 28:10–22). It took on an ominous quality for Amos when it was designated as one of the two major cultic centers by Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:29–30). Cultic activity at Gilgal appears in the conquest narrative when the Israelites cross the Jordan and Joshua raises a memorial to commemorate the event (Josh 4:19–20). It is possible that after the division of the kingdoms, Gilgal was seen as a northern worship site because of its association with Saul (see 1 Sam 11:15 and 15:21). Hosea also condemns this place as corrupt (Hos 4:15 and 9:15).

**4:4. three-year tithes.** The better reading of the Hebrew here would be "on the third day" or "every three days" (instead of every three years, see NIV note). It is possible that Amos is satirizing an aspect of the northern kingdom's cultic practice. There is a possibility that freewill offerings and noncompulsory tithes (compare Gen 14:20) were given at the sanctuary shortly after arrival or were tied to some coming event or vow. To Amos, however, such frequency of offerings cannot replace true piety or obedience to the covenant.

**4:9. blight and mildew.** Farmers are only too aware of what the forces of nature can do to their crops. Here God attempts to get Israel's attention by destroying the harvest.

First, the sirocco winds strip all of the moisture out of the air and the plant life. Then, too much rain falls and the crops turn yellowish-brown and wither in the fields. See the comment on curses in Deuteronomy 28:22.

**4:9. locusts.** Insects can also play havoc with growing crops as well as the leaves on olive and fig trees. For another example of locust swarms and their relation to God's anger see Joel 1:4–7. Akkadian Mari texts report that locusts descended on a town and another explains that the harvest could not be completed because of the swarm of insects. For information concerning the devastation caused by locusts see the comment on Exodus 10:1–20.

**4:13. connection between wind and thoughts.** In Hebrew the word translated "wind" is the word that is also often translated "spirit." It is not so much that the word had two different meanings but rather that in the ancient world they did not find it so easy to differentiate between wind and spirit. In Mesopotamian thought the gods gave revelation of their thoughts through dreams. The messenger who brought these dreams was named Zaqiqu. The common word *zaqiqu* refers to a ghost or a phantom. It derives from the verb *zaqu*, which refers to the blowing of the wind, or to the breath of a god.

## 5:1-27

### Seeking the Lord

**5:5. Bethel, Gilgal.** See comment on 4:4.

**5:5. shrine at Beersheba.** The discovery of a large horned altar in the excavations of Tell es-Saba' dating to the Iron II period provides corroboration of cultic activity at this southern site. It is mentioned in the ancestral narratives (Gen 21:33) and is the site where Samuel's sons operated as judges (1 Sam 8:1–2). The destruction of shrines outside Jerusalem by King Hezekiah (Arad, Beersheba; 2 Kings 18:4) may be a reflection of Amos's condemnation of these sites.

**5:8. Pleiades and Orion, constellations in ancient world.** Textual evidence from Babylonia, including the "Venus tablet" of Ammisaduqa (c. 1650), indicates that astronomical studies were conducted with skill and precision. Although astrology was also prevalent in late Egyptian periods and in Persian period Mesopotamia, it seems that this divinatory activity, interpreting omens (see Is 47:13) is only an extension of the work of a true science. There are records of the movement of the planets, placement of the major fixed stars and constellations, as well as descriptions of the phases of the moon and solar and lunar eclipses. Given the widespread knowledge of the stars and the planets in both Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures, it was important for the biblical writers and prophets to attribute these celestial bodies to Yahweh's creation (see Job 9:9). Mesopotamian constellations included animal figures such as a goat (Lyra) and snake (Hydra); objects such as an arrow (Sirius) and a wagon (Big

Dipper); and characters such as Anu (Orion). The most popular of the constellations was Pleiades, often portrayed on seals even in Palestine and Syria. Neo-Assyrian texts preserve sketches of stars in constellations. A prayer to the gods of the night from about 1700 B.C. invokes the constellations by name, calling on them to give answers to the diviner seeking an omen.

**5:11. stone mansions.** This refers to houses using hewn stone (called “ashlar”), for many of the houses in Israel used rough fieldstones in construction. Often the foundation was stone while the superstructure was of sun-dried mud brick. Only the very wealthiest of the upper class would have been able to afford this carefully dressed masonry. The limestone used for this construction was quarried near Samaria. The curse used here is called a “futility curse” because it calls for their efforts and labor to become futile, and it can be compared to an inscription on a Babylonian boundary stone calling on the gods to see that anyone who builds a house on stolen land should have the house taken from them.

**5:12. judicial bribes and oppression.** One of Amos’s principal themes is criticism of social injustice (see Ex 23:6–8; Deut 16:19; and Hammurabi’s Code for laws against bribery). There is a long history of peasant or wisdom literature pleading for justice under the law and from kings and officials. For example, in a collection of Babylonian Wisdom sayings the “unscrupulous judge” is one who accepts a present “and yet lets justice miscarry.” Similarly, the twenty-first century “eloquent peasant” in Egyptian literature charges that “lawmakers approve of robbery” and “the inspector condones corruption.” The tenth-century Babylonian “Theodicy” decries people who “fill the storehouse of the oppressor with gold” while they “empty the larder of the beggar of its provisions.”

**5:20. day of the Lord.** See sidebar at Joel 2.

**5:21. religious feasts and assemblies.** Amos’s attack is addressed at the empty, mechanically celebrated *ḥagîm*, the technical term for the three major pilgrimage festivals (Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Harvest and Feast of Ingathering—see the comments on Ex 23:15–16). Religious festivals offered frequent opportunity for celebrations, communal meals and social gatherings. What had been designed as a means to praise and honor God, however, was not bringing any pleasure to him.

**5:23. music in worship.** Mesopotamia and Egypt have long histories of both popular and religious music that also must have been known to the Israelites. Professional musicians, like the *kalu* harp-player so well attested in ancient texts from Old Babylonian Mari and Sumerian Uruk, may well have been the model for the Levitical musicians in the Jerusalem temple as well as the musicians in the northern shrines of Dan and Bethel. The types of instruments, liturgical chants, penitential prayers and laments, and hymns of praise created by these ancient civilizations set a standard of style and composition for the Near East.

Ancient Egyptian tomb paintings demonstrate the postures of dancers as well as a wide variety of musical instruments. One example of the technical expertise employed in sacred music is found in the Psalms associated with the recitation of the creation story—Psalms 8, 19, 104 and 139. They contain both the literary as well as the musical elements (based on the superscription rubrics, choral markers and assonances in the text) needed for a proper performance of music during worship and the enactment of sacred drama.

**5:26. shrine of the king.** Because of a mistaken belief that the god Sikkuth was not introduced until after the Assyrian conquest (see 2 Kings 17:30), there has been an attempt to emend the Hebrew so that the text is read “shrine” or “abode” of the king. In fact, Amos’s statement probably reflects the degree of cultural influence exercised by Aramean merchants and other travelers on the Israelites. Sikkuth or <sup>d</sup>SAG.KUD is associated with Ninurta in Ugaritic sources and specifically with the planet Saturn.

**5:26. pedestal of idols.** This translation is also an attempt to remove the name of an astral deity from the text with an emendation of the word *kiyyun*. The Mesopotamian star god, Saturn, occurs as *kajamanu* in Akkadian texts and has the meaning “the steady one,” an apt title for the slow-moving orbit of the planet Saturn. The images of these astral deities were carried in procession on their festival days.

**5:26. star of your god.** Since both of the gods mentioned in this verse are associated with the planet Saturn, the phrase “star of your god” is actually a reference to the people’s worship of astral deities. Sacred processions paraded the images and symbols of these gods through the city streets to their shrines, where sacrifices, sacred dancing and other cultic activities would take place. Amos, however, is satirizing these practices. Instead of simply describing what has been occurring, he now predicts a “final” procession, but this time the people carry these idols with them into exile (compare the carrying of burdensome idols in Is 46:1).

**5:27. exile beyond Damascus.** Since the Assyrians are never directly mentioned in Amos, it is unclear that this is what he meant when he spoke of the coming exile of the people of Israel. Using such an imprecise phrase as “beyond Damascus” is reminiscent of Jeremiah’s threat “from the north” (Jer 1:14), and both simply indicate the direction of Mesopotamia as the source of the coming destruction.

## 6:1-14

### Woe and Indictment Oracles

**6:1. Mount Samaria.** For Amos’s parallelism to work most effectively, Mount Samaria would have to also contain a worship center just as Mount Zion does in Jerusalem. It is likely a reference to the acropolis section of the city where the temple and palace would be located. Considering

Micah's condemnation of Samaria and its idols (Mic 1:6–7) and Isaiah's reference to "Samaria and her images" (Is 10:11), it seems likely that Israel's capital had a major shrine during the reign of Jeroboam II.

**6:2. Calneh and Hamath.** Although its exact location is still uncertain, Calneh, the capital of the ancient state of Unqi, was most likely situated in the Antioch plain, near Aleppo. Hamath (modern Hama, almost 100 miles south of Aleppo and about 130 miles north of Damascus) is located on the Orontes River. (for more information see the comments on Is 10:9). Though both suffered destruction at the hands of the Assyrians in 738, Israel was also paying tribute at that time too, so Amos cannot be that late. We know too little of the history of northern Syria in the decades preceding Amos to identify what else he may be referring to.

**6:2. Gath.** Gath has been tentatively identified as Tell es-Safi, five miles south of Tell Miqne/ Ekron. Of the five major cities of the Philistines, it was the closest to Judah. There has been little excavation at the site, though it has been confirmed that there are Iron Age remains. The city was located by the Elah Valley, one of the principal passes from the coastal plain into the hill country surrounding Jerusalem. It was the target of an attack by Uzziah of Judah (referred to in 2 Chron 26:6) in the time of Amos.

**6:4. beds inlaid with ivory.** The idea of a bed made from some exotic or luxurious material is reminiscent of King Og's iron bed in Deuteronomy 3:11 (see also Solomon's ivory throne in 2 Chron 9:17–19). Sennacherib's Assyrian Annals mention that Judah's king Hezekiah included a couch inlaid with ivory among his tribute items. Ivory decor was very popular at this time for inlays in furniture and for wall panels. One of the principal sources of ivory was elephant tusks, which were imported from Aram (where Syrian elephants were not yet extinct at this time). Elephant hides and tusks, as well as live elephants, were at times included in tribute payments. Excavations at Ashurnasirpal's palace at Kalah produced some very fine ivory carvings decorating the walls. Over five hundred ivory fragments have also been found in the excavations at Samaria dating to the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. Many feature Egyptian and Phoenician artistic motifs.

**6:4. choice lambs, fattened calves.** For those who could afford it, the best quality meats came from specially bred sheep and cattle that were kept in stalls (see Mal 4:2) and fattened with barley prior to slaughter. Presumably, these ancient feed lots could command a higher price and were well known (see Jeremiah's metaphor for overfed mercenaries in Jer 46:21). Evidence of this breed of sheep (Akk. *kirru*) is found in Ur III economic texts dating to the twentieth-century B.C.

**6:6. wine by the bowl.** The term used for bowl here is one that is usually associated with cultic activity (see Ex 24:6–8; Num 7:13). That suggests that Amos is accusing them not only of drinking to excess in large bowls but perhaps

also of profaning sacred objects. Note that archaeologists have found a number of golden drinking bowls in tombs at Nimrud dating to the late Assyrian period, some of which have the names of Assyrian queens engraved on their sides.

**6:6. fine lotions.** Banqueters in the ancient world were often treated by a generous host to fine oils that would be used to anoint their foreheads. This provided a glistening sheen to their countenance and also would have added a fragrance to their persons and the room. For example, an Assyrian text from Esarhaddon's reign describes how he "drenched the foreheads" of his guests at a royal banquet with "choicest oils." Since Amos may be condemning the people for misusing cultic vessels in this verse, he may also be taking them to task for using the oils that would otherwise have been used as part of cultic practice (see Ex 30:31–32).

**6:7. feasting.** The word translated "feasting" here is a technical term for a funeral meal (more like a festal memorial meal; thus the use of vessels and oils usually connected with cultic rites). The term occurs only here and Jeremiah 16:5, although it is well known in many other Semitic traditions. Extrabiblical references to the funeral meal have been found in Ugaritic texts, in Aramaic texts from Elephantine (Egypt) and in inscriptions in Punic, Nabatean and Palmyrene. All of the elements listed in these verses are connected with these feasts: meat and wine, music, anointing and lounging.

**6:10. burning the bodies.** The burning of bodies was not a common practice (but see comments on 1 Sam 31:12 and 2 Chron 16:14), and the spelling of the verb is unusual. This has led a number of interpreters to an alternative reading such that the text does not suggest burning the body but embalming it with spices for burial.

**6:10. not mentioning the Lord's name.** God's wrath is such that the population of the city of Samaria is to be reduced to a tenth, and the survivors will be so frightened by what Yahweh has done that they will be afraid to mention God's name lest the angry deity take any further notice of them. In that sense then, the command "Hush!" is a sort of warding spell (like "God forbid" in English) to prevent the incautious from invoking God (compare Ex 23:13 and Josh 23:7). Assyrian royal documents from the reign of Enlil-Nirari (1326–1317) provide some light here. In one text the king calls out, "May the god by no means speak!" when the death of a member of the royal family is announced at court. His intent may be to ask that the god not act (speak) against anyone else.

**6:13. Lo Debar.** This site, one of those captured by Jeroboam II during his Transjordanian campaign (2 Kings 14:25), is most often identified with Tell 'el-Hammeh, just north of the Jabbok River, in what would have been Ammonite territory. Amos parodies this victory by revocalizing the city name to *Lodabar*, which means "nothing." He mocks their false pride in these flimsy accomplishments that are as nothing to God's victories.

**6:13. Karnaim.** This important site is located in Bashan at Tell es-Sa'ad, on a northern tributary of the Yarmuk River (see Gen 14:5 and 1 Macc 5:26). Tiglath-Pileser III made it the capital of the Assyrian province of Qarnina when he conquered the region in his 738–737 campaign.

**6:14. Lebo Hamath to the Wadi Arabah.** See the comment on 2 Kings 14:25 for King Jeroboam II's attempt to restore Israel's borders.

## 7:1–9

### Punishment Alternatives

**7:1. locusts.** See comment on 4:9.

**7:1. king's share.** Although it is not mentioned elsewhere in the biblical text, this reference indicates that the king was entitled, as a form of tax, to a portion of the mown grass. This may have been a measure instituted to insure the king's chariot horses and cavalry had sufficient fodder. A reverse example of this is found in a land grant made by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal to one of his officials. This decree exempted the official's new lands from being levied for straw, grain or a portion of his flocks.

**7:7. plumb line.** This traditional translation is no longer acceptable, based on the recognition that the Hebrew *anak* is a cognate of the Akkadian *annaku*, meaning "tin." A plumb line would have a lead or iron weight attached in order to determine that a wall is perpendicular during construction. S. Paul suggests this stands for a tin wall, a symbol of how weak or fragile Israel's defenses are (compare the iron walls in Jer 1:18; Ezek 4:3). For now the exact meaning of this phrase remains uncertain.

## 7:10-17

### Amaziah Confronts Amos

**7:10. prophetic message as treason.** Throughout the ancient world it was believed that prophets not only proclaimed the message of deity but in the process unleashed the divine action. In Assyrian king Esarhaddon's instructions to his vassals, he requires that they report any improper or negative statements made by anyone, specifically naming prophets, ecstasies and dream interpreters. It is no wonder, then, that a prophet negatively disposed toward a king had to be controlled lest he bring about all sorts of havoc. One can perhaps understand why a king would be inclined to imprison a prophet whose very words might incite insurrection or impose doom.

**7:13. king's sanctuary.** Bethel was one of the two royal sanctuaries established by King Jeroboam to serve as alternative worship centers for the people of the northern kingdom (1 Kings 12:26–30). Amaziah's post was a political appointment since the priesthood at Bethel was established by the crown rather than being attached to tribal lineage as the Levites were (1 Kings 12:32). Naturally his loyalties were to the king, and he was very offended by any criticism of either the king or the shrine at Bethel. The state

temple was one in which the king himself participated in the ritual activities.

**7:14. shepherd.** No village in Judah's central hill country could afford to engage in a single economic activity. Every household would have had their small fields of wheat and barley, as well as a small vineyard, a few fig trees and olive trees on their land. In this way they could hope that at least some of their agricultural endeavors paid off. In like manner, a few sheep, goats and cattle would have served as an economic hedge. It would have been easy enough to allow them to graze on the hillsides, accompanied by a boy (see David's occupation in 1 Sam 16:11). A Mesopotamian parallel to this practice is found in the Akkadian word *naqidu*, a term used for a breeder of cattle, sheep and goats.

**7:14. caring for sycamore figs.** The sycamore figs (*Ficus sycomorus L.*) originated in east central Africa and spread to Egypt and the Near East by the Iron Age. The trees are capable of as many as six crops per year. Since the fruit is inferior to that of the common fig (*Ficus carica L.*), the poor principally consume it. Date gardens take up to twenty years to reach their full productive potential. They require much attention because they have to be pollinated by hand. The care of the sycamore fig requires that the fruit be gashed or pierced to encourage an increase in ethylene gas that speeds the ripening process. The knife used to gash the fruit is depicted in Egyptian tomb paintings in Thebes.

## 8:1-14

### Ripe for Judgment

**8:5. clash between economic and religious concerns.** As Nehemiah discovered several centuries later in Persian-period Jerusalem, the desire of merchants to conduct business sometimes makes their compliance with religious law and Sabbath regulations a matter for complaint or even circumvention (see comment on Neh 10:31). There were religious festivals in surrounding cultures (see comment on Ex 20:8–11), but only Israel was commanded to obey the sabbath law and cease all work (see comment on Ex 31:12–17). This restriction on trade caused friction and apparently contributed to corrupt business practices as a way of "making up" the losses.

**8:5. cheating in the market.** Certainly, Amos's complaints against Israelite merchants are not unique. For instance, the charge made against merchants that they use false balances is found in the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope* and in a clause in the Babylonian wisdom literature. Similarly, Hammurabi's Code contains a statement about bankers who "use a light scale to measure the grain or the silver that they lend and a heavy scale to measure the grain or the silver that they collect."

**8:6. sweepings with the wheat.** In their efforts to squeeze as much profit as possible from their holdings, grain merchants were cheating the poor by selling the "husks" of the wheat. A similar charge is made in the Egyptian *Tale of*

*the Eloquent Peasant* against those who “substitute lesser for better goods.” The word translated as “sweepings” occurs only here, but it is related to the word “to fall” and reflects the poorest quality or that which is left over.

**8:8. rising like the Nile.** There is a three-month inundation cycle in the flow of the Nile River (from August to October). The increase in volume is the result of monsoon rains in Ethiopia that swell the Nile and its tributaries. Although the height of the inundation is irregular, the Egyptians early in their history learned to make efficient use, through irrigation canals and other means, of whatever the rise of the Nile brought to them.

**8:9. sun go down at noon.** Since a lunar or solar eclipse was considered a portent of evil or the anger of the gods in the ancient Near East, there are many citations in the literature. Among them is the prediction by the prophet Balaam in the Deir 'Alla inscription that the divine assembly has decided to “bring darkness instead of light.” Priests of the moon god Sin in Babylonian would wear torn garments and sing dirges during an eclipse, and there are numerous letters and omen texts in Babylonian and Assyrian records referring to eclipses. Many are written to kings either warning them of a coming eclipse or assuring the monarch that they will be kept informed of the likelihood of coming occurrences. For biblical examples see Joel 3:15 and Zechariah 14:6.

**8:10. mourning practices.** See comments on Genesis 37:34–35; Leviticus 19:28; and Deuteronomy 14:1–2.

**8:12. sea to sea.** In their staggering search for water during the drought, the people will search from one end of the kingdom to the other. From “sea to sea” is used fairly often to distinguish east and west (from the Mediterranean in the west to the Dead Sea or Jordan River) by the biblical writers (see Ps 72:8; Zech 9:10). A similar expression occurs in the Karatepe inscription of the Aramean king Azitawada: “from sunrise to sunset” (see Is 45:6) for east to west or a sense of universality. Since it is combined here with “north to east,” it is possible that it defines the southern latitudinal border of the northern kingdom.

**8:12. north to east.** The southern boundary has been defined in the previous line, and the western boundary is obvious. From Bethel one could still search to the Galilee region to the north, heading for places like Samaria or Dan, and to the east, whether Beth Shan or the Transjordan territory of Gilead.

**8:14. shame/Ashima.** While the uncertainty with this word has led to its being translated “shame,” it seems most likely that it is a reference to the Syrian god Ashima (NIV note). This deity’s title comes from the Aramaic for “the name” and thus is a shorthand for any number of the northwest Semitic gods and goddesses (Baal, Anat, Astarte). Although official introduction of the worship of Ashima does not occur until after 722, this does not preclude this god’s being

worshiped in Samaria before this time. Later evidence for worship of Ashima comes from the Elephantine letters.

**8:14. god of Dan.** Since Jeroboam I had instituted the worship of Yahweh at Dan by creating a royal sanctuary there (1 Kings 12:28–30), it is appropriate for Amos to refer to the god of Dan. He is probably also referring to the golden calf placed there by Jeroboam as a symbol of Yahweh and as a substitute for the ark of the covenant. Dan continued to have cultic significance for many centuries. Evidence of this is found in a late-third-century bilingual (Greek and Aramaic) inscription that contained the phrase “to the god who is in Dan.”

**8:14. god of Beersheba.** Amos now completes his condemnation of false worship practices among the Israelites by a reference to the “way” of the “god” of Beersheba. “From Dan to Beersheba” is a common phrase for the full extent of the land (Judg 20:1; 1 Sam 3:20), and Amos uses it to demonstrate the universality of Israelite apostasy (see Amos 5:5).

## 9:1-15

### Coming Destruction and Restoration

**9:1. tops of the pillars.** In order to describe how complete the coming destruction will be, Amos again employs a merism. This time his range is from the top to the bottom of the shrine at Bethel, from the capital that decorates the top of the pillars to the doorjamb (see Zeph 2:14). It is possible to compare these earth tremors to Isaiah’s call narrative (Is 6:4), but there it is just a reflection of God’s magisterial presence. Ancient Near Eastern examples of similar destruction mention walls, gates, doors or doorjambs being smashed or demolished (including the Gilgamesh Epic and the inscription of Tukulti-Ninurta I).

**9:2. grave/heaven contrast.** Amos employs a merism contrasting the cosmic distances between heaven and the depths of Sheol (see Ps 139:8). The boasting of Mot in the Ugaritic *Hymn to Baal and Anat* also provides this contrast to the powers of the underworld or death to that of heaven and life. In the ancient world, heaven and the netherworld were not considered to be “spiritual” places outside of the cosmos. Rather, they represented the extreme ends of the cosmos.

**9:3. top of Carmel.** As part of this series of phrases warning the Israelites that they cannot hide from God’s wrath, Amos uses the image of the highest point within their nation. Mount Carmel stands eighteen hundred feet above sea level and is a commanding presence, with dense forests and many caves that some might presume to be excellent hideouts (see the comment on Amos 1:2).

**9:3. serpent in the bottom of the sea.** From the mountaintop to the bottom of the ocean, there is no place to hide. Even at these depths, God can command the sea serpent to do his bidding (compare Jon 1:17). The Israelites knew well the tradition of Yahweh subduing the great sea

creatures (see comment on Ps 74:14 and 104:26). Similar contests of strength are found in the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, and the Egyptian hymn to the sun god, Ra, who must repulse the dragon Apophis repeatedly in order to complete his circuit across the skies. For more information see comments on Genesis 1:20; Exodus 7:1; and Isaiah 27:1.

**9:6. cosmic temple.** Amos's attempt to express God's complete control over all creation begins with a multistoried or many-chambered sanctuary or palace in the heavens (compare Ps 78:69; Is 66:1). These "upper chambers" bind together the vaults of heaven while at the same time rest upon the waters (see Ps 104:3). A precedent for these lofty chambers is found in the *Enuma Elish*. It contains a description of the building of the Esagila temple to Marduk in Babylon in which the gods "built a stage-tower as high as Apsu (waters above the heavens)." In the biblical and ancient Near Eastern view the cosmos was a temple and the temple was a microcosmos.

**9:7. Cushites.** See the comment on Numbers 12:1 for a description of these people from ancient Nubia in the Sudan south of Egypt.

**9:7. Philistines from Caphtor.** For a Philistine connection with Caphtor (Crete), see the comment on Jeremiah 47:4. Ezekiel 25:16 connects them with another of the Sea People groups, the Kerethites. See the comment on Deuteronomy 2:23 for their connection with the Avvites. The prophet uses the universalism theme to show God's concerns for all nations. The Philistines and Arameans, like the Israelites, had been brought to Palestine, but Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh now required them to be singled out for punishment.

**9:7. Arameans from Kir.** Amos refers to Kir as the homeland of the Aramean tribes here, but 2 Kings 16:9 speaks of Kir as the place where the conquering Assyrians exiled the Arameans after King Rezin was executed. Isaiah 22:6 seems to support this latter reference since it speaks of Kir in relation to Elam, south and east of the Tigris River. Assyrian records from the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I (1115–1107) speak of the migration of these tribes into Assyria during the twelfth century. What Amos may be doing here and in 1:5 is to point out that just as the Arameans had been sent back to their place of origin, God just as easily could dispatch the Israelites from the land of Canaan.

**9:9. grain in a sieve.** The work of processing harvested grain included crushing the stalks on the threshing floor with a sled, winnowing (see Jer 4:11) and finally using a sieve to separate the kernels of grain from small stones and other debris. The sieve mentioned here (*kebarah*) has large holes and works best when shaken sideways and in a circular motion. This ordinarily forces the debris to the sides and allows the kernels to fall to the ground where they can be collected (see Eccles 27:4). The initial NIV translation of *šeror* was later corrected from "kernel" to "pebble" to reflect the true action of the sieve.

**9:12. remnant of Edom.** Amos employs the phrase "the remnant of" two other times (1:8 for the Philistines and 5:15 for Joseph). In this case he may be referring to a portion of the territory of Edom rather than to all of it. King Uzziah had captured the Edomite port at Elath (2 Kings 14:22), and it has subsequently been lost again in the reign of Ahaz (2 Kings 16:6) to the Syrians and Edomites. In this eventual restoration of the Davidic kingdom, Amos may have this valuable port city in mind.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., Am). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.