

# THE BOOK OF AMOS

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Amos; the prophet

## Introduction

The book of Amos, which was named after the prophet Amos, was placed third in the order of the Twelve in the Hebrew Bible. The LXX however, placed it second before Joel, but this tradition was not adopted by the Peshitta nor the Vulgate, which followed the order of the Hebrew.<sup>1</sup> Scholars are quite sure about when Amos lived. Morgenstern dated the Bethel address in chapter seven in the autumn of 751 B.C.<sup>2</sup> while Watts placed it in 752 B.C.<sup>3 4</sup> Not much of a difference. Apart from his writings, nothing is known of Amos, who appears to have been a sheep raiser (Am 1:1; 7:14). Amos lived in Tekoa, an uplands village in the wilderness of Judah some five miles southeast of Bethlehem.<sup>5</sup>

It not clear how long the ministry of Amos lasted. Different scholars come with different theories varying from a 20 minute speech<sup>6</sup> to a day, a few days or a much longer span of time. The introduction to the prophecies (1:1) could imply a short period before a big earthquake (mentioned in 1:1).

From Amos 1:1 it is evident that the prophet lived during the reigns of Uzziah, king of Judah (767-740/39 B.C.), and Jeroboam II of Israel (782/81-753 B.C.).<sup>7</sup> Amos preachings' took place in the northern kingdom during a period of greath wealth. The audience of Amos lived seemingly blessed, contented lives (4:1-5; 6:1-6).<sup>8</sup> Under the reign of Uzziah (Judah) and Jeroboam (Israel) the geographical boundaries of the land were almost as big

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to the Old Testament, Harrison (1970)

<sup>2</sup> Amos Studies, Morgenstern (1941)

<sup>3</sup> Vision and Prophecy in Amos, Watts (1958)

<sup>4</sup> Amos: A commentary, Old Testament Library, Mays (1969)

<sup>5</sup> Introduction to the Old Testament, Harrison (1970)

<sup>6</sup> Amos of Israel: A new interpretation, Rosenbaum (1990)

<sup>7</sup> Introduction to the Old Testament, Harrison (1970)

<sup>8</sup> Old Testament Survey, House and Mitchell (2007)

as when Salomo was king, exactly as Jonah prophesied (2 Kings 14:25). As a result of all the military achievements<sup>9</sup> the wealth and prosperity grew.

The prophecy is of very great value in that it forms the chief source of information relating to the internal conditions in the northern kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II. By any standards this period was the most brilliant in the entire history of the Samaritan regime.<sup>10</sup> Trade and commerce flourished, and there was a pronounced drift of labor from the land to the city. During this entire period Assyria was weak, and Syria on the decline; Jeroboam took advantage of the weakness both to extend his dominion, foster commerce, and accumulate wealth.<sup>11</sup> A generation from whom the ever present threat of military attack had been removed begun to concentrate upon more material things, and this quickly resulted in a demand for luxury items that had previously been the prerogative of only the highest levels of Israelite society.<sup>12</sup> The preoccupation with materialistic goals went hand in hand with moral and religious depravity, and struck hard at the traditional concepts of social justice inherent in the Torah.

### **The main idea of the book**

**The book of Amos deals mainly with the malady of Israel, it's condemnation, and the future restoration and glory of Israel.** Amos repeatedly addresses political and social ills. Contrast Hosea, which largely concerns religious ills. <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Kings 14:25-28; 15:1; 2 Chronicles 26:6-8

<sup>10</sup> Introduction to the Old Testament, Harrison (1970)

<sup>11</sup> The Prophets, Heschel (1962)

<sup>12</sup> Introduction to the Old Testament, Harrison, 1970

<sup>13</sup> Jewish Study Bible, Fishbane, 2004

## Structure of the book

The basic structure of the book is unambiguous. It includes a superscription or title that serves as an introduction (1:1), a clear motto that communicates one of the most significant messages of the book (1:2), and a series of prophetic readings of which the last two encapsulate much of the book: The LORD announces a severe, future punishment for the condemned nation, then an ideal and plentiful future to follow the deserved punishment (9:7-15). The series of prophetic readings begins with announcements of judgment against the nations, including Judah and Israel (1:3-2:16) and continues with reports of prophetic speeches and visions of the fate of Israel.

### The book of Amos can analyzed as follows<sup>14</sup>

I	Prophecies against the nations	Chapter 1-2
II	Prophecies of judgement againsts Israel	Chapter 3-6
III	The Visions	Chapters 7-9

### Prophecies against the nations (chapter 1-2)

Amos prophecies against eight nations and the last one is Israel. Amos' accusations surround Israel also geographically<sup>15</sup>. Syria in the north-east, The land of the Philistines in the south-east, Tyrus in the north-west and Edom, Ammon and Moab in the south-east. Judah is in the south and concluding Israel in the middle. The gentile nations are mainly accused for their war crimes. Each of the separates prophecies uses the numerical scheme "X and X+1", often seen and used in the wisdom literature.<sup>16</sup> Some note that the prophecies of Amos against the nations lack the mythological motives that characterize the

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<sup>14</sup> Introduction to the Old Testament, Harrison (1970)

<sup>15</sup> Amos in the Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary, Niehaus (1992)

<sup>16</sup> An Introduction to the Old Testament, Dillard and Longman (1995)

most important collections of prophecies against the nations of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezechiel.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to these other prophetic collections, the prophecies of Amos against the nations serve merely a retoric purpose that works towards the judgement of Israel.<sup>18</sup> It's listeners would agree with Amos' open accusations against the nations with their cruel practises until Amos' arrows are aimed at Israel itself and his judgement concerning the social injustice and idolatry. Ryken<sup>19</sup> (1993) claims that the prophecies have an increasing sense of urgency that reaches its climax in the prophecy against Israel. In that sense, the prophecies against the nations contribute to the main idea of the book, that is working towards the judgement of Israel. The order of the prophecy is both brilliant and revolutionary; the circle of prophecies adressed to the despised hostile nations turn out to be a trap for an unsuspecting Israel.

Starting from the saying of Joel<sup>20</sup> *"The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers"* Amos announces the wrath of the LORD, which will discharge itself upon Damascus (1:3-5), Philistia (1:6-8), Tyre (1:9-10), Edom (1:11-12), Ammon (1:13-15), Moab (2:1-3), Judah (2:4-5) and Israel (2:6-16). The announcement of this judgement has a certain uniformity. Every one of these nations is being threatened with the destruction of the kingdom, or with ruin and exile. Every nation, Amos starts with the words *'For three sins, even for four, the LORD will not turn back his wrath.* Patience and mercy had long, but vainly waited for repentance and amendment of life. This is the significance of this repeated phrase.<sup>21</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> Mythology and Culture in the oracles against the nations, Geyer (1986)

<sup>18</sup> An Introduction to the Old Testament, R.B. Dillard and T. Longman III (1995)

<sup>19</sup> The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible, L. Ryken, (1993)

<sup>20</sup> Commentary on the Old Testament, C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (1977)

<sup>21</sup> The day of the Lion, J.A. Motyer (1974)

threat is *rolling like a storm, in strophe after strophe, over all the surrounding kingdoms, touching Judah as it passes along, and eventually resting over Israel.*<sup>22</sup>

### **Prophecies against Israel (chapter 3-6)**

Chapters 3 to 6 can be viewed in three divisions, with two passages of diagnosis (3 - 4:5; 6:1-14) sandwiching a passage of appeal (4:6-13; 5:1-27).<sup>23</sup> The first diagnosis covers the social (3:9-11), personal (3:12) and religious (3:13-15) aspects of life and the basic sin of self-indulgence or self-pleasing is exposed (4:1-5). The rich had their summer and winter palaces adorned with costly ivory (3:15), gorgeous couches with damask pillows (3:12), on which they reclined at their sumptuous feasts. Samaria's women 'oppressed the poor' and 'crushed the needy' (4:1) so they could have enough wine. With 'rustic insight Amos castigates the society ladies of Samaria as 'cows of Bashan'<sup>24</sup>. The prophet 'vehemently attacked such disastrous class-cleavage in the community and viewed it as a travesty of the solidarity that Israel of old had known.<sup>25</sup> And they have continued their oppressive ways despite Yahweh's repeated warnings (4:6-11) so the people must 'prepare to meet their God' (4:12). But the LORD has not been idle: He has addressed His people through circumstances (4:6-13) and through the intelligible voice of prophecy (5:1-27), calling them back to Himself (4:6,8,9,10,11; 5:4,5,14,22-24); His call to repentance (4:6) focused on the spiritual (5:4-13), moral (5:14-20) and religious (5:21-25) aspects of their life, but it was all to no avail.<sup>26</sup> And indeed why should they turn to Him when they were so completely self-sufficient? The concluding diagnosis reveals man's proud self-satisfaction (6:1-7) and

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<sup>22</sup> Commentary on the Old Testament, C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (1977)

<sup>23</sup> The day of the Lion, J.A. Motyer (1974)

<sup>24</sup> Amos, Prophet of Solidarity, L.C. Allen, Vox Evangelica 6, (1969)

<sup>25</sup> Central Ideas in Amos, A.S. Kapelrud, Journal of Biblical Literature, (1958)

<sup>26</sup> idem

God's hatred of it leading to its complete, imminent overthrow (6:8-14).<sup>27</sup> When Amos appeared in the North there was pride (6:13-14) and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities, and might in the palaces. But the LORD 'abhors the pride of Jacob' (6:8). He will 'smash the great house into pieces and the small house into bits (6:11). He will stir up a nation against Israel that will oppress Israel (6:14). Israel had drifted away from the God and His instructions.

Amos uses an impressive variation of literary forms throughout the book.<sup>28</sup> What stands out most is the accusation. In the chapters three to six the main purpose of the prophetic words is to deliver Gods accusation against Israel as Gods messenger.<sup>29</sup> In the prophetic 'trials' of the bible God the King sends His messenger to his servant, the vassal, to remind him of his obligations to the covenant and the disobedience of the people towards it. The setting is one of a trial: (1) de prosecutor and judge is introduced, (2), de relationships from the past between both parties of the covenant are re-examined, especially the recent disobedience of the vassal, (3) witnesses are being called to the trial, (4), accusations are submitted, (5) retoric cross-examination is normal, (6), repentance is possible, as in, the possibility to recover the covenant relationship is proclaimed and (7) the punishment is specified.<sup>30</sup>

Many of these elements can be recognized in the book of Amos. For instance in Amos 3:1-15. The accuser and the one who is accused are introduced (3:1a), there is a short history of the relationship in the past and the interruption in the relationship is brought to our attention. (3:1b-2). There is a cross-examination that is characterized by rhetorical

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<sup>27</sup> The day of the Lion, J.A. Motyer (1974)

<sup>28</sup> An Introduction to the Old Testament, Dillard and Longman (1995)

<sup>29</sup> Amos in The Minor Prophets: An exegetical and Expository Commentary, Niehaus (1992)

<sup>30</sup> An Introduction to the Old Testament, Dillard and Longman (1995)

questions (3:3-6). The status of the prophet and accuser is affirmed (3:7-8). Witnesses from surrounding countries are called to the trial (3:9) to hear the announced verdict (3:10-15). Amos assumed the solidarity of the nation to which he was called to prophecy.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Visions (chapter 7-9)**

Then the prophet gives an autobiographical account of five visions that he received. The first four of these (7:1-3,4-6,7-9; 8:1-3) are quite similar but differ clearly from the fifth vision (9:1-10). In the first four God 'shows' Amos things or events (7:1,4,7;8:1) and there is a dialogue between God and the prophet. But in the fifth vision the prophet sees the LORD himself and there is no dialogue between God and the prophet. There is no specific act that can be observed and Amos quietly listens to the words of the LORD.

The first four visions have a clear connection with each other and they have as a group their own structure.

The first two visions describe events and are almost identical in structure (the locusts and the drought)<sup>32</sup>. God shows Amos that He was preparing a swarm of locusts stripping the land. And then the LORD shows Amos that He was calling for judgement by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land. It is most likely that the fire is symbolizing a consuming heat by the sun. These first two vision represent the two biggest threats for the agricultural society: locusts and drought.<sup>33</sup> They need no extra explanation. The second pair of visions describes objects (a plumb line and a basket of ripe fruit). These two visions do need extra explanation. In the first two visions Amos pleads with God and God relents in

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<sup>31</sup> Amos, Prophet of Solidarity, L.C. Allen, Vox Evangelica 6, (1969)

<sup>32</sup> Visions and Voices, Biblica 80, J.R. Linville (1999)

<sup>33</sup> The day of the Lion, J.A. Motyer (1974)

reaction to the cry of Amos. In the second two visions the threats of the visions cannot be prevented.

The plumb line represents Gods laws. And God will set the plumb line among his people Israel (7:8). But the Hebrew word there can best be translated with 'tin'.<sup>34</sup> This has consequences for the interpretation of the text. Some scholars believe it has more to do with weaponry and not with a plumb line as a more common translation.

In the second vision of these two visions Amos sees a basket of ripe fruit. Like the fruit that is ripe, Israel is ripe for judgement. The two groups of visions could represent the different time spans in Amos ministry.<sup>35</sup> His early preaching, when Israel could still repent and prevent the judgement to come and his latter preaching when judgement was inevitable.

The book of Amos ends with the fifth vision, which is suddenly a vision of mercy and restoration. The nation that didn't pass the plumb line (7:7-9) will be restored (9:11-12).

The nation that is 'ripe as fruit for judgement' (8:1-3) will again enjoy a fruitful land. *The days are coming, declares the LORD, when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills* (9:13-15).

### **The message of Amos for today**

Amos, just like all the canonical prophets, believes that God is sovereign and that He reigns over the events in history. Gods reign is not just for Israel but extends to the whole world (chapter 1-2). The oracles against the Nations in Amos 1 and 2 give important insights into the nature of God's involvement in human history and the place of God's people in it.<sup>36</sup> No one will escape the judgment of God, *though they dig down to the depths*

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<sup>34</sup> Amos, Prophet of Solidarity, L.C. Allen, Vox Evangelica 6, (1969)

<sup>35</sup> An Introduction to the Old Testament, Dillard and Longman (1995)

<sup>36</sup> God and his people in the nations' history: a contextualized reading of Amos 1-2, M. D. Carrol (1996)

*of the grave, or climb up to the heavens* (9:2-4). The lesson for us is, that God is still sovereign and that we should not take His words lightly. Final judgment will come and Amos stirs us to take that seriously. Most of Amos' accusations are not 'religious' in their nature but rather social. They remind us of the words of Jesus when He said: *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*<sup>37</sup> Gods judgment will also be based on our social acts of justice.

Amos' message about the judgment of God was mainly aimed at two areas: Idolatry and social injustice. In the days of Amos, Idolatry was quite common (2:8; 5:5,26; 7:9-13; 8:14). Prosperity caused by the reign of Jerobeam II, created a powerful and rich top layer in society (3:12,15; 6:4-6). Also alcohol abuse was a problem, even for women (2:8; 4:1). The rich bribed the judges (5:12). The less fortunate were destined for slavery (2:6-7; 8:6) and the poor and needy were oppressed by the ones with power. (2:7; 4:1; 5:11; 8:4). God had revealed himself as the One who hears the cry of the oppressed and as a Defender of the weak, the poor, the widow and the orphan. In God economy, sooner or later, the oppressor will become the oppressed (2:13). It is both remarkable and touching that God always seems to chose the side of the oppressed. So should we! When we read the prophet Amos, it stirs us to be Gods hands and feet to those who needy, weary, broken and oppressed.

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew 25:35-36

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