

THEOLOGY OF AMOS

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THEOLOGY OF AMOS

The preacher Amos published his book of prophetic oracles and visions around the year 760 B.C.¹ He directed his prophecy primarily toward the northern kingdom of Israel. However, the "words of Amos" (1:1)² contained a message that was also significant for the people of Judah and that continues to remain significant for Christians today.

Amos ministered during the reign of Uzziah king of Judah and of Jeroboam II king of Israel.³ This was a period of relative peace and prosperity for both kingdoms. In Israel, Jeroboam II continued to carry on the national religious policies of syncretistic worship that his first namesake had put in place two-hundred years earlier. By means of able political and military leadership, he expanded Israel's border to its greatest extent since the time of Solomon.⁴

However, this national security and material prosperity only led Israel into ever-deeper apostasy and social disintegration. While outwardly retaining a corrupted and hypocritical form of Yahweh worship, the nobility and wealthy classes perverted justice, oppressed the poor, and wallowed in luxury at their

¹ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 318. Jas. Robertson, "Amos," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939). Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 19B, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 23.

² All Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

³ The overlapping period common to both reigns was about 30 years (783-746 B.C.). Smith, 23-24.

⁴ 2 Ki. 14:25, "from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah," cp. Am. 6:14.

expense. God's patience with Israel finally ended. Under the impulse of God's prophetic call, Amos left his home⁵ and secular vocation in Judah; he travelled north to deliver God's message of impending judgment to a careless and complacent nation.

Various introductory, concluding, or revelatory formulas help to frame the literary structure of the book. The two opening verses contain the authorial header and introduce the book's theme. The first major section (1:3 – 2:16) is unified by the repeated statement, "For three transgressions of [a nation], and for four, I will not revoke the punishment" (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). This series of judgment oracles climaxes with the message of God's approaching judgment on Israel. The second section (3:1 – 6:14) is demarcated by the phrase "Hear this word" (3:1; 4:1; 5:1) and by the word "Woe" (5:18; 6:1); these introduce sermonic addresses announcing Israel's judgment. Finally, the last section (7:1 – 9:15) uses the repeated formula, "This is what the Lord GOD [or, he] showed me" (7:1, 4, 7; 8:1), or 9:1 simply says, "I saw."⁶ This series of five visions reaches its climax in the final vision, which not only emphasizes the certainty and severity of Israel's judgment but also concludes with the promise of a future restoration.

The book of Amos introduces its theme in 1:2, repeats this theme in multiple ways throughout the book, and then offers a concluding summary of it in 9:8: *Because he is the sovereign Lord, God judges his sinful people.*⁷ Amos develops this topic through three emphatic sub-themes.

⁵ Tekoa (1:1) was about 5 miles south of Bethlehem. Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 988.

⁶ The verb "saw" (*ra'ah*, 9:1) is the same Hebrew word as "showed" (7:1, 4, 7; 8:1).

⁷ Various forms of this proposition appear in 1:1; 2:6; 3:1; 4:12; 5:1; 8:2; 9:8.

God is the judge of his people.

The first and underlying focus of Amos is on the person and doctrine of God. He is the primary actor and speaker in the text. Of the 146 verses in the book of Amos, first person singular verbs contained in divine speech occur 81 times in 55 verses (37.7%, e.g., 1:3).⁸ Additionally, the names and titles of God outnumber all other personal, national, or geographic references.⁹ His personal covenant name, LORD (*Yahweh*), occurs 81 times, appearing in every one of the 19 sub-sections of the book.¹⁰ Two other names also appear: God (*Elohim*, 12 times, e.g., 4:12)¹¹ and Lord (*Adonai*, 25 times, e.g., 7:7).¹²

Amos presents God as the sovereign ruler of creation; this attribute equips him to execute judgment on both men and nations. Several significant compound names demonstrate this attribute. He is the "Lord GOD" (*Adonai Yahweh*, 21 times, e.g., 1:8),¹³ which emphasizes his rule over all men, but especially over his covenant people. Another title is "LORD God of hosts" (*Yahweh Elohei Hatseba'oth*, 8 times, 3:13; 4:13; 5:14, 15, 16, 27; 6:8, 14; and *Adonai Yahweh Hatseba'oth*, 9:5); the "hosts" are armies of angels under his command. In addition

⁸ 1:3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15; 2:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11; 3:1, 2, 14, 15; 4:6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12; 5:12, 17, 21, 22, 23, 27; 6:8; 7:8, 9; 8:2, 7, 9, 10, 11; 9:1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15. A morphological search in *The Hebrew Bible: Andersen-Forbes Analyzed Text*, Logos Bible Software, 2008 obtained these statistics.

⁹ Proper names or titles of God occur 97 times. The second most common name is Israel. References to Israel, Jacob, or Isaac combined occur 38 times.

¹⁰ These are as follows: introduction; eight oracles in part 1; five sermons in part 2; and 5 visions in part 3.

¹¹ 3:13; 4:11, 12, 13; 5:14, 15, 16, 27; 6:8, 14; 9:15. This does not include occurrences of the word where false gods are the referent (2:8; 5:26).

¹² 1:8; 3:7, 8, 11, 13; 4:2, 5; 5:3, 16; 6:8; 7:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; 8:1, 3, 9, 11; 9:1, 5, 8. This does not include one occurrence referring to "husband" (4:1).

¹³ 1:8; 3:7, 8, 11, 13; 4:2, 5; 5:3; 6:8; 7:1, 2, 4, 5, 6; 8:1, 3, 9, 11; 9:5, 8.

to these titles, at critical points in the text, God describes himself in terms of his controlling power over the physical and moral universe. He created the heavenly constellations (5:8), controls the hydrologic cycles of rain, drought, and flood (4:7; 5:8; 7:4; 8:8; 9:5), forms the mountains and creates the wind (4:13), causes earthquakes (1:1; 4:11), sends locusts (4:9; 7:1-2) and pestilence (4:10), and determines the destiny of nations (2:9-10; 4:11; 6:2; 9:7). Because of this exalted status, he possesses both the authority and the power to bring judgment upon the rebellious and sinful nation of Israel.

Another attribute of God's character relating to judgment is his self-revelation. Amos uses three revelatory formulas that draw attention to this. The first repeated term is "Thus says the LORD" (e.g., 1:3),¹⁴ which introduces divine speech. The second phrase, "says the LORD" (1:5, 8, 15; 2:3; 5:17, 27; 9:15), occurs as a concluding formula. Finally, he uses the saying "declares the LORD" (e.g., 2:11)¹⁵ in various connections. These phrases make the point that God takes the initiative to reveal himself and his purposes for man's benefit, particularly his purpose of judgment.

A more significant line of evidence appears in the repeated references to prophets and prophecy (*n-b-'*, 2:11-12; 3:7-8; 7:12-16; see also 1:1; 5:10; 8:11-12).¹⁶ Amos describes his calling by God to leave his secular vocation (1:1; 7:14) and prophesy to Israel (7:15). Although he did not receive formal training in the schools of the prophets (7:14), he was equipped, inspired, and empowered by

¹⁴ 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; 3:11, 12; 5:3, 4, 16; 7:17.

¹⁵ 2:11, 16; 3:10, 13, 15; 4:3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11; 6:8, 14; 8:3, 9, 11; 9:7, 8, 12, 13.

¹⁶ Other distinctive prophetic vocabulary includes "he saw" (*chazah*, 1:1), "showed" (*ra'ah*, 7:1, 4, 7, 8; 8:1, 2; 9:1), and the revelatory formulas described in the paragraph above.

God to speak (3:6, 8) and write (1:1) his word. Thus, the book itself stands as evidence of God's purpose to reveal himself to his people.

This principle of God's self-revelation through prophets becomes explicit in 3:7, "For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets." Six rhetorical questions (3:3-6) climactically demonstrate that God has amply revealed his purpose to judge Israel's sin. These warnings impel the prophet to speak in God's name (3:8). God not only sends warnings of judgment, but also invitations to turn from sin in order to avoid it ("Seek the LORD and live," 5:4, 6, 14). Because Israel refused to heed these warnings and invitations of the prophets (5:10), God will send them "a famine ... of hearing the words of the LORD" (8:11-12).

This prophetic "word" of Yahweh (*d-b-r*, 1:1; 3:1, 7; 4:1; 5:1; 7:10, 16; 8:11, 12), is the means by which he discloses himself and his future plans. Using phrases such as, "Behold the days are coming" (4:2; 8:11; 9:13) or "on [in] that day" (2:16; 8:3, 9, 13; 9:11), he reveals his pre-determined purpose to bring future judgment or blessing upon his people. These predictions include the climactic eschatological period known as "the day of the LORD" (5:18-20).¹⁷

Other attributes of God that appear in Amos include his justice and righteousness.¹⁸ He is holy (2:7; 4:2). His goodness is demonstrated in his actions toward Israel, such as election (3:2), during the Exodus (2:10; 3:1; 9:7), during the wilderness wanderings (2:10; 5:25), and during the possession of Canaan (2:9-10).

¹⁷ There is evidence that Amos twice quoted from the earlier book of Joel (ca. 835 B.C.): First, in Am. 1:2 (cp. 3:8) he quotes Joe. 3:16, "the LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem"; second, in Am. 9:13 he quotes from Joe. 3:18, "the mountains shall drip sweet wine." See Archer, 304. Thus, Joel's concept of "the day of the LORD" was well known to both Amos and his hearers. Joel's prophecies concerning this period describe judgment on sinners (Joe. 2:1-2) as well as blessings on the remnant (Joe. 2:28-32).

¹⁸ See the section below on *judgment*.

He is longsuffering (4:6-11); twice God relented (7:3, 7) from intended judgments because of Amos's intercession. Additionally his omniscience (4:13; 5:12), omnipotence (4:13; 5:8; 9:5-6), and omnipresence (9:2-3, 6) are indicated.

Sin is the cause of God's judgment.

The second theological focus of the book is on human sin. Amos labels men's wrongful acts as "transgression" (*peshang*, 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; 3:14; 4:4; 5:12), "sin" (*chatta'th*, 5:12; 9:8, 10), "evil" (*rang*, 5:13, 14, 15)¹⁹, "guilt" (*'ashmah*, 8:14) and "iniquity" (*'awon*, 3:2). Mention of sin or particular sins appear in 56 of 146 verses in the book (38.4%). These include sins of Gentile nations as well as those of God's covenant people.

The opening section declares the sins of six Gentile nations (1:3–2:3). Even though the Gentiles do not have a particular covenant with God,²⁰ they are still answerable to God as their Creator and sovereign Ruler.²¹ Their sins against God's general revelation include brutality and violence (1:3, 13), kidnapping and slavery (1:6, 9), oath (or treaty) breaking (1:9); implacable anger and lack of pity (1:12), and desecration of human remains (2:1).

Israel's sins fall into four overlapping categories. Prominent are the sins of social injustice. God's initial indictment against Israel is that "they sell the righteous for silver" (2:6; see also 8:6). Here "righteous" (*tsaddiyq*) means "innocent" and indicates that justice was for sale in Israel's perverted legal

¹⁹ I.e., moral evil. This word also occurs in 6:3 with the meaning of "disaster."

²⁰ Chisholm associates the Gentiles' responsibility toward God with the Noahic covenant ("everlasting covenant," Gen. 9:16). R. B. Chisholm, Jr., "Amos" in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 244.

²¹ As Paul states, "For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law" (Rom. 2:12).

system, and the result was condemnation of the innocent. Sins in this group include the oppression of the poor (2:7; 3:9; 4:1; 5:11; 6:3; 8:4, 6), the perversion of justice (2:6, 7; 5:7, 12; 6:12), bribery (2:6; 5:12; 8:6), living in luxury at the poor's expense (3:15; 4:1; 5:11; 6:4), and deceitful business practices (8:5, 6).

Another group of sins relate to sexual immorality or indulgence of the flesh. These include prostitution and fornication (2:7, 8), drunkenness (2:8; 4:1; 6:6), and revelry (6:5, 7). Sins of the heart are also addressed: pride (6:8, 13; see also 8:7), hypocrisy in worship (4:4, 5; 5:21, 22, 23; 8:5), and complacency (5:18-20; 6:1, 6, 9:10).

Finally, sins against God's covenant are the most serious sins of all. In addition to outright idolatry and idolatrous practices (2:8; 5:26), God specially addresses Israel's perversion of the covenantal worship system. God prominently names various cultic centers of Israelite worship as *prima facie* evidence of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness. The city of Bethel (3:14; 4:4; 5:5^{2x}, 6; 7:10; 13), which is called "the king's sanctuary ... a temple of the kingdom" (7:13), and Dan (8:14) were the two sites originally established by Jeroboam I.²² God also condemns other altars or locations of worship in Samaria (3:9, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 8:14), Gilgal (4:4; 5:5^{2x}), and Beersheba (5:5; 8:14). By way of contrast, Jerusalem (also "Zion", 1:2^{2x}; 2:5; 6:1) represents the one true place where God has chosen to make his presence known.

Israel not only sinned against the covenantal ritual, but also against the covenantal relationship that they enjoyed with Yahweh. They ignored God's goodness toward them (2:9-11), rejected his messengers (2:12; 5:10; 7:10-13), and refused his discipline (4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11). These actions represented aggravating factors of their sin.

²² 1 Ki. 12:29; 2 Ki. 10:29.

Judgment for sin is coming.

This is the central proposition of the book. The theme of judgment appears in 89 of the 146 verses (61%). Amos describes Israel's judgment in terms of both God's action (e.g., 4:6) and its consequent results (e.g., 5:16-17). God calls for a "judgment" (*riyb*, lawsuit, 7:4) against Israel; he publishes his accusation ("Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you," 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; see also 3:13; 7:16); and he passes sentence of punishment (3:2, 14^{2x}) upon him. His spoken word (*dabar*, 1:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 7:10, 16; 8:11, 12)²³ is his primary means for executing judgment: "The LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem" (1:3; cp. 3:8).

Amos clearly delineates the principles upon which God's judgment operates. First, his judgment is according to justice. The theme of "justice" (*mishpat*, 5:7, 15, 24; 6:12), which is closely related to "righteousness" (*tsedaqah*, 5:7, 24; 6:12), is central in Amos. He cries, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). In contrast to Israel's injustice,²⁴ God's just judgment is a further means by which God reveals his own righteous character.²⁵ His covenant "law" (*torah*, 2:4) provides the objective standard of this judgment.²⁶

²³ The verbal form (*dabar*) also occurs twice in reference to divine speech (3:1, 8) and once (5:10) of those who speak according to the divine standard of justice and truthfulness (here most probably a prophet, but possibly a just judge).

²⁴ See the section above on *sin*.

²⁵ See the section above on *God*.

²⁶ Although Amos only once mentions the law explicitly, he implicitly assumes it in two ways: (1) he identifies Israel's sins in terms of covenant obligations (e.g., 2:8, cp. Deut. 24:10-14) and (2) God dispenses punishments in terms of curses for covenant disobedience (e.g., 4:6-11, cp. Deut. 28:15-24).

Second, God's judgment is comprehensive in its effects. It takes the form of destruction (*shamad*, 2:9^{2X}; 9:8^{2X}; *shod*, 5:9^{2X}),²⁷ death (*muwth*, 2:2; 6:9; 7:11, 17; 9:10; *harag*, 2:3; 4:10; 9:1, 4), and exile (*galah*, 1:5, 6; 3:7; 5:5, 27; 6:7; 7:11, 17).²⁸ Its results for Israel are mourning (1:2; 5:16; 8:8, 10^{2X}, 9:5), lamentation (*qiynah*, 5:1; 6:4; 8:10; and *nehiy*, 5:16), wailing (*misped*, 5:16^{2X}, 17; and *yalal*, 8:3) and darkness (5:18, 20; 8:9). God's judgment will irremediably terminate the existence of Israel's political kingdom (9:8).

Third, judgment is inescapable. The repeated use of the statement, "I will not revoke the punishment"²⁹ (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6), points to this fact.³⁰ Amos further emphasizes this aspect in 9:1-4: "Not one of them shall flee away; not one of them shall escape." Because God has fixed his eyes upon Israel (9:4; see also v. 8), there is no place for them to hide from his judgment, neither in Sheol, nor in heaven, nor on the top of Carmel, nor at the bottom of the sea. Three times God swears an oath in confirmation of the certainty of his judgment (4:2; 6:8; 8:7).

Fourth, judgment is imminent. Because Israel failed to heed his discipline, he exclaims, "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel" (4:12). He rebukes those "who put far away the day of disaster" (6:3), with the implication that, contrariwise, it is very near (see also 9:10). Finally, in the vision of the summer fruit (8:1-3), God

²⁷ Another word, "fire" (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5; 5:6; 7:4), functions as a common metaphor for destruction. In some instances it may indicate literal destruction by fire.

²⁸ In four of these references (5:5; 6:7; 7:11, 17) the verb is duplicated (infinitive absolute + imperfect, הִלְךְוּ הִלְךְוּ) emphasizing certainty ("surely go into exile").

²⁹ The phrase אֲנִי אֶפְרָם אֶפְרָיִם אֶפְרָיִם אֶפְרָיִם has two possible meanings: (1) "I will not turn it back," i.e. God will not turn back his wrath or his judgment; or (2) "I will not change it," i.e. God will not change his mind or his purpose for judgment. In either case, it indicates the certainty of the judgment that he is announcing.

³⁰ In an example of verbal irony, God states that the reason he will not turn back (*shuwb*) from judgment is because Israel will not turn back (*shuwb*) to him (4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11).

employs a word play indicating the imminence of his judgment. "Summer fruit" (*qiyts*) is fruit that is fully ripe. God's explanation of the vision is "The end [*qets*] has come upon my people Israel" (8:2). In other words, "Israel is ripe for judgment."

Finally, God offers hope in judgment. Interspersed among the statements declaring Israel's doom as a nation, God frequently inserts a promise to preserve a remnant (3:12; 5:15; 9:8). The only basis for extending such a hope is "grace" (*chanan*, 5:15) not justice. Although Israel failed to obey the Sinaitic Law and God therefore had no further covenantal obligations to them, he still keeps his promises to Abraham. Therefore, this promise in the midst of judgment stands as a further revelation of God's gracious and faithful character.

In addition to his promise to preserve a remnant, God also promises, "I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel" (9:14; 9:11-15). As Amos's final word, it provides an emphatic counterpoint to the message of judgment that prevails in the earlier portions of the book. This final oracle presents a picture of a future day in which God will restore Israel to live in their rebuilt cities (14) in their own land (15) under the Davidic Messiah (11). God will restore the land's agricultural fruitfulness (13, 14) and will elevate Israel to a position of leadership over the Gentile nations (12).

Conclusion

These themes of God, sin, and judgment remain applicable to both believers and unbelievers in the New Testament context. When nations and political leaders violate God's fixed and abiding standards of righteousness, justice, and morality, God's attitude and actions toward them will follow the same pattern of condemnation and judgment declared by Amos. Furthermore, professing Christian churches and believers who depart from the objective form

and pattern of Christian worship prescribed in the New Testament to incorporate worldly, pagan, or humanistic philosophies are heading down the road of apostasy that will only end where Israel's did, in judgment.

From a prophetic perspective, Amos also adds a link in the golden chain that connects New Testament believers with God's saving purpose announced in the Old Testament. James in Acts 15:16 quotes Amos 9:11-12 as support for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Christian church.³¹ The "booth of David that is fallen" most likely refers to the dilapidated and precarious condition of the Davidic dynasty, the "house" that God had promised to build for David (2 Sam. 7:11). Messiah at his appearing would be the one to restore David's dynastic throne to its intended glory; the benefits and blessings accruing to Israel from this restoration are indicated in the following verses (9:13-15). Although these awaits ultimate fulfillment in the future days of Messiah's kingdom, elements of this promise came into effect when Jesus Christ inaugurated the New Covenant at his death, resurrection, and ascension. Thus, the phrase "all the nations who are called by my name" (9:12) indicates the Gentiles' participation and inclusion in the blessings procured through the Messiah's work. "For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:18-19).

³¹ Am. 5:25-27 (cp. Acts 7:42-43) is the other passage from Amos quoted in the NT.

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