

## THE BOOK OF AMOS

### A. ORIENTING DATA FOR AMOS

- Content: in a period of rare economic prosperity and political strength for Israel, Yahweh announces their doom because she has failed to keep covenant with him
- Prophet: Amos, a shepherd/farmer from Tekoa, south of Bethlehem in Judah
- Date of prophetic activity: ca. 760 B.C., for an apparently brief period (at the peak of the reigns of Jeroboam II in Samaria [793–753] and Uzziah in Jerusalem [792–740])
- Emphases: Yahweh is God over all the nations and the whole universe; Yahweh will bring utter ruin to Israel for her covenant disloyalty; syncretistic religion is anathema to Yahweh; Yahweh requires justice for the innocent and mercy for the poor; religious observances are no substitute for doing good and showing mercy

### B. OVERVIEW OF AMOS

This third in the Book of the Twelve is the earliest of the prophetic books. Its basic message is that Yahweh has utterly rejected Israel's present religious and socioeconomic practices, so much so that he is going to bring the northern kingdom to an end and send the people into exile (5:5, 27; 6:7; 7:11, 17). At issue is covenant infidelity in the form of religious syncretism (see "Specific Advice for Reading Deuteronomy," pp. 57–58) and social injustice, carried on especially by the leaders and their indolent wives (4:1; 6:1–6). Indeed, they were gluttoned on religion, but didn't have a clue about Yahweh and his character (4:5; 5:21–23). So the Lion roars from Zion (1:2), and Amos gives him voice (3:8).

The oracles themselves were probably delivered at the sanctuary—the king's sanctuary—in Bethel (3:14; 7:10–17; cf. 1 Kgs 12:32) and within a brief period of time (Amos 1:1). They come to us carefully arranged. The first series (1:3–2:16) proceeds from judgment on the surrounding nations for various forms of treachery (1:3–2:3), to Judah for infidelity (2:4–5), to an opening summary judgment against Israel (2:6–16). Then comes a series of three announcement oracles (3:1–5:17; cf. "Hear this word," 3:1; 4:1; 5:1) that spell out both Yahweh's coming judgment and the reasons for it. Next are two woe oracles, which reflect Israel's complacency, based on false security—religion (5:18–27) and material prosperity (6:1–14). Finally, Amos reports five visions, the first two (7:1–6) indicating that the coming judgment will not be like former ones but will involve total destruction, including the king and his sanctuary (7:7–9). This leads to an encounter with the king's priest at Bethel (7:10–17), followed by the final two visions of utter destruction (8:1–9:10).

In all of this there is scarcely a word of comfort and only a few words suggesting that Yahweh might relent (5:5–6, 14–15). But the book itself concludes with an oracle of salvation (9:11–15) that looks beyond the fall of Israel to the fall of Judah as well, promising that “David’s fallen tent” (Jerusalem) will be restored in a future age of abundance.

### C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING AMOS

Amos is the first of our four canonical eighth-century prophets (a contemporary of Hosea, and a bit older than Isaiah and Micah). The historical-political background to Amos can be found in 2 Kings 14:23–15:7 (cf. 2 Chr 26). Jeroboam II (in Israel) and Uzziah (in Judah) came to reign at about the same time, and both had long and prosperous reigns, which included territorial expansion of a kind that together nearly equaled that of David and Solomon. This was made possible mostly because their reigns coincided with a very low period in Assyrian fortunes (782–745), until the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III. And, of course, the royal house and the wealthy considered this period of growth and expansion as evidence of Yahweh’s blessing, with a still brighter day of Yahweh awaiting them (Amos 5:18). But instead it turned out to be a brief halcyon period that lasted barely one generation. Thus, even though not mentioned by name in Amos, Assyria is still the ominous power on the political landscape, whose shadow lurks behind several passages (2:13–16; 3:11; 5:3, 27; 6:7, 8–14; 7:9, 17; 9:4). And within less than a generation after the death of Jeroboam the kingdom of Israel ceased to exist altogether (722/1), and Yahweh’s voice was no longer heard there (8:11–12)—God having used Assyria as his rod of judgment against his wayward people (see 2 Kgs 17:7–41).

What Amos saw and spoke most clearly at the peak of this period (Amos 1:1) was that everything was in fact the opposite of what it seemed. Their “blessing” had nothing to do with Yahweh, but everything to do with their own corrupt practices; nor did their religion have much to do with Yahweh, even though it was undoubtedly still being carried on in his name. Thus only two broad categories of sin need be denounced: syncretistic religion (2:7–8; 4:4–5; 5:21–23, 25–26; 8:10, 14) and social injustice (2:6–8; 3:9–10; 4:1; 5:7, 10–13, 15, 24; 6:12; 8:4–6), which are clearly spelled out in the opening oracle, where they blend (2:6–8), as they do again in 5:21–24 and 8:4–6. It is this combination of oppression of the poor in a context of distorted religious enthusiasm that leads to Yahweh’s judgment in the form of exile.

Crucial to this judgment is Amos’s own loyalty to Yahweh and his covenant. At the heart of the covenant, as Jesus himself pointed out, is love for God and love for neighbor (Mark 12:30–31). Thus the Old Testament covenant, along with regulations for proper worship as a way of maintaining love for God, was full of laws that provided a form of equity for all, based primarily on land distribution (and thus creating a mostly rural rather than urban society). And those who were without land (widows, orphans, Levites, foreigners) were to be properly cared for by the others. The reason for this, as the Israelites were constantly reminded in the law (see e.g., Exod 22:21–27; Deut 16:18–20; 24:17–22), was that Yahweh himself had compassion for the poor (including a slave people called Israel, whom he had rescued and made his own).

But during this halcyon period enormous changes had taken place in both Judah and Israel, especially in the latter. An urban mentality developed, with luxurious dwellings and ornate appointments (3:12, 15; 5:11; 6:4–6), which was helped along by a collusion among royalty, priests, prophets, and judges, which became a wealthy aristocracy at the expense of the poor. Yahweh had had enough, so he chose a man of the land from the south, a Yahwist with powerful abilities of speech, to speak his word of judgment on the whole scene. Thus Amos renewed Moses' kind of prophetism among God's people—addressed to leaders and people alike, not just to individuals—announcing that the ultimate curse for not maintaining covenant loyalty, namely, desolation of the land and exile (Lev 26:27–45; Deut 28:25–68), was about to be carried out. And he became the forerunner of many others who were to come, most of whom brought the same message to the southern kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 222–224.