

## AMOS

### Prophet of Social Justice

**Historical Context.** Amos is a shepherd and moonlights as a tree trimmer. (Today, he is the patron saint for those working two jobs to make a living.) Coming from Tekoa, a mountain village about ten miles south of Jerusalem, Amos is the first of the writing prophets—prophets whose message has been written down. He is called by God to prophesy in Israel (the northern kingdom) at the shrine of Bethel in Samaria during the reign of King Jeroboam II (786-746). This is a period of prosperity and peace for both Israel and Judah, but also a time of oppression of the poor by the rich. When Amos arrives in Samaria, he is shocked and outraged at what he sees: the rich living in luxury and becoming richer on the backs of the poor. Amos' ministry is one of railing against the prevailing injustices in the northern kingdom. He is called the prophet of divine justice.

The social evils in Israel are compounded by the hypocritical veneer of religion with which the perpetrators of social injustice seek to veil their acts. Thus we find in the Book of Amos not only a critique of social injustice, but also a scathing assault on formal religion that has lost its heart and become little more than a shell of hypocrisy.

Amidst widespread social injustice and shallow worship, Amos becomes a prophet of divine judgment on the nation of Israel and on her neighbors as well. His message is often seen as one of gloom and doom. But the real gloom lies *not* in the proclamation of judgment, but rather in the social evils that demand such judgment.

**Style.** Amos' preaching style is blunt, confrontational and insulting. He calls the rich ladies at the local country club in Samaria "cows of Basham" (4:1). With an agricultural background, he uses symbols he has experienced on the land: laden wagons, roaring lions, flocks plundered by wild beasts.

#### DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

**PART ONE** is a collection of oracles against surrounding pagan nations. These oracles imply that God's moral law applies not only to his chosen ones

but to all nations. In this series of condemnations, Judah and Israel are not excluded (chs 1-2).

**PART TWO** is a collection of words and woes against the people of Israel. In each instance, Amos points out the multiple ways by which Israel has violated God's laws (chs 3-6).

**PART THREE** deals with five symbolic visions pertaining to threats and promises (ch 7:1-9:8).

**EPILOGUE** contains words of hope and promise of restoration (9:9-15).

#### COMMENTARY

#### PART ONE: ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS (Chapters 1-2)

##### CHAPTERS 1-2: The Lord roars

*"The Lord will roar from Zion,  
And from Jerusalem raise his voice...."* (v.2)

The first two verses are like the title page and preface in a modern book. We are told about the key figure in the book—Amos—where he came from and the historical context in which he served during the prosperous reign of King Uzziah in Judah and during the reign of Jeroboam in Israel. Amos will speak the words he has received from the Lord in a vision.

*"The Lord roars from Zion"* tells us that the one speaking does not sound like a gentle shepherd but like a lion roaring in the desert. Amos' audience has been alerted that the message spoken will not be an easy one to hear. It will ring with terror.

The structure of the oracles follows a similar pattern that names 1) the crime committed and 2) the punishment imposed. *"For three crimes and for four ..."* is a way of referring to "multiple" crimes. These are generally "crimes against humanity," e.g., waging war using excessive force, selling captive soldiers into slavery, ripping open expectant mothers.

Judah is condemned for breaking God's laws (2:4-5). Whenever Amos roars about the sins of the nations, his audience cheers loudly, but when the prophet

blasts Israel for its offenses, there is a stunned silence. Now the Israelites are called to see and acknowledge their own sins.

**The sins of Israel (2:6-9).** “They shall sell the just man for silver and the poor man for a pair of sandals” (2:6). Commenting on this verse, *The Catholic Bible –Personal Study Edition* states: “With this verse, Amos strikes at the heart of Israel’s guilt (2, 6:8, 6). He criticizes not just an abuse here and an injustice there, but an economic system that condones the accumulation of great wealth in the hands of a few (6, 1-6) and growth in the gap between rich and poor (5,11). In Israel’s traditional economy, families supported themselves by farming their ancestral lands, as Amos himself may have done (1,1;7, 14-15). But as the wealthy imposed heavy taxes (2, 8; 5, 11), took collateral for themselves (2,8), and cheated customers in the marketplace (8,5), the poor were eventually forced off their lands and reduced to debt-slavery, where they were bought and sold by the rich. Such an economic system was intolerable, according to Amos, for a society that had itself been once freed from slavery (2, 10; 3, 1)” (p.249).

**Verses 9-16.** Having named Israel’s sins in verses 6-8, Amos lists the ways God has been gracious to Israel and how Israel has responded with ingratitude and folly. “You gave Nazirites wine to drink and commanded prophets not to prophesy” (v.12). (Nazirites are like monks within the community—they are especially dedicated to following God’s law. See Num 6:1-3). As a result of all these failures, God’s heavy judgment will fall upon Israel. Amos’ words in verses 13-16 will strike fear in his audience: “I will crush you into the ground.... The most stouthearted of warriors shall flee naked on that day, says the Lord” —a reference to how Israel will be led into exile by the Assyrians.

## **PART TWO: WORDS AND WOES AGAINST ISRAEL (Chapters 3-6)**

### **CHAPTER 3: First Word**

“Hear this word, O men of Israel, that the Lord pronounces over the whole family that I brought up from the land of Egypt.” (v.1)

“Storing up in their castles what they have extorted and robbed ... An enemy shall surround the land, and strip you of your strength, and pillage your castles.” (vv 10-11).

This section is addressed exclusively to Israel, frequently in the form of judgments.

**Verses 1-2.** “You alone have I favored.” The Israelites in their foolishness may think that because they have been specially favored by God, he will overlook their sins of idolatry and injustice towards others. God’s goodness towards them should have motivated them to be merciful towards their fellowman. Instead, the privileged and rich are using their position to enslave others. For such unrighteousness, they will be punished. “Therefore I will punish you for all your crimes” (v.2).

**Verses 3-8: Series of rhetorical questions.** The prophet justifies his intervention in Israel’s life. There is no effect without a cause and no cause without an effect. If Amos prophesies, it is because God has spoken to him. The image Amos uses suggests that his message will be one of disaster. Amos feels the animal urge (“lion roars”) to denounce injustice.

**Verses 9-15: Injustices will lead to severe punishment.** Even though Assyria is not mentioned by name, scholars tell us that in these verses, Amos is predicting how God will use the Assyrians to punish those who “stored up in their castles what they extorted and robbed” (v.10), how God “will strike the winter house and the summer house; the ivory apartments will be ruined...” (v.13).

**Pause:** What might cause us to be insensitive to the needs of the poor? If you have developed a strong social conscience in recent years, what helped to make that happen?

### **CHAPTER 4: Second Word**

“Hear this word, women of the mountain of Samaria, you cows of Bashan, you who oppress the weak and abuse the needy.” (v.1)

“Prepare to meet your God, O Israel.” (v.12)

**Amos goes after the country club ladies in Samaria (vv 1-3).** Amos now attacks the rich and overly pampered ladies at the local country club in Samaria. He likens them to the large well-fed cows of Basham, prized for their quality milk and meat.

These country club ladies push their husbands to exploit the poor in order to support their lavish lifestyle. “Bring drink to us” (v.1). Then Amos

forebodes that the days are coming when these ladies will be dragged away and thrown on the dung heap outside the city gates.

In 4:4, Amos sarcastically invites the Israelites to sin in Bethel (the religious center of the New Kingdom) and Gilgal (Israel's first campground after entering the Promised Land).

**Israel's failure to repent (vv 6-13).** No matter how often God warns the people—through famine, drought, plagues or war—they ignore his call to turn back to him. “*Yet you returned not to me.*” Because of their failure to repent, the people will meet their God in judgment. “*Prepare to meet your God, O Israel*” (v.12).

### CHAPTERS 5-6: Third Word

“*In every square there will be lamentation....*” (v.16)

“*Seek the Lord that you may live....*” (v.6)

“*I hate, I spurn your feasts, I take no pleasure in your solemnities.*” (v.21)

This is the final sermon in the second section of this book. It is a combination of a funeral lament over dead Israel and an exhortation to “seek the Lord” while there is still time (v.6). This chapter also contains a strong condemnation of Israel's liturgies (vv 21-25).

A lament is normally delivered *after* a death. However, in verses 2 and 3, Amos speaks to his *live* audience as if they were already dead. In verses 4-7, Amos invites his listeners to “seek the Lord and *live*” even though the very form of his address implies that they are *dead*. The people must seek the Lord, but they will find nothing in the places (Bethel and Gilgal) where they are seeking.

**Pause:** Amos hated religious rituals that did not lead their participants to ‘a faith that does justice.’ How about your parish, to what extent is liturgy connected to social justice, to concerns for the poor?

The rest of chapter 5 (vv 7-27) and chapter 6 deal with three woes.

**First woe (vv 7-17).** Social injustice is strongly condemned. “*Woe to those...who have cast justice to the ground...have trampled upon the weak...*

*accepting bribes, repelling the needy at the gate*” (vv 7-12). A society is in trouble when those who try to do what is right are hated for their commitment to justice.

**Second woe (vv 18-27).** The “Day of the Lord,” which should be a happy day, will be a day of “darkness and not light.” We also find a harsh condemnation of Israel's liturgical services: “*I hate, I spurn your feasts. I take no pleasure in your solemnities*” (v.21). Amos is not opposed to liturgy in itself, but he is deadly opposed to liturgy that is divorced from justice.

**Third woe (6:1-14).** In chapter 4, Amos condemns the rich women of Samaria calling them “cows of Bashan.” Now the prophet's attention is turned to the rich and powerful men of Samaria. Like their female counterparts, they will be condemned for their pride, their easy living and heavy drinking at the expense of the nation. “*Lying upon beds of ivory, stretched out comfortably on their couches, they eat lambs taken from the stall....* (v.4) *and are not made ill by the collapse of Joseph*” (v.6). Like Joseph of old, sold into slavery by his brothers, “Joseph” collapses again every time we permit another person to go in want while we enjoy more than we need. Amos warns that the tide will turn, and those who have more than enough now will lose everything, including their freedom. They who sell the poor into slavery will themselves be taken into slavery.

**Pause:** Who are the powerless and exploited in our time and who speaks on their behalf?

## PART THREE: SYMBOLIC VISIONS OF DESTRUCTION (7:1-9:8)

### CHAPTER 7: Three visions; prophet's encounter with Amaziah

“*To Amos, Amaziah said: ‘Off with you, visionary, flee to the land of Judah.’*” (v.12)

Chapters 7-9 report a series of five visions, each of which warns of an imminent judgment. Three are recorded in verses 1-9 of this chapter, the fourth in 8:1-3 and the fifth in 9:1-8. The visions speak of an act of God to come upon Israel. In this chapter we also have an encounter between Amos and the head priest at Bethel.

**Vision of locust (vv 1-3).** A locust plague threatens to destroy Israel's crops. Amos does not believe that such plague is a fluke of nature but a divine judgment on Israel for her sins. And so he prays: "Forgive." In response to the prophet's plea, God changes his mind and cancels the locust plague.

**Vision of the fire (vv 4-6).** Amos' vision of fire threatens to consume the land. The prophet once again petitions God to stop the fire, and just like the first woe, God responds to his prayer.

**Vision of the plummet (vv 7-9).** In this vision, Amos sees God standing against a wall with a plummet, an instrument used to check if a wall is straight (standing perpendicular to the ground). Israel was constructed straight, but now she is crooked—she has lost her alignment. Just as a dangerously leaning wall must be brought down for safety, so too must Israel be destroyed because of its crooked alignment. In this vision, Amos does *not* ask the Lord for mercy. Previous judgments have been averted, but Israel has not changed its evil ways. Just as some buildings are beyond repair, so is Israel beyond redemption. In John 3:19 Jesus says: "*The judgment is this, that the light comes into the world, but people preferred darkness to the light, because their works were evil.*"

**Amos encounters Amaziah (vv 10-17).** Amos' visions are interrupted by a scene describing a confrontation between him and Amaziah. This is probably the best known story in the book. Amaziah is the senior cleric at Bethel, the main shrine in the northern kingdom. He has a prestigious position and probably enjoys a nice lifestyle. He represents the king in matters of worship. Now he has to deal with a missionary upstart from the south who is upsetting his congregation with his gloom-and-doom sermons. Fearing that his continued dipping into the collection to maintain his lavish lifestyle may bring him down, he sets out to dismiss Amos: "*Off with you, visionary, flee to the land of Judah! There earn your bread by prophesying, but never again prophesy in Bethel; for it is the king's sanctuary and a royal temple*" (vv 12-13).

Amaziah is suggesting that Amos is only in the prophecy business for the money. At that time, there are indeed professional prophets who make a living by their services. When Amaziah says: "*Eat your bread there*" (in Judah), he is saying: make your living in Judah, not here.

In response to Amaziah's personal attack, Amos says:

*"I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores. The Lord took me from following the flock, and said to me, Go prophesy to my people Israel. Now hear the word of the Lord!"*

*You say: prophesy not against Israel, preach not against the house of Isaac.*

*Now thus says the Lord:*

*Your wife shall be made a harlot in the city, and your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword;*

*Your land shall be divided by measuring line, and you yourself shall die in an unclean land;*

*Israel shall be exiled far from its land.* (vv 14-17)

Amos says: 'I am not one of those professional prophets. I was making a living in Tekoa when the Lord called me to go prophesy to the people of Israel.' As Amos leaves town, he issues a stinging prophecy against Amaziah and his family: his wife will become a prostitute; his children will be slain; and he will be taken into exile.

**Pause:** How real is the danger for clergy to only preach what the people want to hear? How do you feel when clergy address the hot bottom issues?

## **CHAPTER 8: Fourth vision and a prophecy against greed**

*"Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land."* (v.4)

*"I will send famine upon the land: not a famine of bread, or thirst for water, but for hearing the word of the Lord."* (v.11)

The fourth vision begins with a description of something that Amos sees. Then there follows a dialog between Amos and God which leads to a statement of divine judgment. Amos sees a basket of summer fruits. Just as it is time to pluck the fruit, so too is the time ripe for God to judge Israel. The happy songs traditionally associated with harvest festivals will be replaced by wailings. Dead bodies will be seen everywhere.

This fourth vision is not an easy one to proclaim. For Israel, the message is clear: 'You are beyond redemption. Your future has been determined by a

long history of sin and your refusal to repent.’ It is not that God stops being merciful, but there may come a time when a heart becomes so hardened that it can no longer hear God’s word and respond to it.

Delivering harsh judgments could not have been easy for Amos. But as a physician must find it hard to divulge to a patient that he/she is terminally ill and has only a few months to live, so it must have been equally hard for Amos to speak his death sentence words against Israel.

**Ruin (vv 4-14).** These verses contain four oracles in which the prophet employs some phenomenon from the natural world as a description of the end.

**Earthquake (vv 4-8).** This act of judgment is tied to Israel’s sins against justice. The poor are trampled down and exploited. The rich cannot wait for the Sabbath to be over so that they can return to cheating and exploiting the poor.

**Eclipse (vv 9-10).** On festival days, light is celebrated, the light of God’s creation. But Israel’s life of sin and rebellion has made a mockery of the true meaning of the festivals. And so the time of light will become a time of darkness, the eclipsed sun symbolizing the extinguishment of the light of God’s countenance from Israel. One cannot celebrate light and live in darkness.

**Famine of God’s word (vv 11-12).** Amos may have anticipated a real famine, but then goes on to speak about a much worse famine, a “famine of the word of God.” One of the ancient fundamentals of Israel’s faith is that “man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Deut 8:3). *“The coming famine of God’s word would culminate in the starvation of the spirit, not the body, but when the spirit dies within a person the carcass is of little value”* (Peter Craigle).

**Drought (vv 13-14).** Those who worship at the nation’s shrines will “faint for thirst.” Even the nation’s young will hope—which means no hope for the future of Israel.

## CHAPTER 9: Vision of the Altar

*“The eyes of the Lord God are on this sinful kingdom: I will destroy it from the face of the earth.”* (v.8).

The fifth and final vision affirms Israel’s total collapse. The setting for the vision is a sanctuary,

presumably Bethel, which has figured prominently in Amos’ ministry. Amos sees the Lord standing beside the altar and listens as he pronounces judgment.

The Lord declares destruction, first of the sanctuary itself, and then spreading out to include all the people. Neither the world beneath nor the heavens above, neither mountain nor ocean would allow a way to escape, for the Lord has set his eyes upon Israel “for evil and not for good” (v.4). Then follows a poetic passage extolling God’s power over all the forces of nature (vv 5-6).

Then, as if someone had raised a question about Israel’s special status, Amos states that in God’s eyes, Israel is no different than all the other nations. He is the God of all nations and all will be judged by him (vv 7-8).

## EPILOGUE (9:8-15): Words of Hope

Some scholars believe that these last verses were a later edition due to the fact that verse 8a says that God ‘will wipe Israel off the face of the earth’ and verse 8b says that God “will *not* destroy the house of Jacob forever.” In its concluding remarks on Amos, *The Catholic Bible – Personal Study* states:

*“The final editor of Amos puts the prophecy of Amos in a broader historical perspective, that of the whole of Israel. The message of the prophets of Israel, in general, was not of destruction, but of hope. Death and destruction have their place and time, but hope remains. Ultimate optimism is an essential ingredient of biblical faith”* (p.250).

**Pause:** Amos was a prophet of social justice, of a religion that leads to a faith that does justice. What are some ways that your faith leads you to show concern for the poor and to be a voice for those who have no voice?

## Resources

- The Daily Study Bible Series – Twelve Prophets, Volume 1. This commentary was most helpful.
- The Colledgeville Bible Commentary – Old Testament
- The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition