

Amos

(1) Who was Amos?

Amos was a lowly shepherd, basically a hired day-laborer, making him of low social status. He was also a migrant worker, and during the off-season, he would dress sycamore figs.

Amos 1:1

The words of Amos, who was **among the shepherds of Tekoa**, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

Amos 7:14-15

¹⁴Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but **I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs**. ¹⁵But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”

(2) What was the historical context of Amos’ ministry?

Amos spoke his prophecies during the “golden age” of the northern kingdom of Israel. During the reign of Jeroboam II (who ruling for 40 years was the longest reigning king), Israel experienced unprecedented prosperity and territorial expansion – not seen since the days of Solomon. Not only was a period of great wealth and peace, but it was also a very religious time. People earnestly worshipped at the temple in Bethel and offered sacrifices. Then Amos comes with a shocking message – in just 30 years, Israel will be conquered and go into exile.

Amos 9:1-4

¹I saw the LORD standing beside the altar, and he said:

Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake,
and shatter them on the heads of all the people;
and those who are left of them I will kill with the sword;
not one of them shall flee away;
not one of them shall escape.

²If they dig into Sheol,
from there shall my hand take them;
if they climb up to heaven,
from there I will bring them down.

³If they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,
from there I will search them out and take them;
and if they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea,
there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them.

⁴And if they go into captivity before their enemies,
there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them;
and I will fix my eyes upon them
for evil and not for good.

What is the setting of this vision? || What were the people doing? || What does that tell us?

(3) Why is Israel under judgment?

One of the reoccurring themes in Amos is social justice. Amos exposes the ugly truth that much of Israel's prosperity was built on oppressing the poor. God has a special concern for the poor and outlines in great detail how God's people are to care for the poor and defend the poor. But instead, Israel exploited and trampled on the poor.

Amos 2:6-8

⁶ Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals –

⁷ those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth
and turn aside the way of the afflicted;

⁸ they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge,
and in the house of their God they drink
the wine of those who have been fined.”

Amos 5:11-12

¹¹ Therefore because you trample on the poor
and you exact taxes of grain from him,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

¹² For I know how many are your transgressions
and how great are your sins –
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and turn aside the needy in the gate.

You would assume that since the people trampled on the poor, the nation as a whole was godless and pagan. But what was so shocking about Amos' prophesy is that exactly the opposite was the case. Israel was a very “religious” nation, with much religious activity and sacrifices and religious observances. On the surface, the people seems very devote. But it was a religion of hypocrisy because of Israel's disregard for the poor.

Amos 4:4-5

⁴ “Come to Bethel, and transgress;
to Gilgal, and multiply transgression;
bring your sacrifices every morning,
your tithes every three days;

⁵ offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened,
and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them;
for so you love to do, O people of Israel!”

declares the Lord GOD.

Amos 5:21-24

- ²¹ I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

(4) What is the hope of Israel?

Judgment would come down on Israel through conquest and exile. But a remnant would survive. God would save some solely because of his grace, even though all deserved death. And God would raise up a coming king in the line of David who would usher in a true golden era of prosperity, peace and justice. And never again will God's people suffer conquest or exile. This is the great hope of the Bible.

Amos 9:11-15

- ¹¹ "In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins
and rebuild it as in the days of old,
¹² that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,"
declares the LORD who does this.
¹³ "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD,
"when the plowman shall overtake the reaper
and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
¹⁴ I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
¹⁵ I will plant them on their land,
and they shall never again be uprooted
out of the land that I have given them," says the LORD your God.

Acts 15:15-17

- ¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,
¹⁶ "After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will restore it,
¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord."

The promised land was never an end to itself, but a picture of salvation. In the Mosaic Covenant, the land was an object lesson, pointing forward to salvation. Once Israel experienced Exile, the purpose of the land was complete.

In other words, Israel is not still waiting to return to the land. God's people have already returned. We have the reality – salvation in Christ.

Hebrews 11:9-10, 13-16

⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

N o t e s

(1) Who was Amos?

The word “shepherd” can include a wide range of economic and social classes. You could be *the* shepherd, who owned the flocks, and therefore fairly wealthy. Or you could be a hired laborer, which meant you were among the poor. Amos was in this latter class. We know this because he says he was “among the shepherds,” and in 7:14, he labels himself a “herdsman” (indicating he was a hired hand) and in the off-season, he worked in sycamore fig fields. Basically, a migrant worker.

As someone from the poorer classes, Amos was uniquely qualified to observe the injustice and oppression of the poor that his prophesy is noted for.

(2) What was the historical context of Amos' ministry?

Amos' prophecy comes as a rude shock to the people of Israel. He preaches doom and impending judgment to a people who were entirely convinced this was not going to happen. And it must have indeed been difficult to believe Amos' words in the face of the prosperity and religiosity of the time.

This was the so-called “golden age” of Israel. The menace of the super-power Assyria was on the wane.

King Jeroboam II was an accomplished military campaigner and under his rule, Israel regained all the territory lost in previous decades. There was political and economic stability. There was a sustained period of good harvests. Israel was at the cross-roads of important trade routes and wealth flowed into Israel. Scholars mark this period as the greatest period in Israel's history.

Ah, but one would think Amos had a point because the people, while wealthy, had become totally carnal and pagan. Quite the opposite. This was a period of religious renaissance, with the temple in Bethel bustling with activity, priests at their duty, offering sacrifices and worship to God. People were very earnest in their religious devotion and had no cause to believe God was angry at them.

And so Amos' prophesy seemed to go against everything they saw and believed. That in just a few short years, Israel would be conquered and most of the people killed or exiled. That God was angry at them for their sins.

This was a very hard teaching to accept.

Amos 9:1-4

v. 1 – What are “capitals”? They are the tops of pillars. “Threshold” – floor of the entrance. What is the setting? It's the temple. God is standing at the altar. The scene is the people are in the temple worshiping God. And in that temple, God brings down the building, killing everyone in it. This is judgment and wrath of God. Not that people are in pagan revelry, but God judges them in their worship!

v. 2 – No realm, neither the grave nor heaven itself will be a refuge of safety.

v. 3 – No height, nor depth.

v. 4 – And even if they are captured, that is no safety, for God will kill them

God is absolutely determined to pour his wrath on his people. **Stunning!**

(3) Why is Israel under judgment?

The main reason is Israel's utter disregard for social justice. If you read the Bible, you see that God strongly identifies with the poor and loves the poor. And if you love God, you must likewise defend the poor from oppression and care for them.

Amos 2:6-8

Amos indicts the rich and powerful for trampling on the poor. His accusation is not simply that the rich ignored the poor – though that itself is evil. But that they exploited the poor and perverted justice.

“sell the righteous for silver” – there was something called debt slavery. If you borrowed money and you couldn't pay it back, then you had to enter into indentured servitude until pay back the debt. This was designed to keep people accountable – so that they don't flippantly borrow money and waste it. But notice that these people sold into slavery are called “the righteous,” meaning there were perversions of justice and corruption happening – perhaps rigged evidence, bribes, financial adversity, financial tricks, etc. Amos also seems to be suggesting the original debt, in some cases, was a trivial as “a pair of sandals.” This is gross exploitation of the poor.

“turn aside the way of the afflicted” – the “turning aside” here is denying the poor their legal rights in court. Because the powerful and rich could buy justice, justice was only for the rich. The poor had no recourse. Not only were the rich exploiting them, but they had no one to turn to for redress

“on garments taken in pledge” – when a loan was given out, you took the man’s cloak as a pledge. But the law of God was very clear that you had to return the cloak at night so the man could use it as a blanket. But the rich and powerful were keeping the cloaks and denying the poor basic decency and compassion.

“they drink the wine of those who have been fined” – fines were levied by the court and the money was supposed to go to the victims of a crime. But it appears that the rich and powerful were keeping the fines for themselves to use for their own callous pleasures.

Amos 5:11-12

Again, Amos blasts the rich for exploiting the poor. How? Two ways:

(1) They exact taxes from the poor. Now in principle, it is not wrong to levy taxes for legitimate reasons.

But the rich and powerful are using the powers of the state to exploit the poor. They are over-taxing the people and impoverishing them. The purpose of the state is to protect and serve the poor. But here the state is used to crush the poor.

(2) The rich take bribes and “turn aside the needy in the gate.” This is a reference to the legal system. The “gate” was the place you went for legal redress. But the rich corrupted the legal system to serve their needs and pervert justice.

As a consequence, God declares that the rich will not enjoy their homes and vineyards. Notice that these are luxuries the rich enjoy above and beyond what the common man needs. Houses of “hewn stone” was an incredibly expensive way to live – basically the equivalent of a mansion. And to plant “pleasant vineyards,” it appears for personal consumption, was an ostentatious luxury. So the picture that emerges is that the rich were living it up in luxury and comfort while the poor struggled and suffered.

This callousness and lack of generosity is strongly condemned by Amos. And in the end, the rich will not enjoy their riches.

The religiosity of Israel:

Amos 4:4-5

Bethel was the site of the temple in northern Israel (built by Jeroboam – in violation of the Bible, but that is another subject). And remarkably, Amos essentially says – “go to the temple and sin!” This is a revolutionary paradigm-shift in how we think of sin and religion. We typically think either you are a “sinner” or you are “religious.” But Amos says Israel sins precisely in their religiosity. That you can be distant from God and hate God all while you supposedly worship and praise God. That there can be a deep hypocrisy in your worship. This is frightening because it forces us to examine our own religiosity and spirituality. Is it in the end just a self-righteous cover for our sin?

The passage is dripping with sarcasm. Notice Israel is very religious. They sacrifice “every morning.” They tithe “every three days!” versus bringing tithes once a week as prescribed. They are very public in their religiosity. They “publish” their acts of devotion for all to see.

Amos 5:21-24

This is shocking language. God looks at all of Israel’s religious devotion and is repulsed by it. He hates their worship services. He despises their songs of praise. Why? Because it is inauthentic religion.

As James says, “religion that is pure and undefiled is to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.” (James 1:27)

Thus, God says – “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The imagery is of an overwhelming flood of social justice and concern for the poor. Without these things, all Sunday worship services, all Bible reading and singing amounts to rank hypocrisy and sin.

(4) What is the hope of Israel?

Amos 9:11-15

It is important to remember that Israel deserves death and exile. They have broken their covenant with God.

And notice there is no repentance as well. The people never cry out for forgiveness. Amos’ indictment of the sins of the people simply ends with this amazing promise of restoration and grace. Meaning – salvation is purely by the grace of God. The people do not deserve it. They didn’t even ask for it. But God is going to be gracious to his people.

That grace will come in the form of a coming king. God will send a savior-king to his people – in the line of David. Verse 11 speaks of the “booth of David” – the line of David, described as a “tent.” The Davidic line had failed to be a champion of godliness and justice. The Davidic kings of Judah were often just as corrupt and evil as the kings of Israel. But God will raise up a “son of David” who would be greater than David and who would finally fulfill the promise of the kingship of Israel – to save them from their enemies and to represent the people before God.

And in that day of the coming of the Messiah – God’s people will enjoy unprecedented prosperity and well-being. Amos gives us a very vivid agricultural imagery of the bounty of what is to come. “The plowman shall overtake the reaper.” The plowman prepares the ground and plants seeds. The reaper harvests the grain. In the age of salvation to come, the plowman will overtake the reaper, meaning, the reaper will have such an enormous harvest that he can’t collect the grain fast enough before the plowman overtakes him! It’s amazing imagery. Likewise, the “treader of grapes will be overtaken by him who sows the seed” – the same concept that there will be so much grapes that the harvest and making into wine can’t keep up.

“I will plant them on their land and they shall never again be uprooted out of land that I have given them.” (v. 15)

After the Exile to Babylon (and Assyria), God will bring his people back to the land and they will never again suffer conquest or poverty or famine or loss of the land. What does this mean? Again, Covenant Theology helps our understanding. Is Amos talking about the actual land of ancient Israel? No! In fact, the people did return to the land – but that return was a far cry from the resplendent imagery that the prophets paint. And, in fact, the people were conquered again! First by Alexander the Great, then later by Rome.

The answer is that we need to remember the land was a picture of salvation. It was always a metaphor and image of fellowship with God (remember – it evoked the Garden of Eden). Therefore, Amos is talking about God’s people enjoying fellowship with God through the Spirit because of Christ’s atonement. The “land” that the people will never be uprooted from is salvation – the New Heavens and New Earth.

Acts 15 proves this interpretation to be true. Paul in his sermon at Pentecost quotes Amos 9 and says that the prophesy has been fulfilled! God has indeed restored the Davidic line (through Christ) and restored Israel to the land (through salvation in Christ).

Some might say – only the part about the Davidic kingship is quoted, not the part of returning to the land. But that is to misunderstand how OT quotes work. You don’t quote the whole passage. You just quote the beginning and the whole passage is implied. In addition, notice in Amos 9:11, it says, “in that day.” It’s one day. It’s not – at one point, the Davidic kingship will be restored, and then another time later, Israel will return to the land. No. It all happens together as an integrated whole.

[This is where Dispensationalism is flawed. Dispensationalism takes Amos 9 as a promise to ethnic Jews that they will be restored to their land.]