

Amos



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THE BOOK OF AMOS has its origin in words spoken by the prophet Amos. The oracles of the prophet, as they were remembered and recorded, became the seed from which the book as a whole developed and grew. These words of the prophet were addressed in the first instance to the people of his own time and place. Therefore to understand the original proclamation the present day reader needs some knowledge of the audience to which the prophet's words were first spoken. For Amos, who appeared on the scene in the middle of the eighth century before Christ, that audience was the inhabitants of the more northern of the two Hebrew kingdoms, the kingdom of Israel. At that point in its history the kingdom of Israel, under its ruler Jeroboam II, was enjoying a period of prosperity and expansion. This prosperity followed upon a period of about fifty years during which that northern kingdom had suffered under the oppression of its neighboring states. This oppression of the people of God

seems to have been explained at the time as God's saving out of Israel of "all the knees that have not bowed to Baal" (1 Kings 19:18), the chief divine competitor to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Those who survived the years of oppression seem to have looked upon their survival as a sign of God's approval of their faithfulness, and they appear to have understood their new prosperity as a just reward for the faithfulness they and their ancestors had shown to Israel's God. To be sure, not all in Jeroboam's kingdom benefited from this prosperity; poverty existed alongside the new wealth. But that poverty itself could be understood by those enjoying the prosperity to be a sign that the poor and needy were so because they and their ancestors were not among the faithful and thus did not deserve the divine blessing enjoyed by the prosperous.

Amos, however, did not see things this way. In the series of connected prophetic oracles with which his brief prophetic career probably began, oracles delivered perhaps at the Israelite shrine at Bethel, one of the royal sanctuaries of

the northern kingdom, Amos proclaimed the divine condemnation of the affluent in Israel. This series opened with four oracles attacking peoples who had been oppressors of Israel in the recent past: Damascus (1:3-5), the Philistines (1:6-8), the Ammonites (1:12-15), and the Moabites (2:1-3). In each case the prophet mentioned a specific offense of which the nation in question was guilty, and threatened that guilty nation with a destruction which God would not turn aside. These attacks on Israel's enemies, which would certainly have appealed to those Israelites who heard them, appear to have been designed by Amos to elicit their agreement to the fundamental principle that God punishes acts of oppression. Then, in a fifth oracle, Amos applied this principle to the sins of the Israelites themselves (2:6-9, 13-16), whom, he said, God would destroy because of their oppression of the poor in their midst.

In the minds of those who believed that their present prosperity was a divine reward for past faithfulness,

such an attack would have raised the question of Amos' authority to make such pronouncements, particularly since Amos himself was not a citizen of the kingdom he condemned but came from the town of Tekoa, about ten miles south of Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom of Judah, where he had made his living as a shepherd (1:1; 7:14). Amos' hearers would want to know what gave Amos the right to come to their country and, in the name of God, proclaim its destruction. Possibly it was in response to such questions that Amos recounted how he had seen five visions in which God had announced the divine intention to punish Israel (7:1-9; 8:1-3; 9:1-4). In the first two the prophet had pleaded with God to turn aside the threatened disasters, and God agreed to do so. But in the final three visions God announced that there would be no further turning back of the punishment, and from this point on Amos felt the compulsion to convey to the people of the northern kingdom the death sentence God had pronounced upon them. "The lion has roared," said the prophet. "Who

does not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who does not prophesy?" (3:8).

For no more than a year Amos proclaimed this divine judgment on the oppressions. The affluent, those "complacent on the hill of Samaria" (6:1), the capital of the kingdom of Israel, had no reason for such complacency, said the prophet, because their prosperity was built upon oppression. It was "because you trample upon the poor," he said, "and take from him levies of wheat, you have built houses of hewn stone" (5:11). Amos attacked "the oppressors of the innocent, the takers of a bribe" who "turn aside the poor in the gate" (5:10). The town gate was the place where judicial proceedings took place; much of the wealth of the affluent appears to have been obtained through manipulation of the Israelite legal system. Even those, like the women of Samaria, who themselves were not involved in direct acts of oppression, yet enjoyed its fruits, bore responsibility and would not escape punishment (4:1-3).

Those Amos attacked, of course, did not see things this way. To them their present

prosperity was divine reward, and for that reward they were duly grateful to God. They flocked to the sanctuaries to give thanks to God for what they had received, and they looked forward to "the day of the LORD," that day of final triumph when God would confirm the faithful people in their exalted position. In the eyes of Amos, however, those thronging the sanctuaries to give thanks to God for their prosperity were engaged in the worst sort of self-indulgence (4:4-5), for to thank God for the fruits of injustice was blasphemy. God despised their worship in the sanctuaries (5:21-23) because justice was lacking in the society. What God desired was to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (5:24), and since justice was not found in the northern kingdom, said Amos, God would in justice punish that kingdom. In Amos' eyes the hoped for day of the LORD would be the day of final catastrophe for Israel, not its ultimate triumph. "Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD," he said. "It is darkness and not light" (5:18).

The description of the form this final catastrophe would take varied from oracle to oracle. Sometimes Amos threatened an earthquake (3:15; 6:11; 9:1), sometimes war (4:2-3; 5:3), sometimes disease (6:9-10). But whatever the agent, the result would be the total destruction of the nation. All that would be left would be "a head of a bed and the foot of couch" (3:12), the debris of a once great people. Nothing was left for Amos to do but to recite the funeral lament over the corpse of the nation: "She has fallen; she shall never again rise" (5:2).

To counter this attack on the kingdom of Israel a priest at the shrine of Bethel named Amaziah accused Amos of conspiracy, an accusation made elsewhere in the Bible against political figures, but not against prophets. By this accusation Amaziah implied that Amos was a political agitator and not truly a prophet; thus his words were not the word of God. Amaziah commanded Amos to leave Israel and return to the kingdom of Judah from which he had come (7:10-17).

This confrontation between the priest and the prophet might well have been the last anyone ever heard of Amos, were it not for a severe earthquake that occurred two years after Amos' expulsion from Israel (1:1). It seems to have been this earthquake, one of the agents of divine punishment which Amos had proclaimed, that caused people to recollect, record and adapt the words Amos had spoken, and so began the process which would culminate in our Book of Amos. The earthquake appeared to confirm that the words Amos had spoken were in truth the oracles of God. But because the earthquake did not immediately bring a final end to the kingdom of Israel, some took it as a sign that Amos' words could be understood not as a death sentence, but as a warning which, if heeded, might avert the other threatened disasters. Thus, for example, a series of oracles found in 5:4-14 were presented by their compiler as a warning to "seek the LORD and live" (5:6), "to seek good and not evil in order that you may live" (5:14).

Because those who handed on the words of Amos believed them truly to be oracles of God, they were concerned to do more than simply record the words which the prophet had spoken to the people of his own time. They also desired to show their contemporaries that the earlier proclamation was still applicable. An example of this is the oracle against Tyre (1:9-10). That this oracle is a later insertion into Amos' own oracles against the foreign nations is suggested by the fact that, in comparison with those oracles, the oracle against Tyre has a longer indictment, the description of the coming punishment is shorter, and at the end of the oracle the words "oracle of the LORD" are missing. This attack on Tyre was placed after Amos' oracle against the Philistines (1:9-10) on which it builds. In his oracle against the Philistines Amos had condemned that people for their selling captive Israelites as slaves (1:6-8). Then at some later point in the history of Israel the inhabitants of the Phoenician city of Tyre engaged in a similar activity, and, what is worse, did so in violation of

a "covenant of brothers," a treaty between Israel and Tyre. It was clear to the author of the oracle against Tyre that if God, through Amos, had threatened to punish the Philistines for their wicked behavior, God would do no less with Tyre, whose activity was even more blameworthy, and thus that individual appended the oracle against Tyre to the earlier words of Amos.

The preservation and application of the words of Amos was not confined solely to those inhabitants of the northern kingdom who had become convinced that Amos' words were in truth the oracles of God. To the south, in the kingdom of Judah, there also were those who, equally certain that God had spoken through the prophet from Tekoa, were collecting, expanding, and transmitting his oracles. They were convinced that Amos' words, spoken in the north, had application in the southern kingdom as well. This point is made at the very beginning of the present Book of Amos, where we read "the LORD from Zion roars, and from Jerusalem gives forth his voice" (1:2). The

God who spoke through Amos is the God who speaks from Jerusalem.

Other transmitters of the words of the prophet saw events of their own day as the fulfillment of Amos' words spoken many years before. So, for example, Amos had proclaimed that "the horns of the altar (protuberances on the four corners of the altar, which functioned as sanctuary to an individual who grasped hold of one) will be cut off" (3:14), signifying that there would be no place one could escape the coming punishment. This prophecy of destruction was taken by a later transmitter of the oracles of Amos to be a reference to the tearing down of the altar at Bethel by the Judean King Josiah, more than a century later (2 Kings 23:15). To make this point the words "I will visit upon the altars of Bethel" were inserted into Amos' oracle.

With the fall of the city of Samaria in 722 and the capture of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple and the exile of a substantial portion of its population in 587, the threats of Amos appeared to have been fulfilled. These disasters might

well have meant the end of the people of God, who, believing themselves to have been abandoned, would look elsewhere for salvation. That they did not is due in no small measure to the prophecies of doom found in Amos and other pre-exilic prophets. Because of them people could see that in the destruction itself the God of Israel was at work. The very presence of God the destroyer meant that God was still at hand. This became grounds for hope, for it could be asked if the just God that Amos proclaimed, the God whose just punishment the people of God were now enduring, was a God who would punish forever. The conviction that a just God would not punish forever was what led to the addition of words of hope at the end of the Book of Amos. Amos had said, "Because of your trampling on the poor... pleasant vineyards you have planted, and you will not drink their wine" (5:11), and this had come to pass. But because the just God would not punish forever, a later voice now promises the people of God that "they will plant vineyards, and they will drink their wine" (9:14).

By no later than the year 180 B.C. the Book of Amos had reached its present shape. It had become "canonical" and no further additions to it were possible. As the Book of Amos now stands its title and an introductory verse (1:1-2) are followed by three major sections, which constitute the main body of the work. The first section (1:3—2:16) contains the oracles against the foreign nations and culminates in the oracle against the "three transgressions of Israel...and four" (2:6). The second section, chapters three through six, consists of three units introduced by "Hear this word" (3:1; 4:1; 5:1), followed by two units which begin with the word "woe" (6:1, 4), the opening word of a funeral lament. The report of the visions makes up the third section (7:1—9:8a), interspersed with the account of Amos' confrontation with Amaziah, which emphasizes that the true prophetic word accomplishes what it proclaims, as well as with some additional oracles, echoing material found earlier in the book. Just as the first section began with oracles concerning foreign nations, so the

third section concludes with an oracle about nations other than Israel (9:7-8a), thus setting God's word to Israel in the larger context of God's universal control. Following the main body of the work there is a concluding appendix (9:8b-15) containing the words of hope for the future. These words of hope are God's final word in the Book of Amos. What motivates the reader to believe these promises with which the Book of Amos concludes is the knowledge that God had indeed carried out the threats made against the sinful kingdom found earlier in the book, for that destruction demonstrated that God's word does in fact accomplish what it proclaims through "his servants the prophets" (3:7). It is not in spite of, but because of the threats which had fallen upon the people of God that the promise of future blessing can be trusted. When the later apocryphal Book of Ecclesiasticus, in its praise of Israel's ancestors in the faith, referred to the twelve prophets, of whom Amos is one, it described them as those who "comforted the people of Jacob, and delivered them

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with confident hope" (49:10). It is with an expression of confident hope that the Book of Amos comes to its conclusion.

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