

Book of Amos: Transnational God, social justice, and true religion

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Although the Book of Amos is short in length, its content is rich and the core message is multi-dimensional. In this essay I will discuss how different sub-messages spanning across the book are tied together to form a coherent thesis statement. To understand the content, we need to study the context first.

Background information

Author: The author Amos was not a professional prophet. At the beginning of the book Amos did not show any “prophetic authority.” Instead, he was not shy about his humble origin: “The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa.” He further revealed his identity in Chapter 7. Again, the credential seemed to be unimpressive: “I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’” (7:14).

Time: The book was written during the rule of Jeroboam II, king of Israel (789–748 BC), and Uzziah, king of Judah (785–733 BC). The exact period of Amos’s prophetic mission remains unknown. It is probable that he completed his assignment before 745 BC, because he did not mention the political affairs after the death of Jeroboam II, or the expansion of Assyria under the reign of Tiglatpileser III. During this period, Israel was at the peak of its political power and economic prosperity, comparable only to the era of David and Solomon.

Place: According to Amos 1:1, the primary recipient for the prophecies was Israel. The book briefly mentioned the punishment against Judah, but the judgment against Israel was more lengthy. In addition, Amos had a close observation of social injustice in Israel. And thus it is reasonable to believe that the book was written in Israel.

Audience: The audience of Amos is a nation flooded with false confidence. The Israelites took God’s unlimited favor for granted. They felt totally secure in the present and the future. Blinded by their groundless optimism, they never expected any imminent judgment and were interested in material possessions only.¹

Amos aimed to denounce “the house of Jeroboam” (7:9). Although Amos lived in the era of Jeroboam II, in this context it is likely that “Jeroboam” is referred to as Jeroboam the first. First, the usage “the house of Jeroboam” was a reference to the dynasty established by Jeroboam the first. Second, the cult and the illegitimate priesthood started from Jeroboam the first, not Jeroboam II.

There are several possible literal meanings of the name “Jeroboam.” It could mean ‘may the people increase’ or ‘may he contend for the people’. This implies that his kingship resulted from popular

¹ Shalom M. Paul and Frank Moore Cross, “Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos”, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991.

support, not divine endorsement. He was the son of Nebat and the first king of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. When he was a young man, he was promoted by King Solomon to manage the national workforce. Jeroboam disliked Solomon's hard-labor policy and planned conspiracies against him, but the plan was exposed and as a result he escaped to Egypt until Solomon's death. Afterwards, Rehoboam took over the throne, but Rehoboam's refusal to relax his father's harsh policy provoked a revolt. The ten northern tribes asked Jeroboam to be their King, but Benjamin remained loyal to Judah. Consequently, the two kings divided the country. Jeroboam built shrines as a counterpart of the Jerusalem Temple and staffed the religious institution by unorthodox priests. Further, the date of the Feast of Tabernacle was changed and calves became the symbol of deity.²

International justice and universal God

At Amos's time, Syria lost its military might and Assyria had not yet been powerful enough to be a threat. Apparently both the southern and northern kingdoms could enjoy the perpetual peace that was brought by the blessing of God.³ When Amos started his proclamation of judgments, the surrounding nations of Israel, especially Israel's enemies, were the targets. We can imagine that when Israelites heard these bad news about their neighbors, they clapped their hands.

Amos never used the expression "God of Israel." In ancient near east *henotheism* was the norm of many national religions. This doctrine maintained that one god existed for each nation, and each nation's god took care of his own people. However, it is the conviction of Amos that the God of Abraham is universal and all-powerful; He is not confined by ethnics or territories. Amos believed that this limited conception of God corrupts the very essence of true religion. The idea of "local god" leads to projection of the worshippers' characters and the cultural traits to the deity, and such deity failed to be the ultimate moral foundation.⁴ Amos broke this concept by boldly claiming that God is universal and justice is transnational, and thus God's judgments extended beyond borders.

Why did God announce the punishments against other nations first and his chosen people later? One of the keys is 6:2: "Are you better than these kingdoms?" Actually all of these prophecies against those surrounding nations were an "introduction" to the judgment against the Israelites. Another key may be 9:7 "Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?" God treated Israel and all nations by the same high standard. If all other nations eventually faced punishments, how could Israel be immune?

Social justice

When Israelites joyfully witnessed the fall of other nations, Amos turned the bad news towards his own people. The charge against Judah is brief and it centers on religious sins only: "They have rejected

² D. A. Hubbard, "Jeroboam", New Bible dictionary (3rd ed.) (eds. D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman), Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, 556.

³ Fred Wood. *Amos* (Bloomington, IN: CrossBooks, 2009), Kindle location 128.

⁴ *Ibid*, Kindle location 196.

the law of the Lord, and have not kept his statutes, but their lies have led them astray, those after which their fathers walked” (2:4). Simply put, Judah committed the sin of idolatry but they denied or covered it up.

The prosecution against Israel is broader than religious sins; it includes social injustice, too. In addition to Chapter 2: 4-16, Amos further pointed out the guilt of Israel in Chapter 3, 4, and 5. At Amos’s time, Israel was an affluent society. Amos mentioned “ivory houses,” which mean that the houses of the rich Israelites were like palaces. In addition, Amos called the wealthy women “fat cows of Bashan,” drinking wine from bowls (4:1). Pursuing materials became the goal of many people, but religiosity and moral standards were put aside. Amos observed that the rich people were selling the poor into slavery even when the poor owed nothing more than a pair of sandals (2:6-7). Amos’s theology was based upon the Mosaic tradition that emphasizes the LORD’s compassion for the poor.⁵ Amos accused the wealthy minority of practicing an egocentric life style and oppressing the poor majority. Amos said, “You only have I known of all families of the earth, therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities” (3:2). For Amos, God’s blessing is not unconditional; God did not choose Israel for privileges, but for responsibilities.⁶ Due to their social injustice and immorality, Amos bluntly announced God’s judgment.

True meaning of religion

Amos was upset by the disrespect of God’s Temple and religious tradition in Israel. “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” (2:8). “But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, ‘You shall not prophesy.’” (2:11). In 4:4 the religious sins were even more obvious: “Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days.”

Some Israelites naively thought that practicing religion could white-wash their sins. But Amos bluntly declared that no matter what religious rituals they performed, these empty and superficial acts were futile. He wrote, “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” (4:5). “I hate and despise your feasts. I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals. I reject your sacrifices. Let me hear no more of your chanting. But rather let justice flow like water And integrity like an unfailing stream” (5:21). Further, Amos said, “And it shall come to pass on that day that I will turn your religious feasts into mourning” (8:10). In Amos’s view these feasts could not accomplish anything religious. Rather, for Amos true religion had to come out from the bottom of the heart, and to arise from true faith to the LORD. Due to their social injustice and cultic religion, what came next was the Day of the Lord.

⁵ Fred Guyette, Amos the Prophet: A Meditation on the Richness of “Justice”, *Jewish Bible Quarterly* (36, 2008): 15-21.

⁶ Bakon Shimon, “The Day of the Lord”, *Jewish Bible Quarterly* (38, 2010): 149-156.

The Day of the Lord and the Woe to formula

Hosea's favorite word, "love" or "loving-kindness," was not found in the Book of Amos though Amos interceded twice on behalf of Israel (Amos 7:2, 5).⁷ Instead, the Day of the Lord, or the Judgment Day, is a pre-dominant theme of the book. There is no mention of "The Day of the Lord" in any early prophetic literature. How and when it became a popular concept was also uncertain.⁸ Amos 5:18–20 was the first instance of using this phrase in the Old Testament. Today when we mention "September 11" and "June 4", we know exactly what they mean and no explanation is needed. By the same token, there was no further explanation of the phrase "the Day of the Lord" in Amos's time, implying that it was already common in popular phraseology. It is commonly believed that the Day of the Lord has its historical roots in Israel's holy war experiences. These climactic events were given this name because God's intervention was believed to be the most crucial factor in the course of history.⁹

In the Book of Amos, the people looked forward to receiving the "Day of the Lord," implying that the original meaning was positive. Israelites believed on that day God would vindicate them by delivering a decisive victory over all enemies in the future, regardless of Israel's faithfulness to God. But Amos turned it upside down by proclaiming that the Day of the Lord would be the Judgment Day for Israel, probably through an invasion by the enemy (Amos 5–6).¹⁰ In Chapter 5 and 6 Amos started using the "woe to" formula: "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light" (5:18-20). "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria" (6:1). "Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock" (6:4).

Amos described these people as being very self-centered: "Sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David invent for themselves instruments of music; drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph" (6:5-6). Amos further challenged those people by asking ridiculous questions: "Do horses run on rocks? Does one plow there with oxen?" (6:12) This humorous imagery led to this point that Israel was doing silly things: Israel has turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood (6:12).

Visual analogy

The five visions in Amos 7:1-8:3 are the climax of the book. In the proclamations of judgment against the surrounding nations, there were no visions. But the visions of the judgments against the Israelites were "vivid" and "graphical." In Chapter 3 before pronouncing the judgments and listing their sins, Amos used a lot of visual analogies to illustrate that everything has a cause; Israel did not face the punishment for no reason (3:3-6) (e.g. Does a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Does a young lion cry out from his den, if he has taken nothing?) And the consequence of the judgment against Israel was also

⁷ Wood, Kindle location 217.

⁸ Bakon, 149.

⁹ L. Ryken, J. Wilhoit, T. Longman, C. Duriez, D. Penney, & D. G. Reid, "The Day of the Lord", *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998, 196.

¹⁰ J. S. Wright, "Day of the Lord". *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (eds. D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman), Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, 261.

illustrated by a visual analogy: “As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed” (3:12).

In Chapter 7 God wanted to punish Israel twice but each time Amos made a petition: “O Lord God, please forgive/cease! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” Every the result was the same: “The Lord relented concerning this: “It shall not be,” said the Lord. From 7:1-9 Amos used three visions or visual analogies for illustrating God’s mercy: locusts, fire, and plum line.

The story about the priest of Bethel Amaziah was inserted between the visions. Amaziah asked him to stop preaching against the house of Isaac, but Amos refused to comply and announced an individual judgment against the priest. At first glance, it blocks the logical flow. But actually this story further asserted the sin of the Israelites. Suppose the priest was the most religious person in the nation, but even the priest did not welcome the prophet sent by God and refused to listen to true prophecy. Rather, he just wanted to protect the interests of the King. This reinforces the core message that the chosen people deserved the punishment. Later God said that the temple and the land would be restored. Chapter 7 shows that the religion was very corrupt and thus it had to be rebuilt.

Chapter 8 starts with another vision: A basket of summer fruit, which symbolizes that the end has come upon Israel (8:1-2). The whole chapter is concerned with the coming day of bitter morning, and the description is very graphical. For example, on that day there will be dead bodies everywhere (8:3). On that day the sun goes down at noon and darkens the earth in broad daylight. God will turn the feasts into mourning and the songs into lamentation. HE will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head. HE will make it like the mourning for an only son (8:9-10). On that day the lovely virgins and the young men shall faint for thirst (5:13). Additionally, that day was not far away. “Behold, the days are coming” (8:11).

Chapter 9 continues the graphical illustration. On the judgment day no one can escape. “If they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; if they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. If 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. And if they go into captivity before their enemies, there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them” (9:2-4). God gave an explanation for this severe punishment: “Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?” declares the Lord. “Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir? (9:7).

Epilogue of hope

Fortunately, the Judgment Day is not the end. At the end of the book Amos delivered the epilogue of hope, such as restoring the “booth of David”, restoring the land, and rebuilding the nation. On that day drought, famine, locust plague, pestilence, and other disasters would disappear. The chosen people would be planted again upon the land and “never again be uprooted out of the land” given by God (9:15). But more importantly, Amos, who held the concept of the universal God, also implied that at the end God would restore the order of all nations: “All nations that are called by my name” (9:12). He

foresaw a time when the lines of demarcation between Israel and the other surrounding nations would be removed.¹¹

Cosmic motif

Linville interpreted the judgment day and the hope of restoration in terms of the cosmic motif. For Linville the theme of the book of Amos is about a *timeless transformation*. To be specific, judgment and restoration goes beyond one nation. This is a paradigmatic cosmic theme and the Book of Amos is a mythic text. In the final vision described in Amos 9, God stands at the altar announcing an order to strike the capital of the temple, a symbol of the heavenly order. The big picture of the Book of Amos is the “heavenly archetype” or the “cosmic prototype.”¹²

Unlike other religious traditions that historical events just recur in a cycle, the Jewish tradition views history through the lens of progression and divine purposes. The fundamental Jewish belief rests in God, who rules His universe with justice and compassion, and demands moral conduct from humans. This concept is tied to the notion that following the divine plan history would eventually reach a messianic climax of Time.¹³ Hence, the plot of Amos is ethereal: Amos visualizes the dissolution of the transient cosmic structure, and God would eventually restore the order of the entire universe.¹⁴

Prophetic genre of the Book of Amos

Comparatively speaking, the Book of Amos is short, but it contains various prophetic genres as follows:

Report of Prophetic Commission	Amos 7:15 “But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”
Prophetic Announcement of Punishment against Nations	Amos 1:3–2:3 Judgments against neighboring nations Amos 2:4-16: Judgments against Judah and Israel
Prophetic Report of Past Event	Amos 2:9-11 God destroyed the Amorite and led his people out of the land of Egypt. And He raised up prophets and Nazirites.
Woe Oracle	Amos 5:18-20 “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light.” Amos 6:1 “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure

¹¹ Wood, Kindle location 151.

¹² James Richard Linville. *Amos and the Cosmic Imagination* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 1-2.

¹³ Bakon, 149.

¹⁴ Linville, 1-2.

	<p>on the mountain of Samaria.”</p> <p>Amos 6:4</p> <p>“Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock.”</p>
Prophetic Announcement of Punishment against Individuals	<p>Amos 7:16-17</p> <p>When Amaziah challenged Amos’s prophetic authority and forbade him from preaching against the house of Isaac, Amos announced judgments against his family.</p>
Prophetic Announcement of Reprieve	<p>Amos 7:1-8</p> <p>In the visions whenever God announced a punishment, Amos made a petition: “O Lord God, please forgive! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” Every time at the end the Lord changed his mind.</p>
Report of a Prophetic Vision	<p>Amos 7:1-9:10</p> <p>Five visions of judgment against the chosen people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The locust plague (7:1-3) b) The flaming fire (7:4-6) c) The plumb line (7:7-9) d) The basket of ripe fruit (8:1-14) e) The judgment of the Lord (9:1-10)
Prophetic Instruction	<p>Amos 5:4</p> <p>“For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: Seek me and live.”</p> <p>Amos 5:14</p> <p>“Seek good, and not evil, that you may live”</p>
Prophetic Announcement of Salvation	<p>Amos 9:11-15</p> <p>In spite of all the harsh punishments, at the end God gave his people a hope of salvation and restoration.</p>

Concluding thesis statement

Taking all of the above into consideration, the central theme of Amos is: God, as the universal deity that transcends all nations, judged Israel and all nations by the same high standard on the Day of the Lord, but God still gave his people a hope of restoration and consummation, which is a cosmic motif reflecting the creation order of the Almighty and the divine purpose in history.

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