



## The Book of the Twelve Amos

### Amos Introduction

Though it is not first in the canonical order of the Book of the Twelve, the Book of Amos is widely thought to be the historically earliest text from the collection. Most prophetic works, especially in the Book of the Twelve, include an introduction that tell the reader who wrote the book, and sometimes include other biographical and geographical information. Amos begins with an obscure reference to an earthquake; though there are many suggestions as to why this odd piece of information might have been included in Amos's superscript introduction, some scholars argue it forms part of Amos's credentials as a prophet. It is likely that, at some point, Amos prophesied an earthquake which then happened; as we know from other biblical texts such as Deuteronomy, the criteria for a what makes someone a legitimate prophet is if they predict something which later comes to pass. This earthquake may well have been Amos's legitimizing prediction.

The idea of someone like Amos needing to legitimize himself may come as somewhat of a surprise to us as modern readers – it's easy for us to think of Amos as a kind of "ancient celebrity," because that's how we see him as part of the canon of the Bible. But in the ancient world, especially before they became well-known and well-accepted, prophets did need to authenticate their message in order to be taken seriously.

What makes this whole sequence even more confusing is Amos's statement in 7:14 – he does not consider himself to be a prophet! What does this mean in the context of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE? What *is* a prophet?

What is a prophet?

The Book of Amos is a great place to find insight into this very question. In the ancient world, there were different kinds of prophets: there were professional court prophets, who spoke to kings and functioned within the hierarchies of power (Isaiah, for example, is considered a court prophet), and there were "amateurs" like Amos, who were regular people who heard voices and saw visions and spoke accordingly. "Prophet" was a job people had in royal courts and temples throughout the Ancient Near East, and often, though not always, their role was to make their kings feel better about themselves by prophesying that what they did would succeed.

Amos, despite claiming not to be a prophet, begins with exactly the kind of formula we might expect from a professional prophet operating in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The so-called “oracles against the nations,” in which foreign nations are condemned for various geopolitical transgressions, would have been a very recognizable prophetic format. However, where Amos takes a turn is in his inclusion of Israel in these oracles, condemning them for their lack of social justice. This is significant for two reasons: first, at this point in history, Israel hardly warranted inclusion alongside large-scale geopolitical powers such as Damascus, Tyre, and Edom; second, because of their smaller footprint on the world stage, Israel is condemned for internal, social transgressions. On one hand, Amos elevates Israel (and Judah) here, including them with other powerful nations – on the other hand, he also elevates their level of culpability and responsibility, implying that they are not above (or rather, below) the notice and judgement of God.

### Social Justice

Amos uses all of these rhetorical devices to set up his main critique: Israel’s mistreatment of its population, especially the marginalized, perpetrated by the wealthy and elite of the nation’s upper echelons. Economic disparity features heavily in Amos’s message. In his condemnation of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, he speaks specifically to the way that the wealthy and elite offer sacrifices, observe the correct cultic procedures, all while the poor are suffering. To show the rampant extravagance of the elite, Amos mentions houses and beds of ivory in 3:15 and 6:4 respectively; fascinatingly, the archaeological record does suggest the use of ivory in Samaria, as small, intricate ivory carvings have been found there.

This was a time in Israel’s history when riches, wine, and oil were sent to the capital to bolster the wealth of the courtly elite; meanwhile, the subsistence level farmers were left without the things they needed to survive. Again, Amos takes aim particularly at the sacrifices of the elite and wealthy; in 5:22, Amos writes that YHWH outright rejects their offerings. Many have read this section and others like it throughout Amos and the Book of the Twelve as an outright rejection of sacrifice as an outdated method of worship – but a closer reading of the text reveals a more thoughtful message.

Was Amos against sacrifice?

Amos was not against sacrifices in general – his message is more nuanced and articulated, getting at a deeper critique. The prophet’s message is that correct cultic observances, making sacrifices and observing festivals, does not cover up the social ills and abuses perpetrated by those keeping the cultic practices. There is a running theme here in Amos, and elsewhere in biblical prophecy, of being against the rote enactment of faith or religion while the poor and needy struggle. Again, here Amos reverses expectations: the audience is likely expecting to be told to observe the cult, and to pat themselves on the back for a job well done. Not so the message of Amos, however. Throughout the book, Amos shows that without justice the correct cultic practices are nothing.

### The Day of the Lord

Another strong motif in Amos is the “Day of the Lord,” an idea that will develop in prophetic texts over the next few centuries. Back in the oracles against the nation, Amos chastises Israel for looking

forward to the Day of the Lord, which in their minds is the day when YHWH as the patron deity of Israel will win the day for them, bringing victor over their enemies. Instead, Amos says in 5:18 that the Day of the Lord is darkness, not light – it is not what the people expect it to be. This is the first hint at an early eschatology, which is still very much of the world, rather than its later cosmic form; Amos’s elevation of Israel to the level of the other nations means that they are just as culpable to the judgement of God on that day, and that is nothing to celebrate given Israel present lack of justice and oppression of the poor.