

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Amos

I. Introduction

A. *Date & Authorship*

The superscription identifies the author of this book only as a man named "Amos," probably a shortened form of the name Amasiah, meaning "One sustained by Yahweh."¹ He identifies himself as a working-class man—"a herdsman" (7:14), a "sheep-herder" (1:1), and a "grower of sycamore figs" (7:14). In other words, his life up until his prophetic ministry began was one of normal, everyday work. He was not a priest nor a member of the nobility or upper-class, and he denied any connection to professional prophetic ministry both ancestrally and academically (7:14).

He was, in fact, a Judean, whose main occupation was as a herdsman and shepherd based in the southern Judean town of Tekoa, roughly 10 miles south of Jerusalem and 6 miles south of Bethlehem. Yet it appears that his work must have required him to travel, since sycamore-fig trees do not grow at elevations over 1,000 ft above sea level (Tekoa being 2,000+ ft).² It could very well have been that Amos frequently travelled into northern Israel for business purposes, and perhaps even into foreign regions as well. After all, his messages evidence familiarity with regional history both of northern Israel and the surrounding foreign nations, and the fact that his messages were directed toward the northern kingdom, though he was from Judah, suggests his familiarity with the land and the people as a whole.



¹ Thomas J. Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah: An Exegetical Commentary* (Biblical Studies Press, 2003), 99.

² Jeff Niehaus, "Amos," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 315.

The book's superscription also specifies the time period of Amos' message. Apparently, he prophesied his messages during the reigns of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel (1:1), whose reigns overlap from 791-753 B.C. Yet the level of prosperity enjoyed by northern Israel during that time as discussed by Amos narrows down the date of his prophecies to the latter part of Jeroboam's kingship (760s B.C.), since that kind of affluence would have taken considerable time to accumulate.

Amos also provides a historically-specific chronological marker—the mention of a particularly intense earthquake that occurred in the region just two years prior (1:1). The tremor was large enough to have remained in the memory of the people even after Judah returned from exile, since the prophet Zechariah mentions this event in his own prophecies (14:5). Archaeological excavations at Hazor show evidence of a massive tremor "that destroyed the sixth archaeological level sometime between 765 and 760 B.C."³

B. *Historical Background*

Historically, the region was experiencing an unparalleled time of peace and prosperity. Under Jeroboam II, Israel was finally enjoying political relief. Egypt and Babylon were weak, and Syria (i.e., Aram) had been subjugated by Assyria after years of relentless atrocities against Israel (1:3-5; cf. 2 Kgs 10:32-33; 13:7). As for Assyria, its exploits into Syria had left it vulnerable to its northern enemies. Thus, by the time of Jeroboam II, Israel's borders were secure, and Syria's presence to the north had been tamed to the point that the king was able to reclaim some of the territory that had been lost during the division of the kingdom after the time of Solomon (2 Kgs 14:25). Additionally, there was peace at the time between Judah and Israel, as suggested by Amos' presence in the northern kingdom as a prophet from Judah, and as based on his mention of apparent free travel between the nations (5:5).

The international scene afforded Jeroboam the opportunity to stabilize the nation, expand its borders, and establish economic prosperity for the people. Yet this prosperity came with a spiritual price tag. The nation was outwardly religious, especially in the cult, but it was a cover for two enormous issues: idolatry and social injustice. Syncretism and outright paganism were commonplace (5:26), and the affluent of society frequently neglected and abused the less fortunate and vulnerable (2:6-8; 4:1). Amos was quick to identify what these actions really were: covenant treason against their covenant master.

C. *Literary Features*

Amos is a treasure-trove of literary features. The book as a whole is predominantly poetic, with a smattering of narrative elements amongst the main oracles. Modern commentators have thought it odd that the book transitions between third person and first person, and some have concluded that this evidences multiple authors, but in reality, this style of first/third-person shifting occurs throughout the prophetic books (e.g., Deut 1:1-9) as well as in other ANE literature.⁴

³ Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, 100.

⁴ Niehaus, "Amos," 320-22.

Amos is a "covenant-lawsuit messenger," meaning that his prophetic role was to act as Yahweh's representative to bring a lawsuit against Israel for covenant violations. As the plaintiff and the judge, Yahweh was bringing Israel to court. As such, Amos was well familiar with the Mosaic Covenant and his language and phraseology throughout book clearly draws from Israel's covenant texts, particularly Deuteronomy.

PENTATEUCHAL REFERENCES IN AMOS⁵

Amos	Phrase/Concept	Pentateuchal Reference
1:1	the words of Amos	Deut 1:1
1:9	remember the covenant	Gen 9:15; Exod 2:24; 6:5; Lev 26:42-45
2:4	keep statutes walk after	Exod 15:26; Deut 4:40 Deut 4:3; 11:28; 13:5[4]
2:7	pervert justice	Exod 23:6
2:10; 9:7	brought you up from Egypt	Gen 50:24; Exod 3:8
2:10	inherit the land	Gen 15:7; Num 33:53; Deut 2:31
3:1	hear this word	Deut 4:1; 5:1; 6:4
3:7	his servants the prophets	Deut 34:5, 10
4:4	tithes every three days/years	Deut 14:28; 26:12
4:5	burn sacrifices leavened bread as a thank-offering freewill offerings love	Lev 1:9 Lev 2:11; 7:12-15 Lev 22:17-25 Deut 6:5
4:6	return to Yahweh	Deut 4:30; 30:2
4:9	blight and mildew vineyards, olive trees	Deut 28:22 Deut 28:30, 39-40
4:10; 4:12	I sent plague among you	Lev 26:25; Deut 28:20-21, 48
4:13	prepare to meet your God on the heights of the earth	Exod 19:15-17 Deut 32:13
5:4	seek Yahweh	Deut 4:29
5:6	Yahweh like a consuming fire	Deut 4:24
5:11	futility curse on houses futility curse on vineyards	Deut 28:30a Deut 28:30b
5:20	gloom as covenant curse accept offerings	Deut 28:29 Lev 1:4; 7:18; 19:7; 22:27
5:26	images that you fashioned for yourselves	Exod 20:4; 32:1, 23; Deut 5:8
5:27	exile far from home	Deut 28:36, 64-68; 29:27[28]
6:1	first of the nations	Num 24:20
6:11; 9:9	Yahweh is commanding	Exod 34:11; Deut 26:16
7:2	Locusts eating the vegetation of the land	Exod 10:12, 15
7:9	Desolation and waste of high places and sanctuaries exile away from the land	Lev 26:30-31
7:11, 17	preach (drip)	Deut 29:27[28]
7:16		Deut 32:3
8:4	needy and oppressed	Deut 5:11; 24:14-15
8:5	open the granaries false weights false measures	Gen 41:56 Lev 19:36; Deut 25:14 Lev 19:35
8:9	noon is dark	Deut 28:29
8:11	famine scarcity of Yahweh's word	Deut 28:48 Deut 4:28-29; 32:20
9:8	destroy from the face of the land	Deut 6:15
9:12	over whom my name is pronounced	Deut 28:10
9:15	land that I have given to them Yahweh your God	Num 20:12, 24; 27:12 Gen 27:20; Exod 8:24; Lev 11:44; Num 10:9; Deut 1:10

⁵ Ibid., 322.

The references listed above are only a representation of the covenantal language imbedded into Amos' oracles and speaks to the nature of Israel's problem and Amos' mission. He draws most frequently from those texts which contain historical prologues chronicling God's dealings with Israel, the legal code associated with Israel's covenant with Yahweh, and the blessings/curses based on Israel's obedience or disobedience to the law. As much as Amos was part of the "working class," his shepherding/herdsman-ship did not limit his creative and artistic abilities. His messages demonstrate a command of the Hebrew language and evocative literary styling that effectively grabs the reader and dramatizes his words. These effects occur both on a micro and a macro level.

A. *Micro-level artistry*

Amos employs an impressive amount of imagery. His time in the plains and hills or Judea and his frequent travels for his sycamore-fig enterprise provided him access to the richness of the natural world. As a herdsman and shepherd, he was acquainted with the dangers of the Judean wilderness, as well as the beauty and productivity of the land, and this knowledge bleeds into his writing. He speaks roaring lions, birds caught in snares, rushing streams, invading locusts, plant blight, and mountains dripping with sweet wine.

He also incorporated his familiarity with the region into his messages as well. He describes "the verdant summit of Carmel, all the neighbors surrounding Israel, various cities with their massive citadels, the rich pastures of Bashan, the hill country of Samaria, and the Nile as it overflows its banks."⁶

He also employs a wide variety of literary techniques to maximize rhetorical effect:

- Rhetorical questions (3:3-8)
- Rhetorical imperatives (3:9)
- Irony (4:4-5)
- Humor (5:19-20)
- Personification (5:2-3)
- Hyperbole (5:21-23)
- Hymnology (4:13; 5:7-9; 9:5-6)

B. *Macro-level artistry*

Amos also uses structural-level literary features for dramatic rhetorical effect. His opening oracles (1:2-2:16) provides a supreme example of Amos' masterful literary style. Through repetition, structure, and geography, Amos brings his case against Israel to an epic climax.

⁶ Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, 106.



The passage begins as a series of judgment oracles against Israel's enemies. But he employs a geographical chiasm that takes the reader/listener from one end of the region to the other. He begins with Syria in the northeast, then moves to Philistia in the southwest. Next he targets Tyre in the northwest followed by Ammon, Moab, and Edom in the southeast before moving to Judah in the south. Thus all of Israel's neighbors fall under divine judgment, a reality that would enthrall any Israelite reader. Only then does Amos shock his reader by turning suddenly to Israel for an extended oracle of judgment upon the people to whom he has come to address.

Amos also employs the literary form of covenant lawsuit, a style used by other OT prophets and ANE writers. As Niehaus observes, "Because these lawsuit documents deal with covenant breaking, their literary form derives from the second-millennium covenant form itself."⁷ Of course, the pattern was not rigid, and Amos employed this form in various patterns throughout his message against Israel as well as foreign nations:

Amos 1:3-5

Introduction of plaintiff/judge (1:3a)
 Introduction of defendant (1:3a)
 Indictment (1:3b)
 Judgment (1:4-5)

Amos 3:1-15

Introduction of plaintiff/judge (3:1a)
 Introduction of defendant (3:1b)
 Indictment (3:2)
 Confirmation of covenant-lawsuit messenger (3:3-8)
 Summons to witnesses (3:9a)
 Indictment (3:9b-10)
 Judgment (3:11-15)

II. Major Themes

A. *Divine Judgment on Israel's Religious and Social Evil*

The predominant theme of the book of Amos concerns God's rejection of Israel's social and religious activities. While the nation enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and security, they practiced idolatry and social injustice. Hubbard notes that "Israel, notably the political, economic and religious leaders, are held accountable. They have said 'no' to Yahweh in every area of their lives."⁸ He goes on to explain,

⁷ Niehaus, "Amos," 319.

⁸ David Allan Hubbard, *Joel & Amos: An Introduction & Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 108.

The list of their crimes would fill an out-sized police-blotter: enslaving their countrymen for petty debts (2:6; 8:6), perverting justice for the disadvantaged (2:7-8; 5:10, 12, 15), practicing incest (2:7), exacting harsh taxes (2:8, 3:10; 5:11), throttling the prophets who would condemn such deeds (2:12, 3:8; 7:12-13), maintaining an extravagant life-style at the expense of the poor (4:1; 6:1-6), failing to heed the warnings implicit in their experiences of disaster (4:6-11), engaging in religious exercises that were both insincere and tainted with paganism (5:4-5, 21-27; 8:4-5, 13-14), presuming that the Lord's future held only blessings for them (5:18-20; 9:10), resting securely in their military prowess and invulnerable defenses (3:11; 6:2-3, 8), peacocking in their covenant privileges while ignoring God's sovereign care of other nations (3:1-2, 9:7).⁹

Thus, Yahweh's response was a firm announcement of the future of the northern kingdom. Judgment was coming to the nation—a judgment of exile. He speaks of the people being taken away "with meat hooks", going out through the breaches of the walls of the city after it is destroyed (4:2-3). He says that the end has come and that he will no longer spare them (8:2). He says that the nation remained unresponsive to his previous overtures to sway them to repentance, leaving no other recourse but to stamp them out as a political entity (4:6-12).

Yet here theologians and commentators separate in how they understand Amos' overall message. There seems to be a finality to the prophet's tone that have led many to conclude that Amos offered no escape for Israel. By the time he spoke these messages, there was no hope that Yahweh would relent. Hubbard, for instance, writes that at this point in Israel's history, "Judgment was the only effective answer,"¹⁰ and Finley appears to support this conclusion when he writes that "there can be no escape from that awful sentence."¹¹

Yet such finality makes the rest of Amos' message perplexing, for he also includes calls for the nation to repent:

For thus says Yahweh to the house of Israel, "Seek me that you may live. But do not resort to Bethel and do not come to Gilgal, nor cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal will certainly go into captivity and Bethel will come to trouble. Seek Yahweh that you may live, or he will break forth like a fire, O house of Joseph, and it will consume with none to quench it for Bethel, for those who turn justice into wormwood and cast righteousness down to the earth" (5:4-7).

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and thus may Yahweh God of hosts be with you, just as you have said! Hate evil, love good, and establish justice in the gate! Perhaps Yahweh God of hosts may be gracious to the remnant of Joseph" (5:14-15).

Such a dilemma is a good lesson in Old Covenant theology. While the language may appear final and certain—there's nothing Israel can do now to escape exile—Amos' message must be kept within the context of the Mosaic Covenant framework. Under that cov-

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, 106.

enant, exile was the last and greatest curse for covenant violation. Yet the covenant also explains that Israel's change of heart would garner God's graciousness towards them. Jeremiah captures this reality clearly:

Then the word of Yahweh came to me saying, "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" declares Yahweh. "Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or in another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in my sight by not obeying my voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it (Jer 18:5-10).

The point is that promises of blessing or cursing in the Old Testament were inherently conditional under the canopy of the Mosaic Covenant. Yahweh's actions toward the nation, whether for blessing or judgment, were also based on the nation's disposition towards him and the covenant. Yet every once in a while, a promise is made linked not to the Mosaic Covenant, but to the Abrahamic Covenant, and these promises of blessing for the people transcended the conditional limitations of the Mosaic Covenant. However, Amos' warnings of impending exile on Israel should not be considered unconditional. There was always the possibility for Israel to repent.

B. *Yahweh's Sovereignty Over Everything*

Amos' portrayal of Yahweh is of a God who is sovereign over every area of life. As creator of the universe, Amos explains that

He formed the mountains and made the wind (4:13). He draws water from the seas to bring rain upon the earth (5:8; 9:6). He makes the night day, and the day night (4:13; 5:8). He formed the Pleiades and Orion (5:8). And, in the invisible realm, he has built his temple in the heavens (9:6).¹²

Yet he also created mankind, and as such has absolute sovereignty over their lives. His authority does not end with Israel, his special people, but extends to all the nations. For this reason, the opening chapters of the book are more than a simple rhetorical device to shock Israel when they finally hear their names. God is truly furious with the nations, and they too fall under condemnation, and Amos reminds Israel of this fact so that the nation could see the world in perspective:

This all-embracing picture of sovereignty serves one basic purpose in the text: to bring Israel's fantasies of invulnerability down to size. The misunderstood sense of chosen-ness had combined in the eighth century with a measure of military advance, territorial enlargement and material prosperity to elevate Israel in their own eyes. Superior to the nations was how they viewed themselves, and special to God. That self-exaltation inevitably clouded their sense of obligation to and dependence on him and threatened to reduce him to their benign,

¹² Niehaus, "Amos," 326.

private caretaker. His righteousness was interpreted as a readiness always to do right by them.¹³

C. *Israel's Future Restoration*

The message of judgment and exile ends, as it always does in the prophets, with a promise that God's current anger with Israel does not mean he has abandoned his covenant with them. Israel's lack of covenant loyalty stands in stark contrast to Yahweh's continued commitment to the nation. Even the judgments he had sent throughout Israel's history were gracious overtures intended to draw the people back to covenant faithfulness (4:6-11).

Yet hope for the northern kingdom was inextricably linked to the future of Judah and particularly to the Davidic monarchy. After 8½ chapters of judgment oracles, Amos' tone transforms into one of ultimate hope for restoration as God's kingdom of priests:

"In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, and wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name," declares Yahweh who does this (9:11-12).

1. *The Meaning of the Passage*

As it turns out, that statement has become one of the most important statements in biblical theology, and one of the most embattled portions as well. Apart from a few obscure alternative proposals, most interpreters agree that if taken at face value the passage refers to a future reunification of united Israel under the leadership of the Davidic monarchy. The picture is of a dilapidated booth metaphorically representing what is left of the kingdom following its division under Rehoboam. The text contains clear allusions to the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7 and correlates with other prophetic passages where David's name is used in tandem with the reunification of the kingdoms (e.g., Mic 5:2-6; Jer 33:1-26).

The passage also indicates that under the banner of David, the nation will "possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name." The singling out Edom is intentional, given their hostility toward Israel throughout OT history. While the message appears to have militaristic overtones, the word "possess" actually carries a covenantal emphasis. Just as Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:17-18 foretold of a "star" and "scepter" that would emerge from Israel, taking possession of Edom in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, so Amos too reiterates this great reality of universal blessing to the Gentiles. As Keil writes,

The taking possession referred to here will be of a very different character from the subjection of Edom and other nations to David. It will make the nations into citizens of the king of God, to whom the Lord manifests Himself as their God, pouring upon them all the blessings of His covenant of grace.¹⁴

¹³ Hubbard, *Joel & Amos*, 111.

¹⁴ Keil and Franz Delitzsch (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 222.

This reality is clarified further by the inclusion of "all the nations who are called by my name." That phrase is richly significant. In a broad sense, it signifies ownership and possession, but more specifically it carries covenantal overtones describing the relationship of a suzerain to a vassal (Deut 28:10; Isa 48:1-2; Jer 14:9; etc.). It pictures one coming under the protection of Yahweh as his people. In other words, the passage speaks of a universal kingdom where all the world comes under the rule of Yahweh as mediated through the Davidic King.

2. *The Issues with the Passage*

Yet there are several difficulties that have led to a massive split over the interpretation of the text. The first of these issues concerns the major differences between the Masoretic text (i.e., Hebrew text) and the LXX version (i.e., Greek translation). While the Hebrew text reveals that the purpose of the unification of the Davidic empire is so that "they [Israel] may possess [יִרְשׁוּ] the remnant of Edom [אֶת־שְׂאֵרֵי־עֲדוֹם]" (9:12), the Greek version (back-translated into Hebrew) reads "so that the remnant of mankind [אָדָם] may seek [יִדְרְשׁוּ] the Lord."

In reality, the differences are a matter of only a single letter, replacing "possess" [יִרְשׁוּ] with "seek" [יִדְרְשׁוּ] and "Edom" [אֶדוֹם] with "mankind" [אָדָם], and thus it's understandable how each word could have been mistaken for the other. But looking further, the syntax is also different. The LXX has "mankind" as the *subject* of the verb "seek", while the Hebrew text has "Edom" as the direct object of the verb "possess," and even contains its own direct object marker. One would be hard pressed to assume that the Masorites rearranged the text so significantly to warrant such a change, making accuracy of the Hebrew text most likely:

BHS: That they **may possess** [verb] the **remnant of Edom** [direct object]

LXX: That the rest of **mankind** [subject] **may seek** [verb] the Lord

It would seem that the matter should be cleared up, but at this point an even greater issue arises. In Acts 15:16-18, James quotes this passage (from the LXX) as biblical justification for gospel proclamation to the Gentiles. The biggest question is a matter of hermeneutics: *how does James interpret this OT passage?* Some suggest that he reinterpreted the passage, turning the idea of a restored Israel into a spiritual idea of a restored people—the church. In short, they suggest that the passage jettisons the idea of any kind of national future for Israel and claim that the rebuilt booth of David is seen as the unification of Jews and Gentiles through Christ.

But this interpretation assumes that James' message in Acts 15:15-16 is incompatible with the original meaning of Amos 9:11-15. Yet that is simply not the case. The stated purpose of the Mosaic Covenant was that through Israel's obedience they might receive the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant, the ultimate goal of which was the blessing of the world. Their obedience to one meant the blessings of the other, and it does not draw too hard on the imagination to picture a restored Israel experiencing covenant blessings which result in the nations of the world seeking the Lord, just as James describes.

The issue in Acts 15, after all, was an issue of the appropriateness of proselytizing those Gentiles who had already accepted the gospel by faith. In the wake of Peter's missionary efforts and the clear manifestation of the Spirit's presence among the Gentiles and their inclusion into the church, the question remained as to their relationship to Israel. Must they be circumcised and come under the Mosaic Covenant (Acts 15:5)? Can they rightly live as kingdom citizens outside the covenant community of Israel? James' subsequent quotation and interpretation of Amos 9:11-12 affirmed that indeed the OT testified that God's plan to bless the nations did not involve their subsequent dissolving into Israel under the covenant stipulations. Their relationship to God was based on faith, just as Israel's, and their status as a people of God's own possession was not based on their relationship to Yahweh through the Mosaic Covenant. That relationship remained unique to one nation: Israel.

III. Purpose

Amos warns Israel of impending judgment on the nation, yet offers hope through the reunification of Israel and Judah under the rule of a future Davidic King.

IV. Literary Structure

There is virtually no contest in how Amos is structured. The book is divided into five major sections:

AMOS

Introduction	Oracles of Judgment against the Nations	Oracles of Judgment against Israel	Visions of Coming Judgment concerning Israel	The Restoration of Israel
Prophet Date Message	Damascus Philistia Tyre Edom Ammon Moab Judah Israel	Irresponsibility (3:1-15) Idolatry (4:1-13) Moral Decay (5:1-6:14)	Locusts Fire Plumb Line [Attack on Amos] Summer Fruit Yahweh by the Altar	
1:1	1:3	3:1	7:1	9:11