

SESSION TWENTY-THREE

THE BOOK OF AMOS

A Cry for Social Righteousness

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Date

According to Amos 1:1, he ministered in the days of Uzziah (the king of the southern kingdom; r 767-739 BC) and in the days of Jeroboam II (the king of the northern kingdom; r 782-753). Since much of the book is addressed to the northern kingdom, it is clear that the book was written prior to the Assyrian invasion and exile of 722 BC. A date of about 762 BC is probably a good working date for the book.¹

B. Author

According to his own testimony, Amos was not a prophet nor from a family of prophets (Amos 7:14). Rather, he was a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs. God did not have to have a member of the religious leaders to speak to His people. He raised up a righteous man, whom we might say was a "lay person" rather than among the clergy. He was from Tekoa, a small town about 10 miles south of Jerusalem. Thus, he was part of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Although God does use him to rebuke Judah, most of the book deals with the sins of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

C. Setting

The fact that Amos writes during the reign of Jeroboam II is quite significant, for this was a time of prosperity in the Northern Kingdom. Jeroboam's lengthy reign of 30 years contributed to this. Stability, prosperity, and expansion characterized the day. Amos 5:11 speaks of their nice houses built from well hewn stone. Amos 6:1 speaks of those who are "at ease" in Zion and those who "feel secure" in the mountain of Samaria. Amos 3:15 spoke of their houses of ivory (this was literally true of the palace at the capital city of Samaria). Overall, this was a time when everything seemed to be going well, and many were prospering. But this also fostered an attitude of complacent indifference toward God. The lust for material wealth was part of the problem. Many were getting rich at the expense of the less fortunate. Amos 5:11 talks of those who impose heavy rent on the poor. Amos 5:12 rebukes those who

¹Hill dates the book about 750-748 BC, but before the death of Jeroboam II (see Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* [Zondervan, 1991], 370). However, the date of Jeroboam II's death is 753 BC (see Leslie McFall, "A Translation Guide to the Chronological Data in Kings and Chronicles," *BibSac* 148:589 (Jan-Mar 1991): 3-45. Yigael Yadin has suggested on the basis of archaeological excavations at Hazor that the earthquake mentioned in Amos 1:1 may have occurred between 765 and 760 BC (*Hazor*, Schweich Lectures, 1970 [London: Oxford, 1972], 151; cf. Yohanan Aharoni, "The History of the City and Its Significance," in *Beer-Sheba I: Excavations at Tel Beer-Sheba, 1969-1971 Seasons* [Tel Aviv Univ.: Givatayim-Ramat Gan, 1973], 107-8).

"distress the righteous and accept bribes, and turn aside the poor in the gate."

As a result of all this abuse and other disobedience, God summons the enemies of the nation to watch what he is going to do:

"Proclaim on the citadels in Ashdod and on the citadels in the land of Egypt and say, 'Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria and see the great tumults within her and the oppressions in her midst'" (3:9).

You would need to understand the geographical setting of the capital city of Samaria to appreciate this statement. Samaria was set on an elevated hill, surrounded on all sides by flat plains. From the base of the hill, the flat plains extended for at least a half a mile in every direction. Because of this, the city was virtually impossible to destroy or attack. The only way to effectively conquer the city was to lay siege to it and starve it out. Furthermore, the city was positioned perfectly in relation to important trade routes (which helped its prosperity). Even the land all around the city was very fertile for agriculture. About a half a mile or so from the city, however, mountains rose up from the plains to completely encompass the city. This is the image that we need for understanding Amos 3:9. In effect, God is saying to the pagan Gentile nations (the enemies of Israel): "Come, gather round; get a ring side seat, and watch closely what I am going to do to My city when I destroy them." One can almost imagine all these Gentiles taking their seats on the surrounding mountain ridges to watch what happens. Furthermore, Israel is rebuked for not yet having repented: "Yet you have not returned to Me" (4:8). Hence, their doom is sure. In 5:27, we read: "'Therefore, I will make you go into exile beyond Damascus,' says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts." Again in 7:17, God says "Israel will certainly go from its land into exile!"

II. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

See chart on page "*Suppl. 23.1*" and insights into the literary structural techniques, "*Suppl. 23.2*."

III. POINT OF BRINGING IN THE SINS OF THE OTHER NATIONS

Chapters one and two serve as a preamble to the prophet's thesis: If Israel were to compare herself with the other nations from God's point of view, she would have nothing to be encouraged about! Damascus is cited for her brutality. Gaza, Tyre and Edom are cited for their involvement in slave trade and deportation. Ammon is noted for ripping open pregnant women (senseless brutality). Moab is noted for shocking and vindictive hatred (she even burned the bones of kings).

To highlight Israel's guilt in comparison with her surrounding nations, Amos employs an interesting technique of a 3+1 numerical pattern.² Notice that each condemnation oracle in chapters 1 and 2 begins with the same statement: "Thus says the LORD, for three transgressions of (the nation) and for four, I will not revoke its punishment" (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). There are eight of these in total, although the first seven must be distinguished from the final eighth one. Notice that the first seven (though having minor variations) reflect the same basic pattern:

- 1) Divine authority: "Thus says the LORD"

²Numerical patterns based on the formula $x / x+1$ are attested elsewhere in the Old Testament. An inductive study of these indicates that they are varied in their composition and purpose. For several of these, however, a list of items corresponding to one of the numbers (usually the second) is attached (e.g., Ps 62:11-12; Prov 30:15-16, 18-19, 21-23, 29-31; Job 5:19-22; and Prov 6:16-19).

- 2) "For three transgressions . . . and for four"
- 3) God's refusal to relent ("I will not revoke its punishment")
- 4) Reason given: "because they . . ."
- 5) Judgment announced (each beginning with "So I will send fire . . . and it will consume . . . citadels")

The eighth oracle is distinctive from the others in three ways:

- 1) it omits the element of the announcement of the judgment (in particular the recurring "So I will send fire . . . and it will consume her citadels");
- 2) it has additional features and elaboration which are not found in the preceding seven (the reminder of God's past grace [9-11], God's burden with them [13], and the warning that judgment will be inescapable [14-16]); and
- 3) more of her sins and guilt are listed (four conceptual sins!)

As the reader patiently began to read through these oracles, he would certainly notice the 3+1 pattern, though observing that in each case only one fundamental sin was highlighted.³ As he came to the seventh oracle (that concerning Judah), he might be tempted to think that this was the finale of the confrontation oracles, since seven often signifies finality or completeness. Instead, he is met with an eighth (concerning Israel), and it is the eighth that is so distinctive and obviously the *target* of these two chapters. The reader would also notice that God began with three unrelated foreign powers (Syria, Philistines, and Phoenicians), then treats Israel's three "related" neighbors (Edom, Ammon, and Moab), and finally Israel's sister-nation Judah. As the circle began to be drawn in more tightly, those of the northern kingdom of Israel would realize through the use of this ingenious *entrapment technique* that they were the chief offender in God's eyes! In her case (in contrast to the other nations), the 3+1 formula finds true expression, for three sins are listed and then even a fourth.⁴ Chisholm concludes that Amos

purposely altered the normal enumerative form of the x/x +1 pattern for rhetorical purposes. His adaptation of the pattern contributed to the overall theme of chapters 1–2, namely, that Israel would be the focal point of divine judgment because its sins surpassed those of its neighbors.⁵

³In some cases, there may appear to be more than one sin/crime listed, but when we take into account synonymous paralleling lines there is usually just one fundamental "conceptual" sin/crime. In some cases, a crime may be followed by its *motive* (but still there is just one crime in view).

⁴Scholars are divided about the identification of Israel's sins in 2:6ff. The enumeration certainly begins with the words "because they" in verse six. It may be possible to identify all four in vv 6-8. Robert Chisholm, on the other hand, suggests that we have three listed in 2:6-8 and then a fourth suspended in 2:12 (*Interpreting the Minor Prophets* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1990], 81-82). According to his suggestion, these would be (1) the oppression of the poor & needy in 2:6-7a; (2) an illicit sexual sin (possibly engaging in pagan cultic prostitution) in 2:7b; (3) the exploitation of debtors and the misuse of their property in 2:8; and (4) the disregard of God's Word and rejection of his godly representatives whom He had raised up for the nation's spiritual welfare in 2:12.

⁵Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "'For Three Sins . . . Even for Four': The Numerical Sayings in Amos," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:586 (Apr-Jun 1990), 196.

Thus, chapters 1–2 become an effective introduction to the book. The book is primarily about Israel's sin and the judgment that God warns will fall on her.⁶ Though Israel was God's unique people by virtue of the Mosaic covenant, she is no better than the others—in fact she is even more guilt-worthy and her judgment cannot be forestalled. Through her, God's *holy name* (i.e., the name of Yahweh) has been profaned in the sight of the nations (2:7). Therefore, God has no choice but to act for the honor and sanctity of His name. This will be the central issue for the remainder of the book.

IV. THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Obviously, the book is full of condemnation for the abuses of social justice. The defenseless, the poor, the widow, and the orphan are all victims of exploitation. Since this is addressed to the covenant nation, the question may be asked as to how far this can be applied today. The opening two chapters are the best answer. All nations, not just Israel and Judah, are held accountable for sin and abuse of power! The message of Amos strikes right at the jugular of many modern day societies! In *appropriate ways*, Christians should stand up for social justice and seek to curb social abuses (especially those who are exploited by the "power clique"). However, we must also remember that the societies we live in today are not like Israel (which was a covenant nation).⁷

If we follow the example of the first century apostles—who also lived in a world of social abuses—whatever action we take would stop short of anything like attempting to overthrow oppressive governments. We need to pray, speak up, and do what we can by peaceful means. Most of all, we need to first be obedient at the individual level!

⁶Although the book is primarily about Israel, these opening chapters are certainly instructive for all these nations. They must realize that (1) power must be used righteously; (2) justice cannot be sacrificed for expediency; and (3) justice is antecedent to the peace and prosperity of the state.

⁷For some helpful interaction on the applicability of Amos to today, see Thomas J. Finley, "Contemporary Context," in *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 121-23; and Thomas J. Finley, "An Evangelical Response to the Preaching of Amos," *JETS* 28 (1985): 411-20.