

# Amos

According to the Bible, many prophets lived before Amos (see above all Elias and Elijah; cf. Abel, Abraham, Moses; see 1 Samuel 9:9-13; 2 Samuel 12), but he is the first whose prophecies were preserved in a book bearing his name — and always for many it is the favorite and the most important. Although a native of Tecoa, a village on the edge of the desert in the south of Judah (1:1; 7:12-13), Amos practiced his prophetic calling as an itinerate “missionary” to Israel (ca. 760 B.C.), during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-743 B.C.), an epoch of notable prosperity in the northern kingdom (7:15). Saint Augustine marveled that a simple shepherd from Judah wrote such a book, but we now understand that, before being called to fulfill his prophetic mission in the north, Amos was a well educated landowner (“dresser of sycamores”), sheep breeder, who enjoyed a good economic position (DHHBE, 1:1 and 7:14, notes; → 1 Peter).

The texts commonly seen as later additions are the three doxologies (Amos 4:13, 5:8-9; 9:5-6), perhaps added for the liturgical reading; the prophecies against Tyre, Edom and Judah (1:9-12; 2:4-5), which would date from the Exile; and 9:11-15 (perhaps with 9:8b-10). The Jerusalem Bible explains: “What is said of the crumbling house of David, of the revenge against Edom, of the return and reestablishment of Israel, assumes the epoch of the Exile, and can be attributed, with certain other touches, to a Deuteronomist edition of the book” (BJ 1088). Other Bible scholars, however, conclude that the entire book comes from Amos himself, without any rereading whatsoever by disciples or previous editors <sup>1</sup>. At any rate, the current focus is on the literary study of our “canonical” received text, although some suggest that it is better to enter from “the back door”, since, if we begin our reading with the hope and exilic perspective of the conclusion (Amos 9:11-15), we will avoid a few traditional errors <sup>2</sup>.

## Outline

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| 1:1-2    | Prologue: Yahweh, the liberating God, roars like a lion against the oppressors |
| 1:3-2:3  | Denunciations of violence and oppression in six neighboring pagan nations      |
| 2:4-5    | and against Judah, for its idolatry and for not adhering to the Law.           |
| 2:6-16   | Denunciations of oppression, violence and idolatry in Israel.                  |
| 3:1-6:14 | Denunciations of oppression and threats over Israel.                           |
| 7:1-9:10 | Five visions of judgment — 7:1-2, locusts; fire; 7-9, plumb line;              |
| 8:1-3    | Basket of ripe fruit;  |
| 9:1-4    | The crumbling of the sanctuary.  |
| 9:11-15  | Epilogue: future liberation and Restoration of Israel.                         |

1. **The Poor.** David Pleins<sup>3</sup> points out three fundamental structures which Amos denounces as causing poverty in Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.:

- (1) creditors, debtors and slavery;
- (2) the trampling of justice at the city “gate” (= the court);
- (3) fraud and the manipulation of prices in the market.

6 Thus says Yahweh:

For three transgressions of Israel,  
And for four, I will not revoke [the punishment];  
Because they sell the just/innocent (*tsadiq*) for silver  
And the needy (*'ebyon*) for a pair of sandals.

7 they trample the head of the poor (*dallim*) into the dust of the earth,  
and push the poor-oppressed-humiliated (*'anawim*) out of the way (*derek*);  
father and son go into (*halak* = lie down with?) the [same] girl [slave/goddess?],  
so that my name is profaned.

8 they lay themselves down beside every altar  
on garments taken in pledge  
and in the house of their god[s] they drink  
wine bought with fines they imposed.

Amos does not speak of any sin or vice of the poor as a cause of their situation (→ Proverbs), but refers to the poor as (1) a “just/innocent” sold into slavery, (2) a “poor mendicant (*'ebyon*)”, (3) those “impoverished” by the loss of land, (4) “oppressed/humiliated (*'anawim*)”, (5) the slaves prostituted in the sanctuary (see **3. Sexual Minorities** below), and (6) debtors who had given their clothing as a guarantee to the creditor. Thus, utilizing six expressions, in 2:6-8 Amos reflects the paradigm of the Exodus and insists that the dominant sin in Israel is the oppression of the poor and the weak (see, also, the oppressions *'ashuqim*, in Israel in 3:9). Whether by legal but cruel mechanisms (2:6b, 8), by manipulation of the judicial system (2:7a), or by sexual exploitation of young slaves given over to prostitution in the sanctuary (7b), the strong and the rich abused their power and privilege to violate the rights and the dignity of the poor and the weak – always finding in idolatrous religion an ideology to justify their sin.

Notably, as the analysis of → James in the New Testament shows, the same mechanisms of oppression and the tactics of the oppressors continued for eight centuries<sup>4</sup>:

- (1) Economic and judicial mechanisms, especially against poor debtors (James 2:1-12);
- (2) Ambitious and petulant merchants (4:13-17; see “covet”, 1:14-15; 4:2);
- (3) Affluent landlords that retain salaries (5:4).

Much of the same basic vocabulary for the poor and for mechanisms of oppression is repeated in a second text (Amos 8:4-6):

4 Hear this, you that oppress/trample on the needy (*'ebyon*)

and bring to ruin the poor-oppressed-humiliated (‘*anawim*) of the land,  
 5 saying, “When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain;  
 and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?  
 We will make the ephah small the shekel great,  
 and practice deceit with false balances,  
 6 buying the poor (*dallim*) for silver  
 and the needy (‘*ebyon*) for a pair of sandals,  
 And selling even the sweepings of the wheat.”

Amos again makes it clear that the poor did not become poor by their own vices, but as a consequence of the dishonest, oppressive and violent practices of the rich and powerful elite. The prophet repeats the same three words to describe the poor that he used in 2:6-8, and makes a special point of the violence and of two of the most common mechanisms of oppression: fraud in the marketplace, enslavement of the debtors; the violence can be the result of the manipulation of the justice system with bribes and false witnesses. James Mays points out how archeology confirms that Amos’ accusations are neither the prophet’s fantasies nor caricatures, since in the excavations of Tirza of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the archeologists found markets with two sets of weights: one for selling and the other for buying<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, these excavations demonstrated that an economic revolution was occurring: in the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. houses were all of the same size, but by the 8<sup>th</sup> century a sector of large and luxurious houses existed along side another sector of small, poor houses<sup>6</sup> (see Amos 3:13 and 6:11).

In the third classic text where Amos denounces the oppression of the poor and weak (5:7, 10-13), the prophet emphasizes the denial of justice in the courts as an expression of oppression:

7 Ah, you that turn judgment (*mishpat*) to wormwood,  
 and bring liberating justice (*tsedeqah*) to the ground!....  
 10 They hate the one who reproves in the gate (the court)  
 and abhor the one who speaks the truth.  
 11 Therefore because you trample on the poor  
 and take from them levies of grain....  
 12 You who oppress (*tsarar*) the innocent, who take bribes,  
 and push aside the needy (‘*ebyonim*) in the gate (the court)...

Again, reflecting the Exodus paradigm, Amos insists that Israel’s great sin is the oppression of the poor and the weak, repeating two basic terms for the poor (*dal* and ‘*ebyonim*). Oppression is expressed first as the denial of justice (5:7), the rejection of truthful testimony in defense of the accused poor (5:10), metaphors for violence (“trample on”, 5:11a; “pushing aside”, 12b) and other words that signify oppression (*tsarar* I, 5:12a). Amos also describes enemy nations’ acts of oppression against Israel (see the plundering, 3:11; cf. the reign of violence, 6:3; the oppression, 6:14). For a discussion of the fourth classic text, where Amos again denounces the oppression of the poor and the weak, see **2. Women** below.

Since Amos emphasizes oppression as the fundamental cause of poverty in Israel, he cannot advocate the band-aids offered by a “conservative with compassion” as an adequate

response. Rather he calls the elite oppressors of Israel to radical conversion: to abandon the practice of oppression and to begin a new practice of liberating justice and solidarity with the poor and the weak. All the hypocritical religiosity and pompous piety of the elite is an abomination for Yahweh:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in  
Your solemn assemblies (5:21)...  
But let judgment (*mishpat*) roll down like waters,  
and liberating justice (*tsedaqah*) like an ever flowing stream (5:24).

For Israel's elite, the only alternative to the new practice of liberating justice would be to suffer the judgment of the "Day of Yahweh" — an expression that occurs for the first time in Amos — as a judgment against the oppressors, instead of the hoped-for liberation of the oppressed (5:18-20; see BJ and DHHBE, notes). Concerning God's wrath against oppressors (2:1,4,6; 2:6; cf. 1:3,6,9,11,13), see → Zephaniah and Exodus 22:21-24.

Although Amos offers profound possibilities as a source of re-readings in the style of the liberation theologies, as contrasted with the post-modern capitalist world economy, the book contains no recipes or prescriptions for resolving our crisis which also threatens to lead us to destruction<sup>7</sup>. So, to take advantage of the wisdom of the book today, we must note the prophet's option Amos for the poor in the larger context of his focus on the earth (1:1-2; 4:1-3; 7:10-11) and his option for life (5:4-6, 14-15). Thus, instead of discounting the three doxologies to the Creator (4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6) as later additions, we may appreciate them for their ecological implications, since on such a fragile planet the poor and the rich, women and men, sexual minorities and those married with children must all be concerned about our common well-being<sup>8</sup>. However, obviously, for Amos the Exodus paradigm is much more fundamental than the traditions concerning creation (Genesis 1-2): "The Exodus manifests Yahweh's role as God of Nations, even of Israel's enemies ...Yahweh had acted in the history of the Philistines and Arameans as well as in that of Israel (9:7)"<sup>9</sup>:

Yahweh declares:  
"Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?  
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,  
and the Philistines from Caphtor  
and the Arameans from Kir?" (9:7; see 2:10; 3:2)<sup>10</sup>

Thus, for Amos, the liberation of the Israelite slaves in the Exodus shows the character of Yahweh as Lord of history and liberator of *all* the oppressed of whatever nationality or color.<sup>11</sup>

**2. Women.** In the fourth classic text of Amos concerning the poor — who were without doubt mostly women and children — the prophet denounces the women of the elite (rich, married women) as also being guilty (4:1):

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,  
Who are on Mount Samaria,  
Who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,  
Who say to their husbands,  
“Bring something to drink!”

Although 4:1 uses feminine forms, a description of the judgment then follows (the Exile), which all the guilty will suffer (4:2a; masculine plural in the Hebrew). The language is as strong as in the other texts, but is not as explicit with regard to the mechanisms of oppression (unjust practices in the market and the courts) — only referring to one apparent addiction to wine. Probably the denunciations in other texts of people with luxurious houses and furnishings and a sybaritic lifestyle enables us to understand in more detail how those elite women lived (6:4-7):

- 4 Alas for those of you who lie on beds of ivory,  
and lounge on their couches,  
and eat lambs from the flock,  
and calves from the stall;
- 5 who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp  
and like David improvise on musical instruments;
- 6 who drink wine from bowls,  
and anoint themselves with finest oils,  
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
- 7 Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,  
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

Since women receive such little attention in the Bible, many modern Biblicists express concern that one of the few references to women in Amos is so negative as to be prejudicial and insulting, if not outright misogynist. However, Judith Sanderson points out that describing women with the metaphor of “cows” was not a gratuitous insult to the feminine body, since it was common to compare humans to animals – see the referred beloved praised as “a mare among Pharaohs chariots. Song of Songs 1:9! (Cf. 2:9; 4:5; 7:3.) The modern reader, on seeing the prophet compare women to cows, perhaps first thinks of fat, ugly bodies, but in many epochs to be fat was considered beautiful, and the prophet probably wanted rather to show the high social status, the prosperity and apathy of these women<sup>12</sup> (in 2 Kings 24:15 the Hebrew describes the leaders as “sheep”). Moreover, according to the norms of patriarchal societies, women must humbly serve their “lords/husbands”, but these women, in addition to being addicted to wine, are very “domineering”: “Bring us something to drink!” (Amos 4:1). In another text the prophet denounces Amos for violence against pregnant women during a war of conquest (1:13; cf. the reference to “beautiful young women” in 8:13). Concerning 2:7b, see below.

**3. Sexual Minorities.** As Judith Sanderson points out<sup>13</sup>, the ambiguous reference to the “girl” in Amos 2:7c-8 has prompted five common interpretations

- 7c father and son go (walk) in to (*halak* = to lie with) the [same] *girl*,  
so that my holy name is profaned.

8 they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge;  
and in the house of their gods they drink wine bought with fines they  
imposed.

(1) She is a *domestic slave* (BJ notes), since she is called “girl”, and the context speaks of socio-economic abuses (2:6-7ab; she would be forced to have relations with both father and son; see NISB, note 2:7).

(2) She is a *common prostitute*. See 1 Cor. 6:12-20; → 1 Corinthians.

(3) She is a *cultic prostitute* in the sanctuary, thus they have to walk to lay with her and perform the activities in 2:8; see Hosea 4:14 and Deut. 23:17. Thus in Amos 7:17 the prophet warns that the wife of Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, would become a prostitute.

(4) A man had sexual relations with a *young girl* (and had to marry her), but his father interfered with the relationship, breaking the law that prohibits sexual relations with the daughter-in-law (Lev. 18:15; 20:12, a type of incest). See 1 Cor. 5:1-8; → 1 Corinthians.

(5) “Every man and his father (for generations) walk [to a sanctuary to worship] the well known Young Girl”, who would be *the goddess of the sanctuary*. Thus it would not literally be a young girl, and there are no sexual relations<sup>14</sup>.

There is no consensus, but perhaps it would be better to combine (1) with (3), since many cultic prostitutes were slaves, which explains why the previous context speaks of socio-economic oppression, while the later context asserts a cultic sin. Generally in the Hebrew Bible idolatry represents an ideology that seeks to justify and rationalize oppression.

Determining a correct interpretation arises from the fact that the language of the Bible — as is common in all languages — is euphemistic when it refers to sexual themes. At any rate, as Judith Sanderson concludes:

Amos said nothing at all about the profession or status of the girl, nor her willingness or unwillingness, nor the results of the males’ actions for her, choosing rather to focus solely on the profanation of God’s name. The girl got lost in the theological accusation.<sup>15</sup>

If we reject the fifth interpretation (the Girl as goddess), she at least clearly represents a sexual minority and suffers oppression, whether as a domestic slave, a common prostitute or – most probably – as a slave prostitute in a sanctuary. Moreover, the reference to the banquet (*mirzakh*) in Amos 6:7 (see Jeremiah 16:5) is commonly understood as a banquet in a place of mourning, a type of social club and funeral parlor (*marzeakh*) common among the elite<sup>16</sup>, where members perhaps also practiced sexual rites<sup>17</sup>.

Amos himself appears to be another example of the prophet of the shaman type, an itinerant spiritual leader, unmarried, without any particular interest in women (4:1; → Ecclesiastes, Joel) — a “rebel”, but with a cause. After being accused by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, of conspiring (*qashar*) treason against the king (7:10), Amos answered that, although “I am

no prophet, nor a prophet's son", Yahweh had called him to prophesy (7:14). Thus, like Moses (against the Pharaoh), Jesus (against the local oligarchy of Jerusalem) and Paul (against the Caesar and the Roman Empire), Amos' authority was a *subversive authority* against that which the priest, the king and Israel's elite that supported them attempted to possess. Confronted with these elites and their dominant institutions, this "minor" prophet, by his courage and solidarity with the oppressed, left a major mark on human history.

**Note:** Concerning the translation of **Amos 2:7b**:

"...turn aside the way (*derek*) of the oppressed-humiliated-poor ('*anawim*).

The translations vary:

- "deny justice to the oppressed" (NIV)
- "push the afflicted out of the way" (NRSV)
- "thrust the rights of the oppressed to one side" (NJB)
- "turn aside the way of the afflicted" (ESV)
- "make the humble walk a twisted course!" (JSB).

Some understand "way" literally and conclude that Amos (like Job) speaks of the arrogant who thrust the weak off the road (see arrogant chauffeurs who send pedestrians scurrying like chickens in modern cities; Job 24:4; Isa 10:2; 29:21; Amos 5:12). Others take "way" as a metaphor for the justice due to the oppressed poor, which is denied by bribed judges. Probably it is best to combine these two alternatives and understand that the oppressed seek to approach the city gate to secure a hearing and liberating justice, but are thrust aside from the way (NRSV) and then denied the justice due them at the gate/court (NIV). See the discussion in Anderson and Freedman (1989:316-318).

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Anderson y David N. Freedman 1989:141-144

<sup>2</sup> Haroldo Reimer 1992, cited in Marie-Theres Wacker 1999:325; → Romans 16

<sup>3</sup> 2001:369-374

<sup>4</sup> Craig Blomberg 1999:147-160; Hanks 2001:68; 2000:202

<sup>5</sup> Mays 1969:144

<sup>6</sup> Mays 1969:2-3; cf. Dale Manor 1992:576

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Theres Wacker 1999:326

<sup>8</sup> Wacker 1999:326

<sup>9</sup> Mays 1969:8-9

<sup>10</sup> Norman Gottwald 1985:356-357

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 103:6-7; Hanks 1982/83:23/5; the Ethiopians were black; DHHBE note 9:7

<sup>12</sup> Sanderson 1998:221

<sup>13</sup> Sanderson 1998:220-221

<sup>14</sup> Sanderson 1998:221.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson y Freedman 1989:318-321

<sup>16</sup> Anderson y Freedman 1989:566-569

<sup>17</sup> Rosenbaum 1999:32

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