

Notes on Amos

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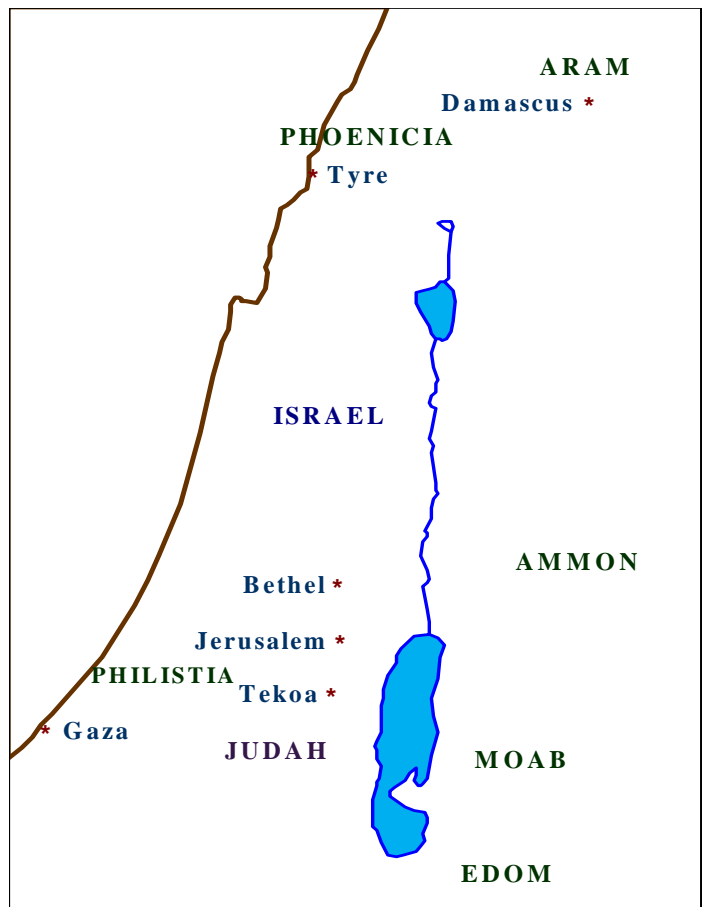
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Introduction

TITLE AND WRITER

The title of the book comes from its writer. The prophet's name means "burden-bearer" or "load-carrier."

Amos was a "shepherd" (Heb. *noqed*; cf. 2 Kings 3:4) or sheep breeder, and he described himself as a herdsman (Heb. *boqer*; 7:14). He was more than a shepherd (Heb. *ro'ah*), though some scholars deny this.¹ He evidently owned or managed large herds of sheep, and or goats, and was probably in charge of shepherds. Amos also described himself as a grower of sycamore figs (7:14). Sycamore fig trees are not true fig trees but a variety of the mulberry family, which produces fig-like fruit. Each fruit had to be scratched or pierced to let the juice flow out so the "fig" could ripen. These trees grew in the tropical Jordan Valley, and around the Dead Sea, to a height of 25 to 50 feet, and bore fruit three or four times a year. They did not grow as well in the higher elevations such as Tekoa, Amos' hometown, so the prophet appears to have farmed at a distance from his home, in addition to tending herds. Tekoa stood 10 miles south of Jerusalem in Judah. Thus, Amos seems to have been a prosperous and influential Judahite, but there is no indication that he was a priest, or had any connection with the



PLACES MENTIONED IN AMOS

¹E.g., C. F. Keil, "Amos," in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 1:233.

royal family or the ruling classes in his land. Amos' natural surroundings had a profound effect on him and his writing (cf. 1:2; 2:9; 3:4-5; 5:19-20, 24; 6:12; 7:1-6; 8:1; 9:3-15).

DATE

Amos ministered during the reigns of King Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 B.C.) and King Uzziah (Azariah) of Judah (792-740 B.C.), specifically two years before "the earthquake" (1:1). Zechariah also referred to a notable earthquake during the reign of Uzziah (Zech. 14:5). Josephus wrote that an earthquake occurred when Uzziah entered the temple and was struck with leprosy (cf. 2 Chron. 26:16-20).² However, this may be simply Jewish tradition. Archaeological excavations at Hazor and Samaria point to evidence of a violent earthquake in Israel about 760 B.C.³ So perhaps Amos ministered about 760 B.C. This date may account for the omission of the name of King Jotham who ruled as coregent with Uzziah from 750-740 B.C. Thus Amos was a contemporary of the other eighth-century prophets: Jonah, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah.

"A flurry of prophetic activity was divinely inaugurated in the eighth century B.C., mainly to warn the northern kingdom of an impending destruction if she did not repent and reverse her way of life."⁴

PLACE OF COMPOSITION

Since Amos lived in the Judean town of Tekoa, he was a prophet from the Southern Kingdom. His hometown served as a defensive warning outpost for the protection of Jerusalem from the south. Similarly, Amos' prophecies were a defensive warning for the protection of Israel from the south.

Amos ministered in the chief center of idolatry in Israel: Bethel, near the southern border of Israel. Amos was a southerner ministering a message of judgment to the northerners of his day.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

Amos prophesied against the Northern Kingdom of Israel (1:1). Yahweh raised him up to announce judgment on Israel because of her covenant unfaithfulness and rebellion against His authority. Amos announced the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, but he also predicted that the Lord would preserve a remnant that was repentant. He would restore this remnant to political prominence and covenant blessing, and through them, draw all nations to Himself. Amos announced a warning to the residents of the Northern Kingdom, but he also held out hope.

²Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 9:10:4.

³Y. Yadin, et al., *Hazor II: An Account of the Second Season of Excavations, 1956*, pp. 24, 26, 36-37; and Philip J. King, *Amos, Hosea, Micah—An Archaeological Commentary*, p. 21.

⁴Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 192.

Amos emphasized God's righteousness; Hosea, his contemporary in the north, God's love. Amos' prophecies are more threatening; Hosea's are more tender. Amos' professional life is a subject of his prophecies; Hosea's home life is a subject of his.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

These were times of political stability, material prosperity, and geographical expansion for both the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms (cf. 1:6; 6:2, 13; 2 Kings 14:23-29; 2 Chron. 26:1-15). Jeroboam II and Uzziah were two of the most competent and effective kings that their respective kingdoms enjoyed. They brought their nations to heights of success, second only to those in Solomon's golden age. Archaeologists have found hundreds of ivory inlays in the excavations of Samaria, proving the Northern Kingdom's prosperity.⁵ The Northern Kingdom was at the height of its power during Jeroboam II's reign. Aram had not recovered from its defeat by Adad-Nirari III of Assyria in 802 B.C., and Assyria had not yet developed into the superpower that it became under Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.).

"Commerce thrived (8:5), an upper class emerged (4:1-3), and expensive homes were built (3:15; 5:11; 6:4, 11). The rich enjoyed an indolent, indulgent lifestyle (6:1-6), while the poor became targets for legal and economic exploitation (2:6-7; 5:7, 10-13; 6:12; 8:4-6). Slavery for debt was easily accepted (2:6; 8:6). Standards of morality had sunk to a low ebb (2:7)."⁶

"In other words the prosperity of Israel was merely a thin veneer over a mass of poverty and misery."⁷

Religion flourished too. The Hebrews participated in the yearly festivals (4:4; 5:5; 8:3, 10) and offered their sacrifices enthusiastically (4:5; 5:21-23). They believed God was with them and considered themselves immune to disaster (5:14, 18-20; 6:1-3; 9:10). Yet they worshipped the native Canaanite deities along with Yahweh.

"If the Prophet Amos were to come to our world today, he would probably feel very much at home; for he lived at a time such as ours when society was changing radically."⁸

UNITY

Almost all scholars agree that the Book of Amos was originally a single book that the prophet Amos wrote. Comparison with the writings of the other eighth-century prophets, plus the consistently vivid and forthright style of Amos, make this conclusion virtually inescapable.⁹

⁵See the *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, 4:1044-46; and D. W. Thomas, ed., *Archaeology and Old Testament Study*, pp. 69-70.

⁶Donald R. Sunukjian, "Amos," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1425.

⁷H. L. Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 64.

⁸Warren W. Wiersbe, "Amos," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, p. 344.

⁹For further discussion, see the commentaries, especially T. E. McComiskey, "Amos," in *Daniel-Minor Prophets*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 270-74.

THEOLOGY

Amos' descriptions of God remind the reader of the descriptions of Him in the first few chapters of Genesis. Amos stressed the sovereignty of Yahweh over history. He controls the movements of peoples (9:7) and the order of nature (4:13; 5:8). The prophet also affirmed the ability of people to submit to or reject the Lord's authority. He reminded his hearers of Yahweh's election of Israel (3:2), but repudiated the popular idea of his day that God would not punish His people.

"Amos, more than any other prophet, urged the responsibility of elective privilege."¹⁰

"Whereas Hosea was crushed with a sense of the unfaithfulness of Israel to the love of God, Amos was outraged at the violence they had done to the justice and righteousness of God. The note he strikes in his prophecy is the counterpart and corollary to the message uttered by [his contemporary,] Hosea."¹¹

Like many of the other prophets, Amos spoke of the day of the Lord. He saw it as a time when God would judge sin, even in His own people (5:18-20). Another day would come, however, when David's kingdom would be restored and would include both Jews and Gentiles (9:13-15).¹²

Amos' emphases on man and sin emphasize idolatry and social injustice, frequent themes in the other writing prophets, but especially prominent in this book.

"No other prophet was inspired to give such a proportion of scrutiny to the justice system of Israel."¹³

STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Scholars have observed that Amos wrote in the covenant-lawsuit structure and style that was common in the ancient Near East in his day (the *rib* oracle).¹⁴ His words are covenant-lawsuit addresses.¹⁵ The Great King (God) is introduced in the third person (1:2), and then begins to speak in the first person (1:3). Amos' phraseology illustrates the covenant background against which it was written, namely, the Mosaic Covenant.¹⁶ One

¹⁰Ibid., p. 276.

¹¹*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 932.

¹²For further discussion of Amos' theological emphases, see Billy K. Smith, "Amos," in *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, pp. 31-33.

¹³Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, pp. 291-92.

¹⁴E.g., Jeffrey Niehaus, "Amos," in *The Minor Prophets*, pp. 317-26. See R. Campbell Thompson and Richard W. Hutchinson, "The Excavations on the Temple of Nabu at Nineveh," *Archaeologia* 79 (1929):103-48; R. Campbell Thompson and Max E. L. Mallowan, "The British Museum Excavations at Nineveh, 1931-32," *University of Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 20 (1933):71-127; and Wilfred G. Lambert, "Three Unpublished Fragments of the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 18 (1957-58):38-51.

¹⁵See Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959):285-95.

¹⁶See a chart of the phrases that appear both in Amos and in the Pentateuch in Niehaus, p. 322.

writer called the genre of the entire book a covenant enforcement document.¹⁷ Other stylistic features that Amos employed prominently include repetition (e.g., 1:3, 4, 5), summary quotation (e.g., 4:1; 6:13; 8:5-6; 9:10), and irony (e.g., 4:1).

"Amos makes use of a wide range of literary devices in presenting his oracles: metaphors, simile, epithets, proverbs, short narratives, sarcasm, direct vituperation, vision, taunt, dialogue, irony, satire, parody—a virtual anthology of prophetic forms' (Ryken 1993, 342)."¹⁸

". . . he is the author of the purest and most classical Hebrew in the entire Old Testament."¹⁹

Amos was probably an impressive and effective speaker, as well as a gifted writer, since his writing style is rhetorical. He used short, uncomplicated sentences. He often asked questions and provided explanations. He also knew the power of repetition. He illustrated his points well with figures of speech and lessons from nature. Perhaps after he finished preaching in Bethel, he returned to Tekoa and wrote down his prophecies on a scroll.

OUTLINE

- I. Prologue 1:1-2
 - A. Introduction 1:1
 - B. Theme 1:2
- II. Prophetic messages that Amos delivered 1:3—6:14
 - A. Oracles against nations 1:3—2:16
 - 1. An oracle against Aram 1:3-5
 - 2. An oracle against Philistia 1:6-8
 - 3. An oracle against Phoenicia 1:9-10
 - 4. An oracle against Edom 1:11-12
 - 5. An oracle against Ammon 1:13-15
 - 6. An oracle against Moab 2:1-3
 - 7. An oracle against Judah 2:4-5
 - 8. An oracle against Israel 2:6-16
 - B. Messages of judgment against Israel chs. 3—6
 - 1. The first message on sins against God and man ch. 3
 - 2. The second message on women, worship, and willfulness ch. 4
 - 3. The third message on injustice 5:1-17
 - 4. The fourth message on unacceptable worship 5:18-27
 - 5. The fifth message on complacency and pride ch. 6

¹⁷Stephen J. Bramer, "The Literary Genre of the Book of Amos," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (January-March 1999):43-49.

¹⁸Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 430. Their quotation is from Leland Ryken, "Amos," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*.

¹⁹George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, p. 50.

- III. Visions that Amos saw chs. 7—9
 - A. Three short visions of impending judgment 7:1-9
 - 1. The swarming locusts 7:1-3
 - 2. The devouring fire 7:4-6
 - 3. The plumb line 7:7-9
 - B. An intervening incident 7:10-17
 - 1. The challenge 7:10-13
 - 2. The response 7:14-17
 - C. Two more visions of impending judgment chs. 8—9
 - 1. The basket of summer fruit ch. 8
 - 2. The Lord standing by the altar ch. 9

MESSAGE

The Book of Amos is distinctive from the other prophetic books of the Old Testament in two respects.

First, the prophet Amos was not a prophet in the same sense that the other prophets were prophets. He was not recognized as a prophet among his contemporaries. He had not been to one of the schools of the prophets. He had not been disciplined by another recognized prophet. He was what we would call today a "layman," and an untrained layman at that. The other prophets claimed to be prophets, but Amos claimed to be a farmer and shepherd. God burdens some Christians to leave "secular" employment to announce His messages. They can identify with Amos. This was his calling, too.

Second, the prophecy of Amos is not a prophecy in the same sense that the other prophetic books were prophecies. Amos' perspective was wider than most of the other prophets. An evidence of this is that he did not refer to God as the God of Israel, as the other prophets did. Instead, he thought of Him, and referred to Him, as the God of the whole earth. Moreover, Amos grouped Judah and Israel with Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab. He saw Yahweh as sovereign over all these city-states and nations, not just over Judah and Israel primarily. Whereas Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel all recorded messages of judgment against foreign nations, they focused on Judah and Israel particularly in their books. Amos focused on Israel particularly, but he viewed Judah and Israel as two among many nations that God would judge for the same sins.

In Amos we see God as detached from the prophetic order, and from every nation, yet directing through a man uniquely chosen as His prophet, and directing over the affairs of all nations. I do not want to overemphasize this point, because these are more differences in degree than in kind.

There are at least three timeless values of the Book of Amos. It reveals the philosophy, the practice, and the promise of God's divine government.

Amos gives us the philosophy of the divine government in the comprehensiveness of its outlook. The prophet did not argue for God's universal sovereignty, nor did he even

affirm it. He assumed it and applied it. In particular, he explained the standard by which God exercises His universal sovereignty, the principle by which He rules, and the patience that marks His governing.

The standard by which God measures nations is their treatment of other nations. God would judge the Arameans because they were cruel to their neighbors. He would judge the Philistines because they bought and sold other human beings. The Phoenicians traded in human lives, in spite of a covenant in which they pledged not to do so. The Edomites were unforgiving and took revenge. The Ammonites were cruel. The Moabites were violent and vindictive. The Judahites had despised the Lord's instruction regarding what their treatment of others should be. And the Israelites had oppressed the poor and needy, even within their own borders. These are all expressions of violations of human rights. All these nations violated the terms of the Noahic Covenant (Gen. 9:5-6).

The principle that lies behind this standard is that privilege brings responsibility. God's harshest judgment fell on His own people, who had the most light. The pagan nations were guilty of violating human rights, too, but their punishment would be less, because they did not have the privilege of having as much of God's revealed will as the Israelites did. We see the same principle in operation in Hosea and in Romans 1—3. All people are under divine wrath, because everyone has failed to respond positively to the light that they have. But those who have more light fall under more severe judgment, because they sin with a greater knowledge of God's will (cf. Luke 12:48). Similarly, national privilege determines national responsibility. The United States has had great privilege, and so has great responsibility to God.

The patience that marks God's sovereign governing of the world comes out clearly in Amos, too. The phrase "for three transgressions, yes, for four" reminds us that God does not judge nations for only one transgression. Every transgression will receive punishment from God, but judgment does not fall immediately. God could have judged these nations much sooner than He did, but He was patient and waited until they had sinned repeatedly. In Genesis we read, "The iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete" (Gen. 15:16). God waited to judge all these nations until they had amassed so much sin that He could delay no longer to judge them. Fortunately, God deals with us the same way, or all of us would have died long ago. His dealings with groups of people—nations—depends on the conduct of the individuals in those groups.

If cruelty to other nations makes God angry, it is because His heart is set on kindness. If oppression stirs up His wrath, it is because He desires people to live in peace. If violations of human rights call down His judgment, it is because He longs that people experience happiness and well-being. His sovereign government always moves toward the best conditions for humanity, and He resists what disrupts those conditions. Amos closes with a picture of the world order that God desires and will bring to pass eventually. It is a picture of peace.

The second timeless value of this book is its presentation of Israel as a case study of Yahweh's government. No nation had so much light as Israel had, or a closer relationship to God than Israel did (3:1-2, 7). But in Israel, privilege had borne the fruit of sin and would end with judgment.

When God wanted to convict His people of their sins, He described the luxury and wantonness of Israel's women (4:1). John Ruskin, the English poet, claimed that war would cease when enough pure women demanded it. Amos pictured the depravity of the Israelites by describing the evil women of the nation promoting it. He also described it ironically this way: "Enter Bethel and transgress; in Gilgal multiply transgression! Bring your sacrifices every morning, and your tithes every three days" (4:4). The Israelites were going to places of worship to engage in sinful rituals, not to worship. A modern equivalent would be: "Let's go to church to meet someone of the opposite sex that we can sin with."

Israel had sinned in failing to yield to Yahweh's chastisement (4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11). None of God's judgments on His people had moved them to repent. The Israelites who longed to see "the day of the Lord" failed to realize that it would be a day of judgment for them (5:18-20). Those of them who never gave "the day of the Lord" a thought, and were at ease in Zion, needed to realize that this day was coming.

The terrible descriptions of Israel's sins in this book appear all the worse because of Israel's privileged position. These were His chosen people. He did nothing without revealing it to them through His servants the prophets (3:7). Yet the Israelites were guilty of the sins of wanton womanhood, of refusal to submit to discipline, of professing a desire for God to act, and of indifference to the fact that He *would* act in judgment.

In five visions, Amos pronounced judgment that would fall on the Israelites. These were: the visions of the locusts, the fire, the plumb line, the basket of summer fruit, and the altar of judgment. In all of them, Amos pictured divine judgment determined, temporarily restrained, and finally executed. These prophecies of coming judgment must have sounded strange to the Israelites, who were then living lives of ease and material prosperity under King Jeroboam II. After all, had not God said He would bless the godly with prosperity? How could Amos then say that the Israelites were such great sinners? Furthermore, Amos was a "nobody" in society, a despised Judahite, a rural dolt.

Because Israel's light had been clear, her judgment would be pervasive. She had failed to take advantage of her privileges and had lived selfishly. Consequently her ruin would be complete.

The third timeless value of this book is the promise of ultimate restoration that it contains at the very end. Restoration would come in three stages. First, there would be preliminary restoration. God would restore the Davidic dynasty to power (9:11). Then, progressive restoration of the nation would follow (9:12-14). Finally, there would be permanent restoration (9:15). These blessings will all come on the Jews after Jesus Christ returns to the earth at His second coming.

Amos, then, reveals the sovereign government of the God of all the earth. We discover His philosophy of government, we see a case study of His government, and we learn of the outcome of His government in this book.

The message of Amos is that God blesses people so they can be channels of blessing to others, not so they may simply squander His blessings selfishly. My prayer is often, "Make me a blessing to someone today." Christians sometimes sing, "Channels only,

blessed Master, but with all Thy wondrous power flowing through us, Thou canst use us every day and every hour." We need to ask ourselves often, "How can I help someone today?" not "How can I get someone to help me today." Christians should be givers more than takers. God blesses us as we bless others.

This message is applicable mainly to national life, because national life is the primary focus of the revelation in Amos. But obviously Christians can apply the lessons of Amos to our individual lives as well.

God still rules over all nations, not just His chosen people. He still opposes nations that violate human rights, and He will judge them. The old order may pass away with the turning of the pages of the calendar, but the divine order does not change. God remains the same. God's methods change, His requirements for His people change, His dispensations (household rules) change, but His underlying attitudes toward people do not change. Cruelty is as hateful to God today as it ever has been.

Another major lesson of Amos is that people who have the light of God's truth live with greater responsibility than those who live in darkness. The light exposes our sins, and when we see our sins, we must humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, or we will experience His judgment. Christians have a greater responsibility to judge themselves, "that we be not judged," than the unsaved. We may be judged, not with separation from God eternally, but with separation from much future blessing.

Amos charged Israel with injustice, avarice, oppression, immorality, profanity, blasphemy, and sacrilege: seven deadly sins. These same sins characterize believers today. We are in danger of doing what the Israelites in Amos' day of material prosperity did. We can wrongly conclude that our prosperity is a reward from God: that He is blessing us for our goodness. All the while we may be preparing ourselves for judgment. It is only as we turn from our sins, in profound repentance, that we can live. Yet if judgment comes, its purpose is not to destroy us, but to restore us to the Lord.

We must distinguish between secular nations and the church of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the principles that Amos reveals are applicable to both groups. The nations with greater light have greater responsibility. The church has greater light and has greater responsibility. When nations fail to take advantage of their light, they become degraded. When the church fails to take advantage of its light, it becomes degraded.

These principles are also applicable to individuals. God's people are greatly blessed people. Unfortunately, many Christians conclude that because "there is therefore now no condemnation in Christ Jesus," there is also no accountability to Christ Jesus. We must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive payment for what we have done with the light that God has given us (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 3; 2 Cor. 5). This is an awesome thought that should sober and humble us every day we live. We need to prepare for our "day of the Lord," when we will see our Savior, stand before Him, and give an account of our stewardship to Him. Amos spoke to the Israelites as the people of God. Christians are the people of God in our day, and we need to heed His strong words of warning as well.²⁰

²⁰Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:197-211.

Exposition

I. PROLOGUE 1:1-2

The first two verses of the book constitute a prologue. They contain an explanation of what follows, an identification of the writer, the time of his writing, and his theme.

A. INTRODUCTION 1:1

What follows are the words (i.e., collected messages, cf. Prov. 30:1; 31:1; Eccles. 1:1; Jer. 1:1) of Amos (lit. burden-bearer), who was one of the shepherders who lived in the Judean town of Tekoa, 10 miles south of Jerusalem. This town stood on a comparatively high elevation, from which its residents could see the Mount of Olives to the north, as well as the surrounding countryside in every direction. Amos' words expressed what he saw in visions that came to him from the Lord. These visions concerned Israel, the Northern Kingdom at the time when he wrote, namely, during the reigns of King Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II (the son of Joash), king of Israel. Here, though not always in Amos, "Israel" must mean the Northern Kingdom rather than the combined people of Israel and Judah, as it often means in the prophets, because of the many references to people and places in the Northern Kingdom that follow.

"The main audience for the book was to be those who would read it in Judah in the decades and centuries that followed. It was for this audience that the Judean-oriented superscription was composed."²¹

Amos wrote sometime after the visions the Lord gave him "two years before the earthquake," which was perhaps about 762 B.C.²²

"In this [ancient Near Eastern] culture an earthquake would not have been viewed as a mere natural occurrence, but as an omen of judgment. Amos had warned that the Lord would shake the earth (see 8:8; 9:1, 5, as well as 4:12-13). When the earthquake occurred just two years after he delivered his message, it signaled that the Lord was ready to make the words of Amos a reality."²³

"The earthquake which shook Jerusalem two years after the appearance of Amos as prophet, was a harbinger of the judgment threatened by Him against the two kingdoms of Israel and the surrounding nations,—a practical declaration on the part of God that He would verify the word of His servant; and the allusion to this divine sign on the part of the prophet was an admonition to Israel to lay to heart the word of the Lord which he had announced to them."²⁴

²¹Stuart, p. 299.

²²See my comments above under "writer" and "date" in the Introduction section of these notes.

²³Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets*, p. 378.

²⁴Keil, 1:234.

This introductory verse has been called "the most complete superscription to be found in all of prophetic literature."²⁵

"The opening words make it clear that what follows is a covenant lawsuit commanded by Israel's suzerain, the Lord himself."²⁶

B. THEME 1:2

This verse summarizes the message that Amos received from the Lord. Amos reported that Yahweh roared from Zion, as a lion roars before it devours its prey or as thunder precedes a severe storm (cf. 3:4, 8; Jer. 25:30; Hos. 5:14; 11:10; 13:7). Yahweh was about to judge. "Yahweh" is the first word in the Hebrew sentence—usually a verb comes first—and so is emphatic by position. The Lord spoke from Zion (Jerusalem, also emphatic by position) because that is where He manifested Himself in a localized sense to the Israelites of Amos' day. In Israel, the primary worship centers were Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12—13). All the land would mourn, from the shepherds' pastures in the lowland to the summit of Mt. Carmel (a merism), because the Lord would dry up the land. This was one of the promises of judgment if God's people proved unfaithful to His covenant with them, the Mosaic Covenant (Deut. 28:20-24; cf. Lev. 26:22; Deut. 32:24). "Yahweh" was God's covenant name, and it connotes holiness and power (cf. Exod. 3:5; 19:10-25). However, since oracles announcing judgment on neighbor nations, as well as on Israel, follow, the extent of God's judgment would go beyond Israel's territory and Israel's covenant (cf. Isa. 24:4-6; 26:20-21). The mention of Mt. Carmel, nevertheless, fixes the primary site in Israel. Most of this book records messages of judgment against Israel. The theme of the book is practical righteousness (cf. James).

II. PROPHETIC MESSAGES THAT AMOS DELIVERED 1:3—6:14

The Book of Amos consists of words (oracles, 1:3—6:14) and visions (chs. 7—9), though these sections also contain short sub-sections of other types of material.

A. ORACLES AGAINST NATIONS 1:3—2:16

An oracle is a message of judgment. Amos proceeded to deliver eight of these, seven against Israel's neighbors, including Judah (1:3—2:5), and one against Israel (2:6—6:14). The order is significant. The nations mentioned first were foreign, but those mentioned next were the blood relatives of the Israelites, and Judah was its closest kin. Upon hearing this list, the Israelites would have felt "a noose of judgment about to tighten round their [the Israelites' own] throats."²⁷ This is the "rhetoric of entrapment."²⁸

"The prophet began with the distant city of Damascus and, like a hawk circling its prey, moved in ever-tightening circles, from one country to another, till at last he pounced on Israel. One can imagine Amos's hearers

²⁵Shalom M. Paul, *Amos*, p. 33.

²⁶Niehaus, p. 336.

²⁷J. A. Motyer, *The Day of the Lion: The Message of Amos*, p. 50.

²⁸R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p. 144. Cf. Isa. 28.

approving the denunciation of these heathen nations. They could even applaud God's denunciation of Judah because of the deep-seated hostility between the two kingdoms that went as far back as the dissolution of the united kingdom after Solomon. But Amos played no favorites; he swooped down on the unsuspecting Israelites as well in the severest language and condemned them for their crimes."²⁹

Each oracle follows the same basic pattern. First, Amos declared the judgment to come. Second, he defended the judgment by explaining the reason for it. Third, he described the coming judgment. Smith described this pattern, which occurs with some variations in the oracles to follow, as a "messenger speech."³⁰ It contains five elements: introductory formula, certainty of judgment, charge of guilt, announcement of punishment, and concluding formula.

"All the things condemned by Amos were recognized as evil in themselves, not merely in Israel, but by all the nations of the western Fertile Crescent."³¹

Other major collections of oracles against foreign neighbors appear in Isaiah (chs. 13—17, 19, 21, 23, 34), Jeremiah (chs. 46—51), and Ezekiel (chs. 25—32). One might consider all of Obadiah and Nahum as oracles against foreign nations as well. In fact, all the prophetic books except Daniel and Hosea contain some condemnation of Israel's neighbor nations.³²

1. An oracle against Aram 1:3-5

1:3 The expression "for three transgressions [Heb. *pasha'im*, rebellions, i.e., against the universal Sovereign; cf. Gen. 9:5-17] and for four" is one of Amos' trademark phrases (cf. vv. 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). It means *for numerous transgressions* (cf. Job 5:19; 33:29; Ps. 62:11-12; Prov. 6:16; 30:15-16, 18-19, 21-23, 29-31; Eccles. 11:2; Mic. 5:5-6). "Three transgressions" represents fullness, and the fourth, overflow. Amos cited just the last transgression, the one that "broke the camel's back" and made judgment inevitable, or possibly the representative one, for Israel's enemies.³³ The phrase may also be a poetic way of describing seven transgressions, symbolizing completeness.³⁴ Limberg observed that the number *seven* plays a significant role in the structure of the whole book and in the makeup of certain of the sayings.³⁵ This may have been a way

²⁹McComiskey, pp. 281-82.

³⁰Smith, p. 44. See also F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Amos*, pp. 341-69.

³¹Ellison, p. 72.

³²See the chart of oracles against foreign nations in Stuart, pp. 405-6.

³³J. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary*, pp. 23-24.

³⁴Meir Weiss, "The Pattern of Numerical Sequence in Amos 1—2, A Re-examination," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967):418.

³⁵J. Limburg, "Sevenfold Structures in the Book of Amos," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987):217.

Amos certified that the whole book and each section in it was the Word of the Lord.³⁶ In the oracle against Israel, Amos cited seven sins (one in 2:6, two in 2:7, two in 2:8, and two in 2:12). Israel's panic would also be sevenfold (2:14-16).

"Based on structural parallels with proverbial statements that use the 'three, even four' numerical pattern (see Prov. 30:15-16, 18-19, 21-23, 29-31), one expects to find a list of four specific sins in each oracle. But this never happens in the first seven oracles. After specifying one or two sins, the prophet breaks off the list, announces judgment, and then moves on to the next nation as if the real target of God's anger lies somewhere else. This stylistic device does not become a bad omen for Israel until the list of Judah's sins is left truncated, suggesting that another nation, which proves to be Israel, will follow."³⁷

"Damascus" was the capital city of Aram (Syria), and it stands for the whole nation by metonymy. Similarly, the capitals Jerusalem and Samaria often represent their respective nations, Judah and Israel, by metonymy, in biblical literature. Yahweh promised that He would not turn back the punishment due Aram, because the Arameans had proved to be a scourge to the people of Israel. Threshing "Gilead," a Transjordanian part of Israel, with sharp iron implements ("sledges"), pictures the plowing up of that part of the nation militarily (cf. Isa. 41:15; Mic. 4:13; Hab. 3:12).³⁸ Israelite citizens and territory had suffered greatly during constant battles with the Arameans, especially in Transjordan (cf. 2 Kings 8:7-12; 10:32-33; 13:3-7). The Aramean rulers, Hazael and his son Ben-hadad III, had repeatedly invaded and conquered Israel between 842 and 802 B.C.

1:4 The Lord promised to send a consuming "fire" (judgment) on the "house" (dynasty) and "citadels" (fortified towns) of the Arameans. "Hazael" and "Ben-hadad," dynastic names, probably represent all the Aramean kings.³⁹ Another view is that the Hazael in view was the king of Damascus who ruled for most of the second half of the ninth century B.C., and "Ben-hadad" was his son and successor (2 Kings 13:3, 22-25).⁴⁰ The idea of sending fire on the walls of the main cities of the land recurs throughout these oracles (cf. vv. 4, 7, 10, 12, 14, 2:2, 5). It is a vivid metaphor for *consuming destruction*.

³⁶Ibid., pp 222-23.

³⁷Chisholm, p. 379.

³⁸See D. A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, p. 131.

³⁹H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, p. 156.

⁴⁰Chisholm, p. 382. See Benjamin Mazar, "The Aramean Empire and Its Relations with Israel," *Biblical Archaeologist* 25 (1962):98-120; and M. Haran, "Observations," *Israel Exploration Journal* 18 (1968):201-12.

1:5 Yahweh would "also break the bar" that secured the gate of Damascus, making it impossible to defend (cf. 1 Kings 4:13). He would cut off the people who lived in "the valley of Aven" (lit. evil, perhaps Baalbek or the Biq'ah Valley in Lebanon), and Aram's ruler, who lived in Beth-eden (perhaps Bit-Adini, an Aramean state on the Euphrates River 200 miles to the north-northeast of Damascus).⁴¹ These names mean "valley of wickedness" and "house of pleasure," but since the other names mentioned in the oracles are real locations, these probably were as well. The Arameans would go into exile to "Kir" in Mesopotamia, from which they had originated (9:7, precise location unknown). Thus, God would send them back where they came from after He obliterated all they had achieved. (Similarly, elsewhere [Deut. 28:68; Hos. 7:16; et al.] God threatened to send Israel back to Egypt, from which it had come.)

"Benjamin Franklin said it well at the Constitutional Convention, 'I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men.'"⁴²

The fulfillment of this prophecy came when Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria captured Damascus and took the Arameans captive in 732 B.C. (2 Kings 16:7-9).⁴³

2. An oracle against Philistia 1:6-8

1:6 "Gaza" was the chief city of Philistia, as Damascus was of Aram. The particular sin for which God would judge the Philistines was their capture and deportation of whole communities (or people at peace, Heb. *shelema*), possibly Israelites and or Judahites, "to Edom" as slaves (cf. Joel 3:4-8). During the reign of Israel's King Jehoram (852-841 B.C.), Philistines and Arabs had carried off the royal household (2 Chron. 21:16-17), plundered the temple (Joel 3:5), and sold the people into slavery (Joel 3:3, 6).

"The concern of Amos seems to have been the freedom and dignity of persons regardless of their national origin. Sale of such captives for use as slave laborers was to treat precious humans made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27) as mere commodities. The driving force behind these atrocities was nothing higher than the profit of the mighty.

"Broken treaties have marred the pages of history from ancient to modern times. God has a low tolerance level for those who break treaties, who take away human freedom and dignity, and whose motive is material profit. Such

⁴¹Paul, pp. 52-54; Andersen and Freedman, pp. 255-56.

⁴²Wiersbe, p. 344. His quotation comes from Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia*, p. 126.

⁴³Charles Lee Feinberg, *Joel, Amos, and Obadiah*, p. 43.

people should brace themselves for the destructive judgment of God."⁴⁴

1:7-8 "Fire" (destruction) would overtake the cities of the Philistines and affect everyone from the ordinary citizens to the rulers. Ancient Near Eastern armies commonly used fire to burn and weaken a city wall.⁴⁵ Amos mentioned four of the five major cities of Philistia, all except Gath, probably because it had already fallen under Judahite control (cf. 6:2; 2 Kings 12:17; 2 Chron. 26:6).⁴⁶ Another writer argued that Gath had become more of a Canaanite city by this time than a Philistine city, and that is the reason Amos did not mention it.⁴⁷ Still another possibility is that Amos simply chose to refer to some, but not all, of the Philistine cities. Sovereign Yahweh ("Lord GOD") promised to cut off *even* "the remnant" of Philistines that remained in Amos' day. This title for God occurs 19 times in Amos, but only five times in the other Minor Prophets. It stresses both His Lordship and His covenant relationship with people. Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.) captured "Ekron" and killed its officials because of their disloyalty.⁴⁸

This prophecy was initially fulfilled when the Judean kings Uzziah and Hezekiah invaded Philistia (2 Chron. 26:6-7; 2 Kings 18:8), and when a succession of Assyrian conquerors captured these towns.⁴⁹ It was completely fulfilled during the Maccabean period (169-134 B.C.) when the Philistines passed out of existence.

3. An oracle against Phoenicia 1:9-10

"Tyre" was apparently the leading city of Phoenicia at this time. The sin of the Phoenicians was the same as that of the Philistines. They had sold whole communities of people to the Edomites as slaves.⁵⁰ They also broke a covenant of brothers.

"If Israel was the injured partner, the reference is probably to the pact between Solomon and Hiram (1 Kings 5) or perhaps to the later relations established through the marriage of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 16:29-31)."⁵¹

Ironically, many Tyrians became captives and were sold as slaves when Alexander the Great destroyed Tyre in 332 B.C. (cf. Ezek. 26—28). Phoenicia declined as a major power in the ancient Near East—after that destruction—and never revived.

⁴⁴Smith, pp. 51-52.

⁴⁵Niehaus, p. 345.

⁴⁶Stuart, p. 359.

⁴⁷H. Kassis, "Gath and the Structure of 'Philistine' Society," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965):259-71.

⁴⁸Daniel D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib*, pp. 31-32.

⁴⁹See James B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, pp. 282-88; and King, pp. 52-54.

⁵⁰See Paul, p. 59.

⁵¹Sunukjian, p. 1429.

4. An oracle against Edom 1:11-12

Amos next moved from addressing chief cities to addressing countries, specifically countries with ethnic ties to the Israelites. Perhaps their closer relationship to Israel is why he mentioned countries, rather than cities, in the introductions to the later oracles.

Edom's overflowing sin—that brought divine wrath down on its people—was the way the Edomites had treated the Israelites. The Edomites had been very hostile to their "brother," Israel (cf. Gen. 25:29-30; Num. 20:14; Deut. 2:4; 23:7; Obad. 12). This hostility existed throughout the history of these two nations. This animosity even led the Edomites to attack the Israelites "with the sword" (cf. Obad. 10). Consequently, God would send destruction on Edom's chief southern region and a prominent northern city, even on the whole land (a merism). "Teman" was both a village and a southern region in Edom, but here the region is probably in view.⁵² "Bozrah" was a northern city.

The Assyrians subjugated Edom in the eighth century B.C., and the Nabateans, an Arabian tribe, took it over in the fourth century B.C.

5. An oracle against Ammon 1:13-15

The Ammonites were descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew (cf. Gen. 19:30-38). Ammon was in trouble with Yahweh because its soldiers brutally attacked and slew the Israelites, even "the pregnant women" and their unborn children, who lived in Gilead to the west of Ammon. This brutal slaughter terrorized and decimated the attacked populace. The Ammonites did this "to enlarge their borders" (territory) to the west, for materialistic advantage, not for self-preservation. Consequently Yahweh promised to destroy "Rabbah," the capital, and Ammon's walled cities ("citadels") in battle. The Ammonites' king and royal officials would go into exile.

This happened when Tiglath-Pileser III invaded Ammon in 734 B.C., but Ammon's final demise came when Nebuchadnezzar sacked Rabbah and took many of Ammon's citizens captive to Babylon around 586 B.C. The last reference to them is the Ammonites' defeat by Judas Maccabeus in the second century B.C. (1 Macc. 5:6-7).

"In the Old Testament, as in the ancient Near East, theophanic imagery was used to indicate the active presence of a god in battles against those who refused his rule."⁵³

6. An oracle against Moab 2:1-3

Yahweh promised not to revoke His punishment of "Moab," another nation descended from Lot (cf. Gen. 19:30-38), because of its brutal treatment of an Edomite king's corpse. Burning the bones of a dead person dishonored that individual, since there was then nothing substantial left of him. Burning the king's bones indicated a desire to completely destroy the peace and even the soul of Edom's king, for eternity. This was a despicable

⁵²Niehaus, p. 352.

⁵³Ibid., p. 355.

crime in the ancient Near East where a peaceful burial was the hope of every person. This treatment of a dead corpse reflected a lack of respect for human life, life made in the image of God.

"Highly significant is the fact that Amos here pronounced the punishment of Yahweh on a social crime involving a non-Israelite. In his other oracles the crimes were, for the most part, against the covenant people. Amos understood that an aspect of God's law transcended Israel."⁵⁴

Probably the Noahic Covenant provides the background for the Lord's indictment (Gen. 9:5-7; cf. Isa. 24:5).

"All the things condemned by Amos [in all eight oracles] were recognized as evil in themselves, not merely in Israel, but by all the nations of the western Fertile Crescent."⁵⁵

"Crimes against humanity [not just against Israel] bring God's punishment. This observation is a powerful motivation for God's people to oppose the mistreatment and neglect of their fellow human beings."⁵⁶

"However dimly and falsely men may draw the boundary, there are such things as absolute right and wrong based on the nature of the Creator and Ruler of all."⁵⁷

"When a society acquiesces in and welcomes an evil, knowing it is evil, that society is doomed."⁵⁸

Because of this sin, Moab would perish in the tumult of battle, and its leaders would die. "Kirioth" was a major city in Moab (cf. Jer. 48:24).

Nebuchadnezzar conquered Moab shortly after 598 B.C., which opened the way for Arab tribes to occupy its land.⁵⁹

7. An oracle against Judah 2:4-5

God would treat "Judah" with the same justice that He promised Israel's other neighbor nations. Judah's overflowing sin was her failure to live by the Torah, the instruction that Yahweh had given her, including the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Rom. 2:12-15). Listening to false prophets and worshipping idols (Heb. *kazib*, a lie, something deceptive) had been major evidences of this apostasy (cf. Deut. 6:14; 7:16; 8:19; 11:16, 28).⁶⁰ So Yahweh

⁵⁴McComiskey, p. 291.

⁵⁵Ellison, p. 72.

⁵⁶Niehaus, p. 358.

⁵⁷Ellison, p. 74.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Josephus, 10:9:7.

⁶⁰See Andersen and Freedman, pp. 301-5, for defense of the false prophet interpretation.

promised to destroy "Judah" and "Jerusalem," just as He had promised to destroy her sinful neighbors.

"Verses 4 and 5 of this chapter are directed against Judah, while the remainder of the Book of Amos is addressed to Israel."⁶¹

The fulfillment came with Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:1-12).

8. An oracle against Israel 2:6-16

The greater length of this oracle, as well as its last position in the group of oracles, points to its preeminent importance. Verse 10, by using the second person rather than the third, suggests that all these oracles were originally spoken to Israel.

There are four sections to this oracle: Israel's recent sins, God's past gracious activity on Israel's behalf, Israel's response, and Israel's punishment.

Israel's recent sins 2:6-8

Not all the sins that Amos identified appear in verses 6-8; two more appear in verse 12. Amos named seven sins of Israel all together rather than just one, as in the previous oracles, though he continued to use the "for three transgressions and for four" formula. Seven seems to be the full measure of Israel's sin. The idea of "the straw that broke the camel's back" carries over from the first seven oracles into the eighth, with double force. Keil identified four *kinds* of crimes: first, unjust treatment of the innocent in judgment (v. 6); second, oppression of the quiet in the land (v. 7a); third, profanation of God's name by immorality (v. 7b); and fourth, desecration of the sanctuary by drinking carousals (v. 8).⁶²

2:6 Israel's first sin was that the Israelites took advantage of "righteous," or "needy" people for their own personal, material advantage and sold them into slavery, perhaps into debt (cf. 2 Kings 4:1-7). They sold, for the price of what they owed, honest people who would have repaid their debts if given the opportunity. They would even sell into slavery someone who could not pay the small price of "a pair of sandals." Another interpretation is that they would take as a bribe as little as what a pair of sandals cost. The Israelites should have been generous and open-handed toward the poor (Deut. 15:7-11). Sin often results in the devaluation of human life.

2:7 Second, the Israelites were perverting the legal system to exploit the poor. The courts were siding with creditors against their debtors; they were "stepping on" the poor. This was as painful and humiliating as having one trample on one's head as it lay in "the dust." The oppressors longed to see the poor reduced to extreme anguish. They may have been so greedy that they craved even the dust that the poor threw on their heads in mourning.

⁶¹Feinberg, p. 49.

⁶²Keil, 1:252-53.

Or, perhaps they *chased* ("panted after") the poor to death, starving them by economic means—sometimes literally to death—since "dust" is metaphorical for the grave. The Mosaic Covenant called for justice in Israel's courts (Exod. 23:4; Deut. 16:19).

Third, fathers and sons were having sexual intercourse with the same women. The women in view may be temple prostitutes, servant girls taken as concubines, or female relatives (cf. Exod. 21:7-11; Lev. 18:8, 15). This showed contempt for Yahweh's holy character (cf. Exod. 3:13-15). The Law forbade fornication, including incest (Lev. 18:6-18; 20:11, 17-21).

"This sin was tantamount to incest, which according to the law, was to be punished with death (cf. Lev. xviii. 7, 15, and xx. 11). Temple girls (*qedeshoth*) are not to be thought of here."⁶³

2:8 Fourth, the Israelites failed to return "garments taken as pledges," the collateral for debts owed them. The Law specified that the Israelites could take a garment as a pledge, except the garment of a widow (Deut. 24:17), but they were to return it to the owner before nightfall (Exod. 22:26-27; Deut. 24:10-13; cf. Deut. 24:6; Job 22:6). The Israelites were even taking these garments with them and displaying them at the public feasts to honor whatever god they worshipped. Another possibility is that the Israelite men were using these pledged garments as blankets on which to have sex with the temple prostitutes.⁶⁴

Fifth, the Israelites were perverting the worship of Yahweh.

". . . drinking carousals were held in the house of God. *'Elohehem*, not their gods (idols), but their God; for Amos had in mind the sacred places at Bethel and Dan, in which the Israelites worshipped Jehovah as their God under the symbol of an ox (calf)."⁶⁵

A less likely view follows: the Israelites had worshipped idols (cf. v. 4). They were using "the wine" that they had received as fines, or had extracted from the poor, to honor heathen gods. The proper course of action would have been to drink wine that the worshipper had paid for himself, or present it in worship of the true God.

God's past grace 2:9-11

In this section, Amos reminded the Israelites of Yahweh's past blessings on them. This made the heinousness of their sins even clearer. Israel's treatment of the poor had been

⁶³Ibid., 1:253.

⁶⁴Ronald Boyer, in an e-mail dated October 23, 2012.

⁶⁵Keil, 1:254.

destructive, but Yahweh's treatment of the poor Israelites had been constructive. The other nations that God pronounced judgment against, in the previous oracles, had not enjoyed these special blessings.

2:9 The Israelites had committed the previous breaches of covenant—in spite of God having driven the giant Amorites out of the Promised Land for them (cf. Num. 13:22-33). These enemies had been as strong and tall as cedar or oak trees (cf. Num. 13:28-33; Deut. 1:26-28), but the Lord "destroyed" them completely, from "fruit above" to "root below."

"Destruction of 'his fruit' left no possibility of future life from seed. Destruction of 'roots' left no possibility of future life from the tree. God is able to deal decisively with the enemies of his people."⁶⁶

Here the Amorites, the most formidable of the native inhabitants, represent all of them, by metonymy (cf. Gen. 15:16). The defeat of these giants demonstrated Yahweh's superior power as well as His love for His people. By implication, if God drove the Amorites out of the land, He might also drive the Israelites out.

2:10 Going back even further in their history, Yahweh reminded His people that He had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and had led them safely through the wilderness for 40 years. He had preserved them so they could take possession of the Promised Land, the land of the Amorites. By shifting to the second person, Amos strengthened the force of God's appeal.

2:11 In the land, God had raised up prophets and godly Nazirites from among the Israelites' sons. Prophets relayed God's messages to them, and Nazirites were examples of ordinary citizens who dedicated themselves completely to the Lord. These individuals were blessings to the nation because, by their words and deeds, they encouraged the people to follow the Lord faithfully. Yahweh asked—rhetorically—if this was not in fact what He had done.

The order of these blessings is not chronological. Evidently Amos arranged them in this order to highlight the Exodus, the central of the three blessings mentioned and the single most important event in Israel's history.

Israel's response to God's grace 2:12

Even though God gave His people prophets and Nazirites, the Israelites had encouraged the Nazirites to compromise their dedication to Yahweh, and had told the prophets to stop prophesying. These were the sixth and seventh sins of the Israelites that Amos

⁶⁶Smith, pp. 65-66.

enumerated. The people were uncommitted to God and unwilling to hear and obey His Word.

"Even today we are sadly familiar with the preacher who preaches the whole Bible most faithfully but yet so that none of his hearers are ever shaken out of their sins. I myself have been told by a sincere Christian man, who was motivated, as he thought, purely by concern for my well-being, 'You mustn't say that kind of thing here, or you will not be invited again.' How many a man of God has been passed over when a minister has been wanted: 'He is not the man for us.' There are many ways of saying to the prophet *Prophesy not*, and one and all they are an abomination to God and bring judgment on God's people."⁶⁷

Israel's consequent punishment 2:13-16

In the previous oracles, Amos consistently likened God's judgment to fire (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5). In this one, he did not use that figure, but described the judgment coming on Israel with other images—especially images of panic in battle.

2:13 The Lord said He felt burdened by the sinfulness of His people, as heavy as a wagon "weighted down," filled to its capacity with grain.⁶⁸ Another interpretation understands Amos to be picturing Israel being crushed, like an object under the wheels of a heavily loaded cart.⁶⁹

2:14-16 Running fast would not provide escape from His coming judgment, resisting would not enable the Israelites to withstand it, and outstanding leaders could not deliver them from it. Archers opposing God would not be able to prevent Him from advancing against them, quick runners would not be able to flee, and riding a horse could not remove them from the scene of judgment. When Yahweh judged the Israelites, even the bravest among them would prove fearful and ashamed. In the past, Israel's heroes had routed the Canaanites, but in the future they would not even be able to deliver themselves in battle, much less win a victory. This sevenfold description of Israel's panic balances the earlier sevenfold description of Israel's sin.

The fulfillment of this threatened judgment came when the Assyrians besieged and destroyed Samaria, Israel's capital, in 722 B.C., and carried many of the people of that land into captivity.

These oracles teach the modern reader that God is sovereign over all nations, and holds them accountable for their conduct toward other human beings, as well as for their response to special revelation (cf. Gen. 9:5-6). They also teach that God is patient with

⁶⁷Ellison, p. 76.

⁶⁸Andersen and Freedman, p. 334.

⁶⁹Sunukjian, p. 1432; McComiskey, p. 295; Smith, p. 68.

sinner and will only punish when the measure of human sin has overflowed His predetermined capacity. The oracles also teach that God is impartial in His judgment; He will punish sin in His own people, as well as sin in those with whom He has established no special relationship.

". . . the prophets usually declared that judgment (i.e., suffering) would come on a nation because it had not treated people properly."⁷⁰

B. MESSAGES OF JUDGMENT AGAINST ISRAEL CHS. 3—6

After announcing that God would judge Israel, Amos delivered five messages in which he explained more fully why God would judge the Northern Kingdom. Appeals for repentance and explanations of how to avoid judgment appear within these messages. The first three begin with the word, "Hear" (3:1; 4:1; 5:1; cf. Prov. 8:32), and the last two begin with "Alas" (5:18) and "Woe" (6:1), both being translations of the Hebrew word *hoy*. The first message was explanation, the second accusation, and the third lamentation.⁷¹

1. The first message on sins against God and man ch. 3

Amos' first message explained that God would judge His people because they had oppressed others in spite of their uniquely privileged relationship with Yahweh. The prophet addressed this message initially to both Israel and Judah (vv. 1-2), but he focused it mainly on Israel (vv. 9, 12). The first two verses are a brief oracle that introduces the series of judgment pronouncements that continue through chapter 6.

Israel's unique relationship with Yahweh 3:1-2

Amos called on all the Israelites to hear a message from their Lord. He referred to them as those whom Yahweh had redeemed from Egypt, reminding them of the unique privilege they enjoyed. He also mentioned that the Israelites, among all the peoples of the world, had a special relationship to the Lord. "You only" is in the emphatic first position in the Hebrew sentence. This is an allusion to the covenant that God had made with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai (cf. Exod. 19:3-6; Deut. 28:1-14). God had chosen (known, Heb. *yada'*; cf. Jer. 1:5) the Israelites, in that He had made a commitment to them, as His vassal, in a covenant relationship.⁷² He had also revealed Himself to the Israelites as He had done to no other people. God said that He would punish His people for their "iniquities," because these sins were against His unusual blessings (cf. v. 14). Greater privilege always results in greater responsibility (cf. Luke 12:48). Verses 2 and 14 both contain promises that God would punish His people, forming an *inclusio*, or literary envelope, around the whole passage.

⁷⁰Stephen J. Bramer, "Suffering in the Writing Prophets (Isaiah to Malachi)," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*, p. 148.

⁷¹Wiersbe, p. 348.

⁷²See H. B. Huffmon, "The Treaty Background of Hebrew *Yada'*," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 181 (February 1966):31-37.

"A similar injunction to hear what God has to say formerly introduced his commands in the Sinai covenant. Now, it introduces his covenant lawsuit against his rebellious people, who are in fact his family."⁷³

"The oracle stresses not Israel's covenantal accountability, but Yahweh's. He *must* punish Israel for their sins. This was a concept which the average Israelite of Amos' time apparently found hard to understand (cf. 5:18-20). A God should protect and benefit his nation at all times, should he not? Why would a God want to harm his own people who worshiped him regularly (5:21-23)?"⁷⁴

Israel's inevitable judgment by Yahweh 3:3-8

Amos asked seven rhetorical questions in verses 3-6 to help the Israelites appreciate the inevitability of their judgment. In each one, the prophet pointed out that a certain cause inevitably produces a certain effect. The five questions in verses 3-5 expect a negative answer, and the two in verse 6 expect a positive one. Verses 7-8 draw the conclusion.

- 3:3 Two people do not travel together unless they first agree to do so. By implication, God and Israel could not travel together toward God's intended destination for the nation, unless the Israelites agreed to do so on His terms (cf. v. 2). A better possibility is that God and Amos are the "two" in view.⁷⁵ God had sent Amos with a message to deliver; his message was not humanly devised, but it expressed God's mind.
- 3:4 A lion does not roar in the forest unless it has found prey. Young lions do not growl in their dens unless they have captured something and are about to consume it (cf. 1:2). Here, the lion seems to be God, who has Israel within His inescapable power.⁷⁶
- 3:5 Birds do not get caught in traps unless there is bait in the traps that attracts them. Animal traps do not snap shut unless something triggers them. Israel had taken the bait of sin and had become ensnared. Now it was impossible for them to escape.
- 3:6 People do not tremble at the news of some coming danger unless someone blows a trumpet to warn them. Calamities do not occur in cities unless God has either initiated or permitted them.⁷⁷ This prophet had sounded the alarm of Israel's coming destruction, and now the only sane response was to repent.

⁷³Niehaus, p. 375.

⁷⁴Stuart, p. 322.

⁷⁵Keil, 1:260.

⁷⁶Ibid., 1:260-61.

⁷⁷See Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "How a Hermeneutical Virus Can Corrupt Theological Systems," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:663 (July-September 2009):264-66.

"The seven examples of related events began innocuously, but become increasingly foreboding. The first example (Amos 3:3) had no element of force or disaster about it. The next two (v. 4), however, concerned the overpowering of one animal by another, and the two after that (v. 5) pictured man as the vanquisher of animal prey. In the final two examples (v. 6), people themselves were overwhelmed, first by other human instruments, then by God Himself. This ominous progression, to the point where God Himself is seen as the initiator of human calamity, brought Amos to a climactic statement (vv. 7-8)."⁷⁸

3:7 A similar inevitable connection exists between two other events. God does nothing to His people unless He first warns them through one of His prophets (cf. Ps. 25:14; Jer. 23:18, 22).⁷⁹ Here God meant that He would do nothing *by way of covenant-lawsuit judgment* without first telling His people. Obviously God does, however, some things without giving a special revelation to His people that He will do them.

3:8 Amos drew the final comparison by alluding to his previous illustrations. The message of judgment coming from the Lord that Amos now brought the Israelites was like the roaring of "a lion." Who would not fear such a Lion as the sovereign Yahweh? Indeed, how could the mouthpiece of the Lion not prophesy, since Yahweh had spoken?

". . . if an untrained rustic farmer is preaching God's Word, it means God has called him."⁸⁰

The two rhetorical questions in this verse introduce the following series of oracles.

Israel's unparalleled oppression from God 3:9-10

3:9 Amos called for announcements to be made to the large buildings (i.e., to the people living in them) of "Ashdod" in Philistia and to those in "Egypt." The Mosaic Law required two witnesses in cases involving the death penalty (Deut. 17:6). Here those witnesses were Ashdod and Egypt. Amos may have chosen these nations because they had previously oppressed the Israelites. People who lived in "citadels" were for the most part the wealthy, and the leaders of their local cities, towns, or districts. A "citadel" (Heb. *'armon*) was almost any fortified building higher than an ordinary house (cf. Ps. 48:3; Isa. 34:13; Jer. 9:21). These structures became part of a city's defense system because they were high and easier to defend than

⁷⁸Sunukjian, p. 1433.

⁷⁹For a list of examples of God doing this, see *ibid.*, pp. 1433-34.

⁸⁰Wiersbe, p. 349.

ordinary houses. Usually important people lived in these larger buildings, and they were often attachments of the palaces of kings (cf. 1 Kings 16:18; 2 Kings 15:25). Here, because of the military terminology in the passage, their function as fortresses is particularly in view.

These witnesses should come and stand on the mountains surrounding Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom. There they would see great tumults, not the peace and order that should have prevailed, and oppressions within Samaria. The Israelites were assaulting and robbing one another; the rich were taking advantage of the poor.

- 3:10 Yahweh announced that the Israelites had plundered, looted, and terrorized each other so long that they no longer knew how to do right (Heb. *nekohah*, straightness). The Israelites were different from their aggressors because they plundered and looted their own fortresses rather than those of a foreign enemy. It was as though the Israelites hoarded up "violence and devastation" while others, and they themselves, hoarded material wealth. Now the wealthy foreigners, infamous for similar sins, would see that the Israelites behaved even worse in their own citadels.

Israel's coming catastrophe from Yahweh 3:11-15

Amos' announcement of Israel's coming judgment came in three waves (vv. 11, 12, and 13-15).

- 3:11 Sovereign Yahweh announced that an enemy that would surround the land of Israel would destroy and loot its impressive fortresses. That enemy proved to be Assyria, which besieged and destroyed Samaria and overran all Israel in 722 B.C.
- 3:12 Yahweh also predicted that only a small remnant of the people would survive. The situation would be similar to when a shepherd snatched a remaining fragment of a sheep, a couple of leg bones or a small piece of an ear, from the mouth of an attacking wild animal. It would be like when someone stole everything in a house and the owner could only hold onto a piece of his bed or a bedspread. Similarly, an overpowering enemy would steal away the people of Samaria, and only a few would escape. Evidently about 27,000 Israelites from Samaria suffered captivity.⁸¹

The figure of a shepherd represented Yahweh in Israel's literature (e.g., Ps. 23:1; et al.). The people would have seen Him as the One who would rescue the remnant, as well as the One who would allow the enemy to overpower them.

⁸¹Pritchard, p. 284; D. Winton Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times*, pp. 58-60; Ellison, p. 159.

- 3:13 Sovereign Yahweh Almighty, the suzerain Warrior who led the most vast and powerful of all armies, urged the previously mentioned witnesses to hear His Word and to bear testimony "against the house of Jacob." The reference to Jacob recalls the devious nature of this ancestor whose character the present generation of Israelites mirrored. It also recalls God's gracious promises to Jacob. The Israelites, as bad as they were, were *God's* people, not just the people of King Jeroboam II.
- 3:14 God now promised to destroy the pagan "altars" that Jeroboam I had erected at "Bethel" at the same time He destroyed the people of Israel (cf. 1 Kings 12:26-30). This altar, and the one at Dan, had taken the place of the one in Jerusalem for most of the Israelites. The one in Bethel was the most popular religious center in Israel. There the Israelites practiced apostate worship. "The horns" of this "altar," symbolic of the strength of its deity, would be "cut off," and would "fall to the ground," showing its impotence. The horns of an altar were also places of asylum in the ancient Near East (1 Kings 1:50), so their *cutting off* pictures no asylum for the Israelites when God's judgment came.
- 3:15 God also promised to destroy the Israelites' winter and summer homes. The fact that many Israelite families could afford two houses, and yet were oppressing their poorer brethren, proved that they lived in selfish luxury. They had embellished their great houses with expensive ivory decorations (cf. 1 Kings. 21:1, 18; 22:39; Ps. 45:8). The two great sins of the Israelites, false religion (v. 14) and misuse of wealth and power (v. 15), would be the objects of God's judgment. Even some ancient kings did not possess two houses.⁸²

"The fulfilment [*sic*] took place when Samaria was taken by Shalmanezzer (2 Kings xvii. 5, 6)."⁸³

"The enduring principle here is that God will destroy elaborate altars, expensive houses, and other accoutrements of an extravagant lifestyle when these items are acquired through oppression, fraud, and strong-arm tactics. The idolatry of the people led to their opulent lifestyles. Life apart from God may yield temporary material gain, but it will surely result in eternal loss."⁸⁴

The eternal loss for a Christian will not be loss of salvation, but loss of reward, at the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 3:15).

2. The second message on women, worship, and willfulness ch. 4

This message consists of seven prophetic announcements, each of which concludes: "declares the LORD" (vv. 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11). Verse 12 is a final conclusion, and verse 13 is a doxology.

⁸²Pritchard, p. 655.

⁸³Keil, 1:265-66.

⁸⁴Smith, p. 83.

Economic exploitation 4:1-3

4:1 Amos opened this second message as he did the first (ch. 3), with the cry, "Hear this word." He addressed the wealthy women of Samaria, calling them "cows of Bashan." Bashan was a very luxuriant region of Transjordan, east and northeast of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee), where cattle had plenty to eat and grew fat (cf. Ps. 22:12; Jer. 50:19; Ezek. 39:18; Mic. 7:14). These women, along with their men, were oppressing (threatening) the poor and crushing (harassing) the needy. The women were even ordering their husbands to wait on them and bring them drinks. The Hebrew word *'adonim*, translated "husbands," means "lords" or "masters." By using it, Amos was stressing the role reversal that existed. The picture is of spoiled, lazy women ordering their husbands to provide them with luxuries, which the men had to oppress the poor in order to obtain (cf. Deut. 28:56-57; Isa. 32:9-13).

"What is luxury? The word 'luxury' comes from a Latin word that means 'excessive.' It originally referred to plants that grow abundantly (our English word 'luxurious'), but then it came to refer to people who have an abundance of money, time, and comfort, which they use for themselves as they live in aimless leisure. Whenever you are offered 'deluxe service,' that's the same Latin word: service above and beyond what you really need."⁸⁵

4:2-3 Sovereign Yahweh had not just said what He would do, but He had sworn that He would do it. An oath was a means of committing oneself irrevocably to a certain course of action (Gen. 21:23-24; Judg. 21:1, 7, 18; 1 Kings 1:13; et al.).⁸⁶ When God swore, He provided an additional guarantee, in addition to His word, that He would indeed do something (cf. Gen. 22:16-17; Isa. 62:8; Jer. 44:26; Heb. 6:16-18). He made this solemn declaration in harmony with His holiness. As surely as God is separate from humankind and cannot tolerate sin, these women would surely suffer His judgment one day.

An enemy would cart them off, as butchers carry beef with large meat hooks, and as fishermen carry fish with hooks. This description may imply that the enemy would tie them in lines with ropes and lead them away, since this is how fishermen strung their fish on lines. Carved reliefs that archaeologists have found show Assyrians leading people by a rope attached to a ring in the jaw or lip of their captives.⁸⁷ Alternatively, it may mean that their dead bodies would be disposed of as so much meat.⁸⁸ The

⁸⁵Wiersbe, p. 352.

⁸⁶Stuart, p. 385.

⁸⁷See Leonard W. King, *Annals of the Kings of Assyria*, pp. 116-20, 125-26.

⁸⁸J. H. Hayes, *Amos*, pp. 140-41.

enemy would carry the bodies of these women (living or dead) off through breaches in Samaria's walls. The women would be carried off without any complications; each one would go straight ahead to captivity or to burial through any one of the many passageways made through the broken walls.

The enemy would take them to Harmon, perhaps an alternative spelling of Mt. Hermon. Some scholars believe the meaning of "Harmon" is uncertain, though it appears to be the name of some site.⁸⁹ Mt. Hermon was to the north of Bashan, so these cows of Bashan would end up near Bashan. This is, in fact, the direction the Assyrians took the Israelite captives as they deported them to Assyria.

"Those who oppress the poor and crush the needy in order to support an extravagant lifestyle can expect God's harsh judgment to fall upon them."⁹⁰

Religious hypocrisy 4:4-5

4:4 Ironically, the Lord told all the sinful Israelites to go to "Bethel," but to "transgress," not to worship. Such a call parodied the summons of Israel's priests to come to the sanctuary to worship (cf. Ps. 95:6; 96:8-9; 100:2-4). Bethel was the most popular religious site in the Northern Kingdom, but the Lord looked at what the people did there as transgressing His law, rather than worshipping Him. "Gilgal," another worship center, was evidently the Gilgal where the Israelites had entered the Promised Land, and had erected memorial stones (Josh. 4:20-24). Other references to it indicate that it was a place that pilgrims visited, and where they sacrificed in Amos' day (cf. 5:5; Hos. 4:15; 9:15; 12:11). At Gilgal (from Heb. *galal*, to roll), God had rolled away the reproach of Egypt from His people (cf. Josh. 5:9), but now they were bringing reproach on themselves again, by their idolatry at Gilgal.

God—hyperbolically and ironically—urged the people to bring their sacrifices every morning, and their tithes every three days (rather than every three years as the Law required, cf. Deut. 14:28-29). Even if they sacrificed every morning and tithed every three days, they would only be rebelling against God. The people were careful to worship regularly, but it was a ritual contrary to God's will.

"It's as though a pastor today said to his congregation, 'Sure, go ahead and attend church, but by attending, you're only sinning more. . . . Your heart isn't serious about knowing God or doing His will. Since it's all just playacting.'"⁹¹

⁸⁹E.g., Keil, 1:270.

⁹⁰Smith, p. 86.

⁹¹Wiersbe, p. 353.

4:5 "A thank (peace) offering" expressed gratitude for blessings and answers to prayer (Lev. 7:11-15). The Israelites made freewill offerings spontaneously out of gratitude to God (Lev. 7:16; 22:17-19). God permitted the people to present "leavened" bread in these offerings. The people loved to practice these acts of worship, but they did not love to obey sovereign Yahweh, or care for their poor, oppressed neighbors. The Lord wanted their loving obedience, not their acts of worship. Loving religious activity is not the same as loving God.

Refusal to repent 4:6-11

4:6 The Lord had brought famine throughout the land to warn His people about their disobedience and His displeasure, but this judgment did not move them to repent (cf. 1 Kings 8:37-39). They had made an idol of the sacrificial system. Famine was one of the curses that God said He might bring if His people proved unfaithful to His covenant (Lev. 26:26, 29; Deut. 28:17, 48).

4:7-8 He had also sent drought when the people needed "rain" the most, "three months" before their "harvest." He had let rain fall on one town but not another, resulting in only spotty productivity (cf. 1 Kings 8:35). This too should have moved them to repent. Drought was also a punishment for covenant unfaithfulness (Lev. 26:19; Deut. 28:22-24, 48).

4:9 The Lord sent plant diseases and insects to blight their "gardens," "vineyards," and fruit "trees." Yet the Israelites did not return to Him (cf. 1 Kings 8:37-39). These were also threatened judgments in the Mosaic Covenant (Lev. 26:20; Deut. 28:18, 22, 30, 38-40, 42). "Many gardens" is another indication that the Israelites were affluent.

4:10 Wars had brought various plagues on the Israelites, and many of their soldiers had died (cf. 1 Kings 8:33, 37). The plagues on the Israelites should have made them conclude that God was now judging them. God had plagued His people as He formerly had plagued the Egyptians. The "stench" of dead bodies should have led the people to repent, but it did not (cf. Lev. 26:16-17, 25, 31-39; Deut. 28:21-22, 25-27, 35, 49-52, 59-61; 29:23-28).

4:11 Even the overthrow of some Israelite cities did not move the Israelites to repent (cf. Deut. 28:62). Comparing these overthrown cities to "Sodom and Gomorrah" indicates their proverbial complete destruction (cf. Isa. 1:9; 13:19; Jer. 50:40; Zeph. 2:9), not necessarily the method of their destruction. God had rescued His people like burning sticks from a conflagration, as He had formerly extracted Lot and his daughters from Sodom (Gen. 19). The Assyrian kings customarily sowed the ground of a conquered area with salt so nothing would grow there.⁹²

⁹²Niehaus, p. 402.

In all, Amos mentioned seven disciplinary judgments that God had brought on the Israelites: famine (v. 6), drought, (vv. 7-8), plant diseases (v. 9), insects (v. 9), plague (v. 10), warfare (v. 10), and military defeat (v. 11). God sometimes permits His people to suffer so they will turn back to Him (cf. Heb. 12:6), but the Israelites had not done that.

The inevitable outcome 4:12-13

4:12 The Israelites should "prepare to meet" their "God," because they had failed to repent (cf. Exod. 19:10-19; 2 Cor. 5:10). He would confront them with even greater punishments (cf. 3:11-15). They should prepare to meet Him, not in a face-to-face sense, but as they would encounter a powerful enemy in battle. The prophet's call was a summons to judgment for covenant unfaithfulness, not a call to repentance or an invitation to covenant renewal.⁹³ The absence of a stated punishment makes the summons even more foreboding.

4:13 Their enemy was the most formidable one imaginable. It was not another nation or army, but sovereign Yahweh of armies—"the LORD God of Hosts." It was He who forms tangible and stable mountains, creates the intangible and transitory wind, reveals His thoughts to people, turns dawn into darkness, and steps on the hills of Israel like a giant approaching Samaria. They could not escape His judgment, so they better prepare for it (cf. Mic. 1:3-4).

"In one bold sweep, this hymn shows the sovereignty of God—from his creation of the world to his daily summoning of the dawn, from his intervention in history to his revelation of mankind's thoughts. Every believer can take comfort in the fact that, while sometimes it seems that God does not interfere in human affairs, the world is never out of his control. His sovereignty extends to every aspect of human experience."⁹⁴

The description of God here (and in 5:8 and 9:5-6) is a divine royal titulary. This is a genre that was common in the ancient Near East, and it appears occasionally in the writing prophets.⁹⁵ A titulary combines the name of the god or king with epithets that describe him.

3. The third message on injustice 5:1-17

The structure of this message is chiasmic, which focuses attention and emphasis on the middle part.

⁹³Paul, p. 151.

⁹⁴McComiskey, p. 308.

⁹⁵Niehaus, p. 323.

- A A description of certain judgment vv. 1-3
- B A call for individual repentance vv. 4-6
- C An accusation of legal injustice v. 7
- D A portrayal of sovereign Yahweh vv. 8-9
- C' An accusation of legal injustice vv. 10-13
- B' A call for individual repentance vv. 14-15
- A' A description of certain judgment vv. 16-17

Another structural feature stresses the solidarity between Yahweh and His prophet, namely: the alternation between of the words of Amos (vv. 1-2, 6-9, 14-15) and the words of God (vv. 3-5, 10-13, 16-17).

This section is a "proleptic funerary lament" in which God announced, through Amos, the end of the Northern Kingdom.⁹⁶

A description of certain judgment 5:1-3

5:1 This message begins as the previous two did, with a call to hear the Lord's Word. However here, Amos announced that what follows is "a dirge" (Heb. *qinah*) against the house of Israel. A dirge was a lament that was sung at the funeral of a friend, relative, or prominent person (e.g., 2 Sam. 1:17-27; 3:33-34; 2 Chron. 35:25). The prophets used the dirge genre to prophesy the death of a city, people, or nation (cf. Jer. 7:29; 9:10-11, 17-22; Lam.; Ezek. 19; 26:17-18; 27:2-32; 28:12-19; 32:2). Amos announced Israel's death, the fall of the Northern Kingdom, at the height of its prosperity under Jeroboam II.

"To his listeners, hearing this lament would be as jarring as reading one's own obituary in the newspaper."⁹⁷

5:2 Amos announced that the virgin Israel, in the prime of her beauty and vigor, had fallen fatally. "Fallen" in funeral songs usually means "fallen in battle" (cf. 2 Sam. 1:19, 25, 27; 3:34; Lam. 2:21). She would never rise to her former position again. No one came to her aid, even Yahweh (cf. Judg. 6:13; 2 Kings 21:14; Isa. 2:6). She lay forsaken in her land.

5:3 Israelite cities that had sent 1,000 soldiers against Israel's enemy saw only 100 survive, and smaller towns that sent out only 100 soldiers saw only 10 come home alive. No nation could survive such devastating defeat in war.

"We have described for us, then, the utterly prostrate and helpless condition to which the northern kingdom was to be reduced by the Assyrian foe."⁹⁸

⁹⁶Stuart, p. 350.

⁹⁷Sunukjian, p. 1438.

⁹⁸Feinberg, p. 76.

A call for individual repentance 5:4-6

This pericope is also chiasmatic (Bethel, Gilgal, Beersheba, Gilgal, Bethel).

5:4-5 Yahweh invited the Israelites to seek Him so they might live. Even though national judgment and death were inevitable, individuals could still live. Announcements of impending judgment almost always allow for the possibility of individual repentance (cf. Jer. 18:1-10). The Israelites should not seek the Lord at the popular Israelite shrines at Bethel, Gilgal, or Beersheba in southern Judah (cf. 8:14; 2 Kings 23:8), however. All these worship centers stood at cities that were important in Israel's earlier history, but God had commanded His people to worship Him at Jerusalem. There is a play on words regarding Bethel. "Bethel" means "house of God," but it would become "Beth-aven," meaning "house of nothing." "Aven" (nothing) often referred to the powerless spirits of wickedness (cf. Isa. 41:22-24, 28-29).

"During my years of ministry, I've been privileged to speak at many well-known conference grounds in the United States, Canada, and overseas. I've met people at some of these conferences who actually thought that their physical presence by that lake, in that tent or tabernacle, or on that mountain would change their hearts. They were depending on the 'atmosphere' of the conference and their memories of them, but they usually went home disappointed. Why? Because they didn't seek God."⁹⁹

5:6 Amos, as well as the Lord (v. 4), invited the Israelites to seek the Lord by doing good and refraining from evil so they might live (cf. vv. 14-15). The alternative would be God's judgment breaking forth and unquenchably consuming the whole house of Joseph (i.e., the Northern Kingdom, whose main tribe was Ephraim, a son of Joseph).

"Fear of judgment may not be the highest motive for obeying God, but the Lord will accept it."¹⁰⁰

An accusation of legal injustice 5:7

The reason for Yahweh's consuming judgment of Israel was that the Israelites were turning sweet justice into something bitter, and were throwing righteousness to the ground with disrespect. These figures picture their total contempt for what was right (cf. Prov. 1:3; 2:9; 8:20; 21:3; Isa. 1:21; 5:7; 28:17). Right conduct was the proper action, and justice was the result, but the Israelites had despised both in their courts. Instead of the judicial system functioning like medicine, healing wrongs and soothing the oppressed, the Israelites had turned it into poison.

⁹⁹Wiersbe, p. 357.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

A portrayal of sovereign Yahweh 5:8-9

Since Yahweh made the Pleiades and Orion, constellations of stars, He could bring His will to pass on earth too. The rising of the Pleiades before daybreak heralded the arrival of spring, and the rising of Orion after sunset signaled the onset of winter.¹⁰¹ Since Yahweh brings light out of darkness in the morning, and darkens the day at night, He could change the fate of Israel from prosperity to adversity. Since He calls the waters of the sea to form clouds and then empties them on the land, He can pour out judgment on the land as well. Yahweh is the name of this God, the covenant God of Israel. Israel's pagan neighbors attributed all these activities to their idols, and many of the Israelites worshipped them, but Yahweh was the only God who could do these things. The One who would flash forth like lightning from heaven, striking the strong oppressors with destruction and bringing an end to their fortresses on earth, was Yahweh.

Another accusation of legal injustice 5:10-13

This pericope is also chiasitic. Intimidation and abusive treatment flank an announcement of covenant violation.

5:10 Amos cited other reasons for the coming judgment. The Israelites hated judges who reproved evildoers in the city gate, where the court convened, as well as witnesses who spoke the truth. When influential people in a society despise the truth, there is little hope that it will remain stable and secure.

5:11 They imposed high rents and taxes of grain on the poor in order to keep them tenants on the land (cf. Exod. 23:2, 6).

"The small farmer no longer owns his own land; he is a tenant of an urban class to whom he must pay a rental for the use of the land, a rental that was often a lion's share of the grain which the land had produced."¹⁰²

"Taking a gift of corn from the poor refers to unjust extortion on the part of the judge, who will only do justice to a poor man when he is paid for it."¹⁰³

The oppressors used this illegally obtained income to build themselves luxurious homes. The Lord promised that He would make it impossible for these evil people to live in their fancy houses and enjoy the fruits of their vineyards.

5:12 Yahweh knew the many "transgressions" of His covenant and the "great sins" that these perverters of justice committed. They had distressed the righteous by their unrighteous conduct, accepted bribes from the wealthy,

¹⁰¹Sunukjian, p. 1439.

¹⁰²Mays, p. 94.

¹⁰³Keil, 1:283.

and made it impossible for the poor to get fair treatment in the courts. God was looking for justice (in their relationships to one another) and for righteousness (in their relationship to Him). This dual emphasis on justice and righteousness runs throughout the Book of Amos.

5:13 Life had become so corrupt that keeping quiet about these abuses of power had become the only prudent thing to do. If a person spoke out against them, he could count on feeling the wrath of the powerful.

Another call for individual repentance 5:14-15

5:14 Again the prophet urged the Israelites to seek good rather than evil so they could live (cf. vv. 4-6). Then the sovereign, Almighty Yahweh would truly be with them, as they professed He was even as they practiced their injustice (cf. Num. 23:21; Deut. 20:4; 31:8; Judg. 6:12; Isa. 8:10; Zeph. 3:15, 17). He would become their Defender rather than their Prosecutor (cf. Rom. 12:9).

5:15 They should "hate evil," "love good," and "establish justice in the gate" (a metonym for the courts). Perhaps then, sovereign, Almighty Yahweh would be gracious to the faithful remnant in the Northern Kingdom and deliver them.

Another description of certain judgment 5:16-17

This message concludes by returning to a further description of conditions when Yahweh would judge Israel (cf. vv. 1-3). The sovereign Yahweh of armies, Israel's master, announced wailing in all the open plazas of the Israelite towns and in all their streets. There would be many funerals. Everyone would bewail the conditions of divine judgment, not just the professional mourners, but even the poor farmers who would have to bury their oppressors. The vineyards, often places of joy and merriment, would be full of mourning, as would the streets. Yahweh promised to pass through the midst of His people, not to bless them but to blast them with punishment. Earlier, God had passed through Egypt with similar devastating results (cf. Exod. 11:4-7; 12:12-13).

4. The fourth message on unacceptable worship 5:18-27

This lament also has a chiastic structure. It centers on a call for individual repentance.

- A A description of inevitable judgment vv. 18-20
- B An accusation of religious hypocrisy vv. 21-22
- C A call for individual repentance vv. 23-24
- B' An accusation of religious hypocrisy vv. 25-26
- A' A description of inevitable judgment v. 27

A description of inevitable judgment 5:18-20

5:18 The prophet began his message by crying, "Alas" (Heb., *hoy*, woe, oh). This word announced coming doom, and another funeral lament (cf. v. 1). Many Israelites in Amos' day were looking forward to a coming "day of the LORD."

"The Day of Yahweh . . . probably had its origins in the widespread ancient concept that a true sovereign could win his wars in a single day . . ." ¹⁰⁴

Former prophets had spoken of a day in which Yahweh would conquer His enemies and the enemies of His people, and establish His sovereign rule over the world (e.g., Deut. 33:2-3; Joel 3:18-21, and perhaps Isa. 24:21-23; 34:1-3, 8). The Israelites knew that this was going to be a time of great divine blessing, but Amos informed them that it would first be a time of divine chastisement. It would be a time of "darkness" rather than "light" (cf. Jer. 46:10; Joel 3:1-17; Zeph. 3:8; Zech. 14:1-3). God would judge His people before He blessed them.

"Like the student who receives an 'F' for a paper he thought was brilliant, or the employee fired after doing what he thought was excellent work, or the person whose spouse suddenly announces that he or she wants a divorce when the marriage seemed to be going so well, the Israelites were undoubtedly stunned by such a reversal of their expectations." ¹⁰⁵

5:19 The coming day of the Lord would mean inescapable tragedy for Israel. The Israelites may have thought they had escaped one enemy, but they would have to face another. They might think they were secure and safe in their homeland, but deadly judgment would overtake them in that comfortable environment. There would be no safe haven from God's coming judgment, even though they frequented the temple. They would not be safe outdoors or indoors.

5:20 Rhetorically, Amos stated that the coming day of the Lord would be a day characterized by "darkness" and "gloom" (despair), rather than by bright light (joy; cf. Joel 2:1-2, 10-11; Zeph. 1:14-15).

A brighter day of the Lord was also coming (cf. 9:11-15; Jer. 30:8-11; Hos. 2:16-23; Mic. 4:6-7; Zeph. 3:11-20), but first a dark one would appear. The Israelites wanted to hasten the good day of the Lord, but they wanted to forget about the bad one. This prophecy found fulfillment when the Assyrians overran Israel and took most of the people into

¹⁰⁴Stuart, p. 353. See also idem, "The Sovereign's Day of Conquest," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 221 (1976):159-64.

¹⁰⁵Idem, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 354.

exile in 722 B.C. The later Tribulation period for Israel, which will precede her millennial day of blessing, will be similar to what Amos predicted here, but I think it was not what God was foretelling here.

An accusation of religious hypocrisy 5:21-22

5:21 The Israelites enjoyed participating in the religious "festivals" and "assemblies" in which they professed to worship Yahweh. God had commanded the Israelites to observe several feasts and one fast each year, and these are probably the festivals in view. The feasts were Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost (also called Harvest or Weeks), Trumpets, and Tabernacles (also called Booths or Ingathering). The fast was the Day of Atonement. The first four feasts took place in the spring, and the last two and the Day of Atonement were fall festivals. It is not certain, however, how faithfully the apostate residents of the Northern Kingdom observed these special days. Yahweh hated the Israelites' worship assemblies, however, because the people were not worshipping Him from their hearts (cf. v. 15; Isa. 1:13-14). They were only going through the motions of worship. The repetition of "I hate," "I reject," and "Nor do I delight," stresses how much He detested this type of worship. Notice also, "I will not accept," "I will not look," and "I will not listen," in verses 22 and 23.

"The presence of the poor and oppressed . . . witnessed to their failure to please God. The neglected widow and the poor child in dirty rags were theological statements condemning the attitudes of the oppressors. Amos viewed the sacrifices as objects of God's hatred because they furthered the spiritual ignorance of the people by giving them a false sense of security."¹⁰⁶

5:22 "Burnt" and "grain (meal) offerings" were voluntary, and expressed the worshipper's personal dedication to Yahweh and the dedication of his or her works to the Lord (Lev. 1—2). Peace offerings were also voluntary and expressed appreciation for the fellowship that God had made possible for His redeemed people with Himself and with one another (Lev. 3). All three of these offerings were sweet-smelling to the Lord, and were primarily offerings of worship, rather than offerings to secure atonement for sins committed. These three offerings also represent all the worship offerings in another sense. The burnt offering was totally consumed on the altar. The grain offering was partly burned up and partly eaten by the offerer. And the offerer, the priest, and God shared the peace offering. God said He would not accept (lit. smell) or take any notice of any of these offerings, which represent all the others (cf. 4:4-5). In verses 21 and 22 of the Hebrew text, the plural pronouns "you" and "your" indicate that God was addressing the whole nation.

¹⁰⁶Niehaus, p. 431.

A call for individual repentance 5:23-24

5:23 In verses 23 and 24, the singular pronoun "your" indicates that the call is for individuals to repent. God told His people to take away the songs that they sang when they worshipped Him because they were only so much noise in His ears. He would not even listen to the musical accompaniment. He would shut His ears as well as His nostrils (v. 21, vivid anthropomorphisms).

"Today people will pay high prices for tickets to 'Christian concerts,' yet they won't attend a free Bible study class or Bible conference in their own church. Christian music is big business today, but we wonder how much of it really glorifies the Lord. What we think is music may be nothing but noise to the Lord."¹⁰⁷

5:24 Instead of feasts and fasts, instead of offerings and sacrifices, instead of singing and playing musical instruments, the Lord said He wanted justice and righteousness (cf. v. 7). Instead of a constant stream of blood flowing from sacrifices, and an endless torrent of verbal and ritual praise from His people, He wanted these ethical qualities to flow without ceasing from them. The Israelites were inundating Him with rivers of religiosity, but He wanted rivers of righteousness.

"Only when the personal concern of the law is incorporated into their social structure and 'rightness' characterizes their dealings with others will their worship be acceptable. A token practice of justice and righteousness will not do."¹⁰⁸

"It is in the nature of a covenant that it cannot be kept merely now and again. For example, no one can say, 'I keep my marriage covenant; I commit adultery only every few days and the rest of the time am completely faithful to my spouse.' Likewise the Israelite's implicit argument was ludicrous: 'I keep Yahweh's covenant. I misuse and abuse others only some of the time and otherwise faithfully worship Yahweh.'

"Canaanite cultic religion allowed people to be personally immoral and unethical; they could still be right with the gods if they merely supported the cult enthusiastically. Yahweh's covenant denied his people any such option (cf. Matt. 7:21-23)."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷Wiersbe, p. 354.

¹⁰⁸McComiskey, p. 316.

¹⁰⁹Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 355.

This is the key verse in the book, since it expresses so clearly what God wanted from His people. It is a clear statement of the importance of moral and ethical righteousness over mere ritual worship. Amos' concerns boil down to justice toward man and righteousness toward God.

"With Hos 6:6 and Mic 6:8 this text stands as one of the great themes in prophetic literature with regard to the nature of sacrifices and true religion. God is not pleased by acts of pomp and grandeur but by wholehearted devotion and complete loyalty."¹¹⁰

Another accusation of religious hypocrisy 5:25-26

5:25 The Lord now returned to explain further what He did *not* want (vv. 21-23). With another rhetorical question (cf. v. 20), the Lord asked if His people really worshipped Him with their animal sacrifices and grain offerings when they were in the wilderness for 40 years. Animal sacrifices and grain offerings represent the totality of Israel's Levitical offerings. As He clarified in the next verse, they had not. Their hypocritical worship was not something new; it had marked them from the beginning of their nation (e.g., the golden calf incident, Exod. 32).

"Today, there are those who are more in love with the church than with Christ, people who are more preoccupied with choir robes and candle holders [and with worship styles and worship teams?] than with an encounter with the living God. Can we imagine that the God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever will wink at this misdirected love?"¹¹¹

5:26 During the wilderness wanderings, the Israelites had also carried shrines of their "king." This may refer to unauthorized shrines honoring Yahweh or, more probably, shrines honoring other deities (cf. Acts 7:42-43). "Sikkuth, your king," probably refers to Sakkut, the Assyrian war god also known as Adar. "Kiyyun, your images," probably refers to the Assyrian astral deity also known as Kaiwan or Saturn. Amos evidently ridiculed these gods by substituting the vowels of the Hebrew word for "abomination," (*shiqqus*) in their names.¹¹² "The star of your gods [or god]" probably refers to the planet Saturn, that to them represented Kiyyun. However, Keil gave evidence that the star-deity was Egyptian.¹¹³

"The prophet therefore affirms that during the forty years' journey through the wilderness, Israel did not offer

¹¹⁰Smith, p. 115.

¹¹¹Niehaus, p. 433.

¹¹²Andersen and Freedman, p. 533.

¹¹³Keil, 1:292-96.

sacrifices to its true King Jehovah, but carried about with it a star made into a god as the king of heaven."¹¹⁴

Stephen's quotation of this verse in Acts 7:42-43 was from the Septuagint, which interpreted these names as references to pagan idols. The worshippers may have carried pedestals for their images of various idols including astral deities. Many scholars believe that the Israelites conceived of the golden calf as a representation of that on which Yahweh rode, a visible support for their invisible God. Another view is that the golden calf represented Yahweh Himself. The bull in Egyptian iconography was a symbol of strength and power. Jeroboam I had erected bulls at Dan and Bethel in Israel, and had revived this idolatrous form of worship. Amos pointed out that Israel had always mixed idolatry with the worship of Yahweh, so Israel's worship of Him had been hypocritical throughout her history. Certainly, at times, the Israelites worshipped God exclusively and wholeheartedly, but throughout their history there had been these instances of syncretistic hypocrisy. Do we still carry our idols around with us?

Another description of inevitable judgment 5:27

Because of this hypocritical worship, Yahweh, the God of armies, promised that the Israelites would go into exile beyond Damascus. They *did* go into exile in Assyria, to the northeast of Damascus, after 722 B.C. (cf. 4:3).

"The horror of 'exile' was more than the ruin of defeat and the shame of capture. For Israel, it meant being removed from the land of promise, the land of God's presence. Exile, in effect, was excommunication."¹¹⁵

5. The fifth message on complacency and pride ch. 6

In this lament, Amos announced again that Israel would fall under God's judgment.

The boastful complacency of Israel's leaders 6:1-3

6:1 The prophet began this message by announcing coming "woe" (Heb. *hoy*, cf. 5:18). Those who felt "at ease in Zion" (Jerusalem) and "secure in . . . Samaria" were the subjects of his message. Those who felt comfortable in Samaria, partially because it stood on a high hill that was easily defensible, were the distinguished men. They regarded Israel, and Judah, as the foremost of the nations of their day. They were the men to whom the rest of the house of Israel (the people of the Northern Kingdom) came for advice and or justice.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 1:296.

¹¹⁵Sunukjian, p. 1442.

"With masterly irony, Amos addressed the self-satisfied rich, secure in their affluence (v. 1; cf. Luke 6:24-25; 12:13-21)."¹¹⁶

"God doesn't look at the talent of national leaders, the extent of a nation's army, or the prosperity of its economy. God looks at the heart, and the heart of the two Jewish kingdoms was far from the Lord."¹¹⁷

This is the last reference to the people of Zion in this message; from now on Amos spoke only of the Northern Kingdom. Perhaps he referred to the Judean leaders because they were also guilty of the same sins (cf. Isa. 32:9-11), but God had not decreed destruction against them yet.

- 6:2 Amos challenged these proud leaders to visit other cities that had once considered themselves great. "Calneh" (or Calno, Isa. 10:9) and "Hamath" were city-states in northern Aram. Shalmaneser III of Assyria had overrun them in 854-846 B.C., but Israel controlled them in Amos' day. Gath had been a notable city in Philistia, but it had fallen before King Hazael of Aram in 815 B.C., and again to King Uzziah of Judah in 760 B.C. Presently Judah controlled it. Samaria was no better than those city-states, and their territories were larger than Samaria's. Yet they had fallen to foreign invaders. What had happened to them could happen to Samaria—even though the people of Israel believed that Yahweh would protect it.
- 6:3 The leaders of Samaria dismissed the possibility that calamity would overtake their city. But they were really hastening the day of terror (or seat of violence) by refusing to acknowledge and repent of their sins. Amos raised the possibilities as questions, but the answers were obvious.

The 31 years following King Jeroboam II's reign saw increasingly worse conditions for Israel (cf. 2 Kings 15:8—17:6). Six kings reigned, three of whom seized power by political coup and assassination. Fear and violence marked this period (cf. 2 Kings 15:16).

The luxurious indulgence of the Samaritans 6:4-7

- 6:4-6 Amos described the luxury and self-indulgence that characterized the leaders of Samaria during his day. They reclined on very expensive beds inlaid with "ivory." They "sprawled," implying laziness or drunkenness, "on their couches." They ate the best, most tender meat obtainable.

"Ordinary citizens probably ate meat only three times a year, at the annual festivals [cf. Deut. 12:17-18]."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶McComiskey, p. 317.

¹¹⁷Wiersbe, p. 360.

¹¹⁸Smith, p. 118. Cf. Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, p. 359.

They imitated great King David by composing and improvising songs and inventing musical instruments, but they entertained themselves rather than praising God.

"As David invented stringed instruments in honour of his God in heaven, so do these princes invent playing and singing for their god, the belly."¹¹⁹

They consumed wine by the bowlful rather than in cups (cf. Phil. 3:19).

This word is applied by Amos to the bowls out of which the gluttons drank their wine; with special reference to the offering of silver sacrificial bowls made by the tribe-princes at the consecration of the altar (Num. vii.), to show that whereas the tribe-princes of Israel in the time of Moses manifested their zeal for the service of Jehovah by presenting sacrificial bowls of silver, the princes of his own time showed just as much zeal in their care for their god, the belly."¹²⁰

They also spent much time and money anointing their bodies with oils and lotions to preserve and enhance their appearance. (One of the benefits of anointing one's body with oil was that the oil killed lice.¹²¹) Instead, the Israelites should have been mourning over the moral weakness and decadence of their nation that would lead to its ruin.

"Too many Christians are laughing when they should be weeping (James 4:8-10) and tolerating sin when they should be opposing it (1 Cor. 5:2)."¹²²

6:7 Amos announced that these luxuriant leaders would go into captivity "at the head of" the people of Israel. Their banquets would cease, and they would lounge on their soft couches no longer.

"Those who were first in prominence and sin will be the first in punishment and captivity."¹²³

Money and material possessions are not wrong in themselves, but the love of them leads to all types of evil (1 Tim. 6:9-10; James 5:1-6).

¹¹⁹Keil, 1:300.

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 360.

¹²²Wiersbe, p. 362.

¹²³Feinberg, p. 88.

The complete devastation of Samaria 6:8-14

6:8 The prophet announced further that sovereign Yahweh of Hosts, even He, had "sworn by Himself" (cf. 4:2; 8:7). This was a solemn warning because God can swear by no one greater than Himself (cf. Heb. 6:13-14). He loathed the pride of Jacob. "Jacob" here refers to the Northern Kingdom (cf. 3:13), and "the pride of Jacob" is probably the city of Samaria.¹²⁴ In their self-confidence, these leaders resembled their forefather Jacob. The Lord also hated their fortified mansions from which they oppressed the poor and needy (cf. 3:9-10).

"The mighty fortress is their god. Its security and power make God's protection and blessing irrelevant crutches in the real world of economic and political influence."¹²⁵

Therefore, Yahweh would fight against them, and deliver up Samaria and all it contained to an enemy.

6:9-10 So thorough would be the overthrow, that even if 10 men took refuge in one house, they could not preserve their own lives. "Ten men" here may refer to the smallest fighting unit.¹²⁶ The idea seems to be that even if the army was reduced to 10 men, and if they took refuge in the single house that remained, even then they would die.

If the uncle of one of the dead rulers came to bury his nephew, or if a less interested undertaker did so, those still alive and hiding in the house would beg him not to reveal their presence. "Undertaker" is literally "one who burns him." Since cremation was not acceptable in ancient Israel, the reference may be to burning corpses during a plague that would accompany the destruction of Samaria. Or perhaps the idea is that there would be so many dead bodies that they had to be burned to prevent a plague from breaking out.¹²⁷ They would beg him not even to mention the name of Yahweh in anger, lament, or praise, because to do so might draw His attention to them and result in their deaths. As bad as the situation was, they could not bring themselves to seek the Lord for help.

6:11 Yahweh was going to command the utter destruction of all houses in Samaria, small and great. Not only would the people of the city die (vv. 9-10), but the houses of the rich and poor would also perish.

6:12 It was as unnatural for Israel's leaders to live as they did, as it was for horses to run on rocky crags, or for oxen to plow rocks. Horses normally ran on rock-free ground, and oxen plowed fields from which farmers had

¹²⁴See Hayes, p. 188.

¹²⁵G. Smith, *Amos: A Commentary*, p. 207.

¹²⁶See Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 364.

¹²⁷Keil, 1:302. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p.

removed the rocks. Yet these leaders had replaced justice with corrupt courtroom decisions that had killed the defendants—just as though they had taken "poison." "Righteousness" in the rulers should have resulted in grace for the dependent, that would have been sweet to their taste—but the treatment they received was instead bitter to their souls.

- 6:13 The leaders felt very proud and confident because under Jeroboam II, Israel had recaptured some territory that it had formerly lost to Aram (cf. 2 Kings 14:25). This included the town of Lo-debar in Transjordan (cf. 2 Sam. 9:4; 17:27). Amos, however, cleverly made light of this feat by mispronouncing the city "Lo-dabar," which means "not a thing." They had taken nothing of much value. The people were also claiming that they had taken the town of Karnaim (lit. a pair of horns, symbols of strength) by their own strength. It was not they but Yahweh, however, who had strengthened them to achieve this victory over a symbolically strong town. Actually, Karnaim was quite insignificant.
- 6:14 The Almighty, sovereign Yahweh, announced that He would raise up a nation against the Northern Kingdom. He was the *really* Strong One. Once again, God's people would fall under the control of a foreign oppressor, as they had done in the past (cf. Exod. 3:9; Judg. 2:18; 4:3; 6:9; 10:11-12; 1 Sam. 10:17-18). This enemy would "afflict" the Israelites throughout the length and breadth of their nation, from "Hamath" in the north to "the brook (or sea, cf. 2 Kings 14:25) of the Arabah" in the south (the Dead Sea). This nation, of course, proved to be Assyria.

In summary, the reasons for Israel's coming judgment that Amos identified in these five messages, were: legal injustice, economic exploitation, religious hypocrisy, luxurious self-indulgence, and boastful complacency. These sins involved unfaithfulness to Yahweh, the supreme, all-powerful Lord of Israel—with whom the Israelites lived in covenant relationship. Though national judgment was inevitable, individuals who repented could escape punishment.

III. VISIONS THAT AMOS SAW CHS. 7—9

Amos next recorded five visions that he received from the Lord that described the results of the coming judgment of Israel, plus one historical incident (7:10-17). Throughout this section of the book, two phrases stand out: "sovereign Yahweh" (7:1-2, 4 [twice], 5-6; 8:1, 3, 9, 11; 9:8) and "My people" (7:8, 15; 8:2; 9:10). They are constant reminders that Yahweh has authority over all nations and individuals, and that He still recognized Israel's special covenant relationship with Himself. The whole section builds to a terrifying climax of inevitable judgment for Israel. Some scholars believe these visions formed Amos' call.¹²⁸

¹²⁸E.g., Ellison, p. 65.

". . . the first two visions indicate universal judgments, whilst the third and fourth simply threaten the overthrow of the kingdom of Israel in the immediate future, the commencement of which is represented in the fifth and last vision, and which is then still further depicted in its results in connection with the realization of the divine plan of salvation."¹²⁹

A. THREE SHORT VISIONS OF IMPENDING JUDGMENT 7:1-9

The three visions in this section are similar and may have followed one another in quick succession. The first two describe methods of divine judgment from which Amos persuaded God to turn aside, and the last one the method He would not abandon to judge Israel.

1. The swarming locusts 7:1-3

7:1 Sovereign Yahweh showed Amos a mass of locusts swarming in the springtime after the first harvest and before the second. The Lord was forming this swarm of locusts. Ideally, the very first crops harvested in the spring went to feed the king's household and animals (cf. 1 Kings 18:5). The crops that the people harvested later in the spring fed their animals and themselves. If anything happened to prevent that second harvesting, the people would have little to eat until the next harvest in the fall. The summer months were very dry and the Israelites had nothing to harvest during that season of the year.

The *swarming* of locusts indicated that they were about to sweep through an area and destroy all the crops. There was no way to prevent this in Amos' day. Locust invasions were a perennial threat, and they were a method of discipline that God had said He might use if His people proved unfaithful to His covenant with them (Deut. 28:38, 42; cf. Joel 1:1-7; Amos 4:9).

7:2 In his vision, Amos saw the locusts strip the land of its vegetation. Then he prayed and asked the sovereign Lord to pardon Jacob (Israel) for its covenant unfaithfulness. Jacob was only a small nation, and could not survive such a devastating judgment—if the Lord allowed it to happen as Amos had seen in his vision. Keil interpreted this vision spiritually:

"The king, who has had the early grass mown, is Jehovah; and the mowing of the grass denotes the judgments which Jehovah has already executed upon Israel. The growing of the second crop is a figurative representation of the prosperity which flourished again after those judgments; in actual fact, therefore, it denotes the time when the dawn had risen again for Israel (ch. iv. 13). Then the locusts came and devoured all the vegetables of the earth."¹³⁰

¹²⁹Keil, 1:305.

¹³⁰Ibid., 1:307.

Amos' view of Israel, as small and weak, stands in contrast to that of Israel's leaders, who believed it was strong and invincible (cf. 6:1-3, 8, 13; 9:10). Israel occupied a large territory under Jeroboam II, second only in its history to what Solomon controlled, but it was still small in relation to the larger empires of the ancient Near East. Amos may have meant that Israel was small in the sense of helpless. God had promised to take care of Jacob when that patriarch encountered Yahweh at Bethel, now a center of apostate worship in Israel (cf. Gen. 28:10-22). Perhaps that is why Amos appealed to God with the name of Jacob (cf. 3:13; 6:8; 7:5; 8:7; 9:8).

7:3 In response to Amos' prayer, the Lord relented and said He would not bring a completely devastating judgment on Israel, at least then. He would be merciful and patient, and would grant Israel more grace (cf. Exod. 32:14).

The prayers of righteous individuals, like Amos, can alter the events of history (cf. James 5:16-18). Some things that God intends to do are not firmly determined by Him; He is open to changing His mind about these things. However, He has firmly decreed other things, and no amount of praying will change His mind about those things (cf. Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11-12; Acts 1:11; Rev. 22:20). It is important, therefore, that we understand, from Scripture, what aspects of His will are fixed and which are negotiable. The same distinction between determined choices and optional choices is observable in human interpersonal relations. Good parents, for example, will not permit their children to do certain things no matter how much the children may beg, but they do allow their children to influence their decisions in other matters.¹³¹

"Theologies portraying God as inflexible are hardly biblical."¹³²

2. The devouring fire 7:4-6

7:4 Sovereign Yahweh also showed Amos a vision of a great fire that was burning up everything. Like a great drought it consumed all the water and all the farmland (or people) in Israel (cf. 1:9-10). What he saw may have been a scorching heat wave that resulted in a drought.

The "great deep" is a phrase that refers to subterranean waters that feed springs (cf. Gen. 1:2; 7:11; 8:2; 49:25; Deut. 8:7; Ezek. 31:4). So intense was the fire that Amos saw that it dried up even these underground water reservoirs. Great heat with consequent drought was another of the

¹³¹For further discussion of this issue, see Thomas L. Constable, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer*, pp. 149-52; idem, "What Prayer Will and Will Not Change," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 99-113; John Munro, "Prayer to a Sovereign God," *Interest* 56:2 (February 1990):20-21; and Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (October-December 1995):387-99.

¹³²Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 372.

punishments that the Lord warned of for covenant unfaithfulness (Deut. 28:22).

"As the fire is not earthly fire, but the fire of the wrath of God, and therefore a figurative representation of the judgment of destruction; and as *hacheleq* (the portion) is not the land of Israel, but according to Deuteronomy (*l.c.*) Israel, or the people of Jehovah; so *tehom rabbah* is not the ocean, but the heathen world, the great sea of nations, in their rebellion against the kingdom of God."¹³³

7:5-6 Amos prayed virtually the same prayer again, asking the sovereign Lord not to send such a judgment, because Jacob was small (cf. v. 2). Again the Lord relented, and determined that it would not come then (cf. v. 3). He would not discipline Israel with a locust plague or with a raging "fire."

3. The plumb line 7:7-9

7:7 Amos saw a third vision. There are two interpretations of it. The traditional interpretation translates the Hebrew word *'anak* as "plumb line."¹³⁴ According to this view, the Lord was standing on or beside (Heb. *yal*) a vertical wall with a plumb line in His hand. The wall was probably a city wall rather than the wall of a house.¹³⁵ He was using the plumb line to measure the wall (Israel) to see if it was truly upright.¹³⁶

A better interpretation translates the Hebrew word, which appears only here in the Old Testament, as "tin."¹³⁷ According to this view, The Lord was standing on or beside a wall of tin. This tin wall represented the military might of Assyria (cf. Jer. 1:18; 15:20; Ezek. 4:3). Extra-biblical writings also describe military might as walls of various kinds of metal.¹³⁸

7:8 The Lord asked the prophet what he saw. According to the traditional view, Amos replied that he saw a "plumb line." Then the Lord explained that He was about to test Israel. The true standard by which He would judge Israel was undoubtedly the Mosaic Law, the covenant that He had given her by which God measured her uprightness (cf. Exod. 19:6).

According to the preferred view, Amos replied that he saw "tin." The Lord then explained that He would put the "tin" (Assyrian military might) in the midst of His people Israel. In other words, He would use the Assyrian army to defeat the Israelites.

¹³³Keil, 1:308.

¹³⁴E.g., McComiskey, p. 321.

¹³⁵George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets Commonly Called the Minor*, 1:114; Ellison, p. 66.

¹³⁶Keil, 1:310.

¹³⁷E.g., Niehaus, p. 456; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 373.

¹³⁸See Niehaus, p. 456; and Chisholm, *Handbook on . . .*, pp. 397-98.

In both views, the Lord is understood as announcing that He would not spare the Israelites from His judgment any longer; Amos' prayers for Israel would not turn away His punishment as earlier (vv. 3, 6). The nation was so inferior that God would tear it down.

7:9 The method of judgment God would use would not be by locust invasion or by fire, but by the sword. An enemy would invade Israel (cf. Deut. 28:49-50). This enemy, as Yahweh's agent, would destroy the outdoor high places on the hilltops, and the temple sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel, where the people worshipped God and idols, namely: all their worship centers.

Amos probably used "Isaac" simply as a synonym for "Jacob" and "Israel." Another view follows:

"Amos seems to have in mind the special veneration for Isaac which members of the Northern Kingdom displayed in making pilgrimages south to Beersheba (cf. 5:5; 8:14), Isaac's birthplace."¹³⁹

The "house of Jeroboam" probably refers to the dynasty of Jeroboam II, but it could refer to the nation of Israel as headed by Jeroboam I. Jeroboam II's dynasty came to an end with the assassination of his son and successor, Zechariah (2 Kings 15:8-10).

"There is no intercession from the prophet here, for the patience of God is at an end."¹⁴⁰

These three visions appear to have come to Amos in close succession. The final compiler of Amos' prophecies, probably Amos himself, undoubtedly grouped them because of their similarity. They are obviously alike, and together present a picture of judgment, mercifully deferred twice but finally brought on Israel. They clarify the method of Israel's punishment, namely, defeat by an enemy's invading army, and they show that judgment would come after God's patience with the nation had been exhausted.

B. AN INTERVENING INCIDENT 7:10-17

The event described in this pericope evidently followed and grew out of the preceding visions that Amos announced (vv. 1-9). Certain key words occur in both sections of the book but not elsewhere in it: Isaac (vv. 9, 16) and sanctuary (vv. 9-11). Also, the historical incident is a concrete example of God's plumb line in operation, but here it judged individuals. The prophet Amos passed the test, but one of the priests of Bethel, Amaziah, failed the test.

¹³⁹Hubbard, p. 210.

¹⁴⁰Feinberg, p. 97.

1. The challenge 7:10-13

- 7:10 Amaziah, who was one of the apostate priests who served at the Bethel sanctuary (cf. 1 Kings 12:26-33), felt that Amos was being unpatriotic in what he was prophesying. So Amaziah sent a message to King Jeroboam II, charging Amos with conspiring against the king within the land. He felt that Israel could not afford to endure Amos' prophesying any longer. Previously, internal revolt against a king had sometimes followed a prophet's pronouncements (cf. 1 Sam. 16:1-13; 1 Kings 11:29-39; 16:1-13; 19:15-17; 2 Kings 8:7-15; 9:1-28; 10:9).
- 7:11 Amaziah reported that Amos was saying that the king would die by the sword, and that the Israelites would definitely go into exile. While we have no record that Amos said these exact words, they do represent fairly the message that Amos was announcing (cf. vv. 8-9). By claiming that Amos was predicting Jeroboam's death, the priest was personalizing the danger of Amos' ministry to the king and was emotionally inciting him to take action against the prophet. Amaziah regarded Amos' prophecies as simply the prophet's own words. He had no respect for them as messages from Israel's God, but viewed them only as a challenge to the status quo.
- 7:12-13 Amaziah then approached Amos, and told him to move back to Judah and to earn his living in his home country (cf. 1:1). By referring to Amos as a seer (another term for a prophet, cf. 1 Sam. 9:9; 2 Sam. 24:11; Isa. 29:10), Amaziah was probably disparaging the visions that Amos said he saw (vv. 1-9).¹⁴¹ By telling him to eat (earn) his bread in Judah, he was hinting that Amos needed to get a "legitimate" job rather than living off the contributions he received for prophesying (cf. Gen. 3:19; 2 Kings 4:8; Ezek. 13:17-20; Mic. 3:5, 11). Amaziah told Amos to stop prophesying in Bethel (emphatic in the Hebrew text) because it was one of the king's sanctuaries (places of worship) as well as one of the king's residences (places of living). Bethel, of all places, was an inappropriate town in which Amos should utter messages of doom against Israel, from Amaziah's perspective. Amos had become an embarrassment to the political and religious establishment in Israel.

2. The response 7:14-17

- 7:14 Amos replied that he was not a prophet by his own choosing; he did not decide to pursue prophesying as a career. Neither had he become a prophet because his father had been one. In Amos' culture it was common and expected for sons to follow in their father's line of work, though this was not true of genuine prophets. It is possible that Amos meant that he was not the son of a prophet in the sense that he had not been trained in one of the schools of the prophets under the tutelage of a fatherly mentor (cf.

¹⁴¹See Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 376; and E. Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary*, p. 116.

2 Kings 2:1-15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1-7; 9:1).¹⁴² Rather, Amos had previously earned his living in a totally unrelated occupation (cf. Elisha, 1 Kings 19:19-21). He had been a herdsman and a nipper of sycamore figs. The term "herdsman" refers to someone who *bred* livestock, not just a shepherd who looked after animals. A *nipper* of sycamore figs was one who pierced sycamore figs so they would be edible.

"The fruit is infested with an insect (the *Sycophaga crassipes*), and till the 'eye' or top has been punctured, so that the insects may escape, it is not eatable."¹⁴³

"Or, the term may refer to the practice of slitting the sycamore-fig before it ripens—a process that ensures that it will turn sweet."¹⁴⁴

Thus, Amos had a respectable agricultural business background before he moved to Israel to prophesy.¹⁴⁵ He had not been a "professional" prophet like many of the false prophets. He had not always made his living by being a prophet but only functioned as a "called" prophet. Therefore, Amaziah should not think that Amos came to Israel to prophesy because that was the only work that he could do or to make money.

"Amos is an illustration of the biblical principle that spiritual gifts are more important than academic training for ministry, for his oracles are fully as powerful and compelling as any in the OT . . ."¹⁴⁶

7:15 Amos had come to Israel having been sent there by Yahweh to prophesy (cf. Num. 18:6; 2 Sam. 7:8; Ps. 78:70). The Hebrew text repeated the words "the LORD" for emphasis. God had given him a definite commission, and Amos had left his former occupation to obey that divine calling (cf. Acts 5:27-29). Amos' ministry and his location were God's choosing.

7:16-17 Amos then announced a prophecy from the Lord for Amaziah. Because the priest had told the prophet to stop doing what Yahweh had commanded him to do (cf. 2:12), Amaziah's wife would become a harlot in Bethel. She would have to stoop to this in order to earn a living, because she would have no husband or sons to support her. Her children would die by the sword. This may also imply the end of Amaziah's family line. Amaziah's land would become the property of others, presumably the Assyrians, and he himself would die in a foreign, pagan land. All these

¹⁴²B. Smith, p. 139, n. 56.

¹⁴³W. R. Smith, cited in Samuel R. Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos*, p. 212.

¹⁴⁴Niehaus, p. 463. Cf. Wolff, p. 314; *The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1473.

¹⁴⁵See Peter Craigie, "Amos the *noqed* in the Light of Ugaritic," *Studies in Religion* 11:1 (1982):28-33.

¹⁴⁶Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 284.

things would eventually happen when the foreign enemy destroyed Israel. Stifling the Word of God proved disastrous for Amaziah, as it still does today. Finally, Amos repeated that Israel would indeed go into exile, the message that Amaziah had reported that Amos was preaching (cf. v. 11).

Amaziah had told Amos to stop prophesying, namely, to stop preaching (v. 16). "Preaching" is from a verbal root meaning "drip" (Heb. *nataf*), as the heavens drip rain (Judg. 5:4; cf. Amos 9:13). The idea is that Amos should stop raining down messages from heaven on his hearers. True prophets were people who spoke fervently for Yahweh.¹⁴⁷

"Amaziah's loyalty was to Jeroboam, who probably appointed him as priest at Bethel. Amos's loyalty was to God, who sent him to prophesy against Israel. Conflict between Amaziah and Amos was inevitable since their loyalties were in conflict. Primary loyalty to God in their service to Israel would have eliminated conflict between the king, the priest, and the prophet. The answer to conflict among God's people is always to place loyalty to God above all else."¹⁴⁸

C. TWO MORE VISIONS OF IMPENDING JUDGMENT CHS. 8—9

Amos received two more visions from the Lord that he continued to preach to the Israelites—in spite of Amaziah's threats.

1. The basket of summer fruit ch. 8

The vision with which this chapter opens (vv. 1-3) gave rise to three prophetic oracles that follow and expound it (vv. 4-6, 7-10, 11-14).

The vision proper 8:1-3

8:1-2 The sovereign Lord showed Amos a basket of summer fruit. Amos saw what God enabled him to see. The Lord asked him what he saw (cf. 7:8), and the prophet replied that he saw a basket of ripe summer fruit (Heb. *qayis*). Normally this would have been a pleasant sight associated with the joys and provisions of harvest. Then Yahweh told him that Israel was also ripe (Heb. *qes*), but ripe for judgment. The Lord would spare the Israelites no longer. Like the fruit in the basket, Israel also needed to be consumed soon.

"Just as the final fruit of the summer signaled the end of the harvest season, so God's 'end' for Israel was now at hand. God would judge the religious hypocrisy and greed of the people."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁸B. Smith, p. 136.

¹⁴⁹Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 760.

"The Lord takes into his confidence those whom he desires to understand his words and his works (cf. 3:7; Gen. 18:17-19)."¹⁵⁰

8:3 When judgment came, the singing in the royal palace would turn to wailing and lamenting. There would be many dead bodies lying around from the enemy's slaughter, and those people who remained alive would dispose of them in silence because it would be such a terrible sight. Like so much rotten fruit, the dead Israelites would be thrown out.

The sins of the people 8:4-6

Non-visionary material followed the third vision (7:7-9), and non-visionary material follows the fourth vision (8:1-3).

8:4 Amos called those who oppressed the needy and tried to exterminate them to hear him (cf. 5:11). Israel's law called God's people to extend an open hand of generosity to the poor (Deut. 15:7-11; cf. Ps. 72:12-13), but the stingy Israelites were trying to eliminate them.

". . . though Israel was *ethnically* Yahweh's people, the poor were *economically* his special people (Pss 14:6; 140:12; 1 Sam 2:8; Isa 61:1)."¹⁵¹

8:5-6 These oppressors were eager for the monthly festivals and the weekly Sabbaths to end, so they could get back to work cheating their fellow countrymen in order to make big profits. These holidays were days of rest and worship (cf. Num. 28:11; 2 Kings 4:23), but the Israelite workaholics did not enjoy them, though they observed them as good religious people. They were anxious to enslave the needy in their debt so they could control them and use them for their own selfish ends (cf. 2:6). Archaeologists have found at Tirzah the remains of shops from the eighth century B.C. that contain two sets of weights: one for buying and one for selling.¹⁵² Tirzah was the first capital of Israel (1 Kings 14:17; 15:21, 33; et al.).

"These people regarded cereals and human beings equally as stock for sale. Their practices were both dishonest and inhumane."¹⁵³

Merchandising was their priority, not worshipping. Profit was their god, and they willingly sacrificed more important things for it. People who focus intently on what they will do after worship is over do not engage in true worship or enter into the spirit of worship.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰Niehaus, p. 467.

¹⁵¹Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 384.

¹⁵²Mays, p. 144.

¹⁵³Andersen and Freedman, p. 804.

¹⁵⁴Wolff, p. 326.

The wailing of the sufferers 8:7-10

The following two passages (vv. 7-10 and 11-14) describe more fully the two results of God's judgment mentioned earlier, namely: wailing and silence (cf. v. 3).

8:7 For the third time in this book, Amos said that Yahweh took an oath (cf. 4:2; 6:8). This time He swore by "the pride of Jacob." This may be a reference to Samaria (cf. 6:8)—or to Israel's arrogant attitude.¹⁵⁵ It may refer to Israel's land, the Promised Land.¹⁵⁶ Some interpreters take it as a reference to God Himself (cf. 1 Sam. 15:29).¹⁵⁷ The NIV capitalized "Pride" as a title of God. In this case, God vowed never to forget any of the sinful Israelites' unrighteous deeds.

8:8 Because of the sins just described, or the Lord's oath, "the land" would "quake" from the Lord's approach, and from the large enemy army that He would bring against Israel. Perhaps a literal earthquake did occur, but probably trembling with fear is in view (cf. 2 Sam. 7:10). All the inhabitants would mourn over the coming destruction. The waves of terror and destruction would be like the rising and falling of the Nile River.

"Since the rise and fall of the Nile usually extended over a few months, some national upheaval lasting a considerable period of time is implied by the analogy. Sometimes the flooding of the Nile was highly destructive. Amos may have been comparing the destructiveness of social injustice, civil strife, economic exploitation, and religious shallowness in Israel to the destruction caused by the inundation of the Nile. The flooding of the Nile occurred repeatedly, as did the social, civil, economic, and religious problems of society."¹⁵⁸

8:9 On the day of judgment, sovereign Yahweh would send darkness over the land. This may refer to an eclipse of the sun, or it may be a figurative description of the coming judgment as an unnaturally bad day.¹⁵⁹ I prefer the metaphorical interpretation, since this whole chapter contains many metaphors. The figure of "the sun" going "down at noon" was particularly appropriate, since Jeroboam's reign was the zenith of Israel's prosperity, power, and glory.

8:10 Then Yahweh would turn their festivals into funerals, and their melodious singing into mourning. The people would wear sackcloth and shave their heads, as signs of their grief. "Mourning" would come, because judgment had come. It would be as sad a time as the death of "an only son." The death of an only son meant the extinguishing of hope for the future and the

¹⁵⁵Chisholm, *Handbook on . . .*, p. 400.

¹⁵⁶Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 385.

¹⁵⁷Keil, 1:315. See Thomas J. Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, pp. 302-3.

¹⁵⁸B. Smith, p. 148.

¹⁵⁹Keil, 1:317.

losing of provision for one's old age. It also implies long-lasting grief. "The end" of that day would be *bitter* indeed.

The silence of Yahweh 8:11-14

The few remaining Israelites would be silent as they disposed of the corpses of their fellows (v. 3), but God would also be silent in that day of judgment.

8:11 As part of His judgment, God would withhold His words from His people. This would be like a famine, not of physical food and drink but of spiritual food. God's words provide spiritual nourishment and refreshment, so when they are not available, people suffer spiritually (cf. Matt. 4:4).

The Israelites had rejected the Lord's words to them (2:11-12; 7:10-13), so He would not send them to them any longer (cf. 1 Sam. 3:1; 28:6). This is a fearful prospect. If we do not listen to the Word of God, we may not be able to hear the Word of God (cf. Luke 17:22; John 7:34). This does not mean that God would remove all copies of His Word from them, but that when they sought a word of help, advice, or comfort from Him, they would not get it (cf. King Saul). Prophets would not bring God's words to them anymore.

8:12-13 The Israelites would grope all over the land for some word from Yahweh, a word of explanation, forgiveness, or hope, but they would not be able to find one. Even "beautiful virgins" and strong "young men" would "faint" from lack of spiritual refreshment. These types of individuals would have the greatest stamina and could look the hardest and longest, but even they would find nothing. Their deaths would also mean the cutting back of the nation since they could not provide children.

8:14 The apostate Israelites who swore in the name of their favorite pagan deities would fall, never to rise again, because their idols would not uplift them. Amos described the prominent idol in Samaria as "Samaria's guilt" or "shame." One of the idols they worshipped in Samaria was Ashimah (cf. 2 Kings 17:29-30), which Amos apparently alluded to here. From Dan to Beersheba, throughout the whole Promised Land, the Israelites would seek some word from Yahweh, but they would find none to meet their need. There were cultic sites at both Dan and Beersheba (cf. 5:5). In view of other prophecies of Israel's restoration, the prediction that the Israelites would fall and not rise again must have a limited scope. That generation as a whole would not survive the coming judgment, but presumably individuals could repent and escape.

2. The Lord standing by the altar ch. 9

This final vision differs from the preceding four in some significant ways. First, there is no introductory formula that explains the divine enablement of the prophet. Second, in the first pair of visions Amos spoke more than the Lord, in the second pair he spoke only

a few words, and in the last one he said nothing. He played no active part in this vision. This creates an impression of Yahweh being increasingly separate from people and ready to judge. However, as with the preceding two visions, oracles follow the brief vision.

Yahweh's inescapable punishment 9:1-4

"This final judgment oracle in Amos [vv. 1-10] does not so much introduce new information about the character of Israel's coming punishments (death, destruction, and exile) as it does stress the inevitability of that judgment."¹⁶⁰

9:1 In the final vision that Amos recorded, he saw Yahweh standing beside an altar. The altar at Bethel is probably in view, since Bethel was the worship site referred to in most of this book, and since Amos' encounter with Amaziah occurred there (7:10-17). Another possibility is that any and every Israelite shrine might be in view.¹⁶¹ Still another view is that the altar is the brazen altar in Jerusalem, and that all the Israelites—in both the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms—are the subjects of this prophecy.¹⁶² The Lord gave a command that someone (an angel?) would strike the capitals that supported the roof of the temple there with such force that its foundation stones would shake and the whole structure would fall down (cf. Judg. 16:29-30; Isa. 6:4; Ezek. 40:6). From capitals to thresholds (top to bottom) is a merism for a thorough destruction. The Lord also said He would slay with the sword the rest of the priests and worshippers who survived being killed by the collapse of the temple. No one would escape with his or her life.

"The temple was not a literal temple, for the collapse of such a building would affect only a few. Rather it represents the religion of the northern kingdom, which, in the end, brought about the destruction of its adherents. The decay of the social structure that resulted from their cold externalism could lead only to national ruin. The gross sin of idolatry could lead only to judgment."¹⁶³

Another view is that the temple represents the whole kingdom of God, consisting of both kingdoms: Israel and Judah.¹⁶⁴

9:2-3 It would be impossible—for those whom the Lord chose to slay—to escape, even if they tried to dig into the earth or climb into the sky (cf. Ps. 139:7-8; Jon. 1—2).

¹⁶⁰Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 394.

¹⁶¹Ellison, p. 68.

¹⁶²Keil, 1:321.

¹⁶³McComiskey, p. 327.

¹⁶⁴Keil, 1:323.

"If neither heights nor depths can separate people from the love of God (cf. Rom. 8:38-39), they are also unable to hide them from the wrath of God."¹⁶⁵

The ancients conceived of Sheol as under the surface of the earth, so digging "into Sheol" meant hiding in the ground. Neither would hiding in the forests and caves of Mt. Carmel, one of the highest elevations in Israel, or trying to conceal oneself on the floor of the sea, be effective. The Lord would seek the guilty out and command His agents to execute them, even if that agent had to be a "serpent" in the sea (cf. 5:19; Job 26:12-13; Ps. 74:13-14; 89:9-10; Isa. 27:1; 51:9-10). Note the chiasmic structure in these verses going from down, to up, and back down—signifying *all* places.

- 9:4 The Lord would even slay the Israelites whom their enemy led away into captivity. Yahweh would order "the sword" to "slay them" even "from there," though *there* they would presumably be under the protection of a strong foreign power. They would not be able to hide from His all-seeing eye. Normally, God watched over His people for their good, but here He promised to set His eyes on them "for evil." His purpose and intention for them was evil from their viewpoint. So thorough was the dispersion following the Assyrian invasion of Israel, that the exiles came to be known as the "lost tribes." They were not really lost, however, as later revelation makes clear (vv. 11-15; et al.).

The God who would punish 9:5-6

These verses describe the great God who would judge the Israelites. The section closes, "Yahweh is His name" (v. 6). What precedes that clause is a revelation of His person (name).

- 9:5 The Judge is sovereign Yahweh, who controls and leads armies: both heavenly armies of angels and earthly armies of soldiers. As sovereign, He is the One to whom all people and nations are responsible—not just Israel. He is the One who, simply with a touch, can cause the earth to melt—a figure that recalls the effect on ice when a human finger presses on it. He has the power to alter the course of human affairs as well so everyone mourns, if that is His choice. He causes the earth and human affairs to rise and fall, to ebb and flow, like the waters of the mighty Nile River.
- 9:6 He built His dwelling place "in the heavens" as a vaulted dome "over the earth." He "calls for the waters" to leave the seas, rise up and form clouds, and pour down on the land. Since He exercises this control over the whole planet, it is impossible to hide from Him or to escape His powerful hand. "His name" is Yahweh, the covenant keeping God, whose sovereignty spans the universe (cf. 5:8).

¹⁶⁵G. Smith, p. 268.

The justice of His punishment 9:7-10

9:7 Rhetorically, Yahweh asked if Israel was not just like other nations. It was, in the sense that it was only one nation among many others in the world, that lived under His sovereign authority. It was like them, too, in that it was full of idolaters. The Ethiopians (Cushites) were a remote people in Amos' day, living on the edge of the earth from an ancient Near Eastern perspective, yet God watched over them. He had separated "the Philistines from Caphtor" (Crete; cf. Deut. 2:23) and the "Arameans (Syrians) from Kir" in Mesopotamia (cf. 1:5), just as He had led Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. The Philistines and Syrians were Israel's enemies, but God had done for them what He had done for Israel. He could justly send the Israelites into another part of the world, since He had sovereignly relocated these other nations as well. The Israelites considered themselves superior because of their election, but really they were no better or less accountable than any other nation.

By referring to the pagan nations at the end of the book, Amos came full circle, having begun with oracles against these nations. Thus, the emphasis on Yahweh's universal sovereignty brackets the rest of the contents like bookends.

9:8 As the sovereign Lord looked over all the kingdoms of the earth, He noticed those of them that were sinful—and He determined to destroy them because of their wickedness. He would do to Israel what He would do to any other sinful nation (cf. 3:1-2). Yet He promised not to destroy completely "the house of Jacob" (i.e., the Northern Kingdom, because of the covenant He had made with Israel; cf. 5:4-6, 14-15).

9:9 God would sift all the Israelites, among the other nations, to separate the people deserving judgment from the righteous few. He would allow the righteous person (true wheat) to slip through, but would retain the unrighteous (a kernel, pebble, anything compacted, Heb. *seror*) for judgment. Another possibility is that those who do not pass through the screen represent the righteous remnant and all others are the sinful Israelites. He would separate the righteous from the sinful as He sifted through the Israelites. God determines just how much sinfulness makes His punishment inevitable; He determines the mesh of the sifting screen.

"The historical realization or fulfilment [*sic*] of this threat took place, so far as Israel of the ten tribes was concerned, when their kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians, and in the case of Judah, at the overthrow of the kingdom and temple by the Chaldeans; and the shaking of Israel in the sieve is still being fulfilled upon the Jews who are dispersed among all nations."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶Keil, 1:329.

- 9:10 "All" the guilty Israelites would "die by the sword," the Lord promised. None of them who claimed that they would escape that calamity would get away.

The restoration of the Davidic kingdom 9:11-12

The rest of the book is quite different from what has preceded because of its positive message. As is true of other eighth-century B.C. prophets to Israel and Judah, Amos included hope in his prophecy (cf. Isa. 40—66; Hos. 1:10—2:1, 14-23; Mic. 2:12-13; 4:1-5).

- 9:11 In "that day" Yahweh would also restore "the fallen booth of David" that had suffered some destruction (cf. v. 1; Lev. 23:33-42; 2 Sam. 11:11; 1 Kings 20:12-16; Jon. 4:5). The booth (tent) of David is probably a reference to the dynasty of David, which acted as a shelter over the Israelites, or it may refer to the combined kingdom. When Amos prophesied, the tent of David had suffered major damage due to the division of the kingdom into two parts, though it had not yet collapsed completely. In the future, God would restore the Davidic house and rebuild it as in former days—when it was a united kingdom—with a descendant of David ruling over all Israel (cf. Jer. 30:3-10; Ezek. 37:15-28; Hos. 3:4-5). That day, still future from our point in history, will be a day of restoration as well as a day of judgment. The restoration will follow in the Millennium after the judgments of the Tribulation.¹⁶⁷
- 9:12 When the house of David is again intact, Israel will exercise authority over all the nations of the world and will then be a source of blessing to them. This will include even the small number of Edomites alive then, people who had formerly been implacable enemies of the Israelites (cf. Obad. 19). Israel's blessing will extend even to them, representing all of Israel's former enemies. "All the nations" will become associated with the name of Yahweh then, and will enjoy His Lordship and protection (cf. Gen. 12:3; Isa. 9:1-7; 11:1-13; 42:1-7; 45:22-25; 49:5-7; 55:1-5).

Amos described three different groups as remnants: (1) a small group of the faithful within Israel in his day in contrast to all Israel (3:12; 4:1-3; 5:3; 6:9-10; 9:1-4), (2) a small group of faithful Israelites in the future (5:4-6, 15), and (3) a small group of Edomites and other neighbors of Israel who would benefit from the Davidic promise in the future (9:12).¹⁶⁸

At the Jerusalem Council, the Apostle James quoted verses 11 and 12 to support his view that the Gentiles of his day did not need to submit to circumcision and the Mosaic Law, in order to obtain salvation or to live acceptably as Christians (Acts 15:13-21). He knew that the judgments of

¹⁶⁷See Kenneth R. Cooper, "The Tabernacle of David in Biblical Prophecy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168:672 (October-December 2011):402-12.

¹⁶⁸Gerhard Hasel, *The Remnant*, pp. 393-94.

Israel were not yet over (cf. Matt. 24:1-22; Luke 21:5-24; Acts 1:6-7). He also knew, from this passage and others (Isa. 42:6; 60:3; Mal. 1:11), that when God restored the house of David, Gentiles would have a share in that rule as Gentiles. James concluded, therefore, that Gentiles did not need to become Jews to enter into these (millennial) blessings. He did not mean that the church fulfills the promises to Israel, but that since Gentiles will experience millennial blessings as Gentiles, they do not need to live as Jews in the church.

The blessings of the restored kingdom 9:13-15

9:13 In contrast to the images of judgment that Amos had painted throughout this book, days were coming when these terrible conditions would be reversed. The topsoil would become so productive that farmers planting seed for the next harvest would hurry the reapers of the same fields to finish their work so they could plant the next crop. Normally the Israelites plowed their fields in October and the reaping ended in May, but in the future reaping would still be going on in October because of the huge harvests. Wine-makers would similarly pressure the farmers to plant more vines. The grape harvest took place in August, and farmers planted new vines in November. Harvests would be so abundant that the gathering of one crop would not end before it was time to begin the new crop.

"The mountains" would be so full of fruitful grapevines that they could be described as *dripping* "with sweet (the best) wine." "All the hills" would "be dissolved," in the sense of flowing down with produce, perhaps even washing the soil away with grape juice. This verse pictures the reversing of the curse that God pronounced on the earth at the Fall (Gen. 3:17-19). Instead of drought and famine (1:2; 4:6-8), there would be abundant harvests (cf. Lev. 26:3-5; Deut. 28:4-5, 8, 11-12). Even though these may be hyperbolic images, the point is clear.

9:14 Yahweh also promised to restore the Israelites to the Promised Land following their captivity and exile from it. They would return to their land and re-establish life: characterized by security and joy, abundant food and drink, and beauty and blessing. Such conditions could not occur during wartime (vv. 1, 10; 2:13-16; 3:11, 15; 4:10-11; 5:2-3; 6:9-10; 7:17), but would be possible in peacetime, i.e., in the Millennium (cf. Lev. 26:6; Deut. 28:6).

9:15 Furthermore, the Israelites would put roots down in the Promised Land and never have to leave it again (cf. Gen. 13:14-15; 17:7-8; Deut. 30:1-5; 2 Sam. 7:10; Jer. 30:10-11; Ezek. 37:25; Joel 3:17-21; Mic. 4:4-7; Zech. 14:11). They would not fear exile (4:2-3; 5:5, 27; 6:7; 7:11, 17; 9:4) but would be secure from every foe (cf. Lev. 26:7-8; Deut. 28:7, 10). Yahweh, Israel's true God, promised this.

"Let us summarize the remarkable prophecy of Amos to be fulfilled in the consummation of Israel's history: (1) the restoration of the Davidic

dynasty, verse 11; (2) the supremacy of Israel over the nations, verse 12; (3) the conversion of the nations, verse 12; (4) the fruitfulness of the land, verse 13; (5) the rebuilding of their cities, verse 14; and (6) their permanent settlement in their own land after their return from captivity, verse 15."¹⁶⁹

"The pivot on which all this turns is CHRIST. As we have seen, He is brought before us in Amos:—(1) As Israel's Shepherd, rescuing a remnant from the lion's mouth [3:12]. (2) As Israel's Intercessor, beseeching God for them that at all events some might 'arise' (or 'stand,' R.V) [7:2, 5]. (3) As the One for whom Israel will mourn, and to whom their hearts will turn [8:10]. (4) As the true David, who will bring in the state of blessing and peace which God has from the beginning purposed for His people [9:11]."¹⁷⁰

The end of the Exile saw only a dim foreview of the blessings Amos announced here. Blessings in the Church Age do not compare either. Amillennialists see the fulfillment in the Israelites' return from exile, in the Church Age in a spiritual sense (i.e., abundant spiritual blessings), or in heaven.¹⁷¹ Fulfillment has yet to come when God restores the tent of David in Jesus Christ's millennial reign.

"Amos' single prophecy of future blessing (9:11-15) details (1) the restoration of the Davidic dynasty (v. 11); (2) the conversion of the nations (v. 12); (3) the fruitfulness of the land (v. 13); (4) Israel's return from captivity (v. 14); (5) the rebuilding of the waste cities (v. 14); and (6) Israel's permanent settlement in the holy land (v. 15)."¹⁷²

"God's promises for the future are anchor points to keep us stable, and to give us hope in times of personal distress and difficulty. The more we understand what God has promised for the future, the more we can endure our problems today."¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹Feinberg, p. 119.

¹⁷⁰Harold P. Barker, *Christ in the Minor Prophets*, p. 36.

¹⁷¹See Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 835.

¹⁷²*The New Scofield . . .*, p. 938.

¹⁷³Dyer, p. 763.

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