

Resource: Study Notes - Book Intros (Tyndale)

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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AMO

Amos

"Prepare to meet your God," Amos proclaimed to those who worshiped idols ([4:12](#)). Let there be "a mighty flood of justice," Amos admonished the rich who oppressed the poor ([5:24](#)). What brought this shepherd from Tekoa to Bethel to pronounce such powerful judgments? Amos did not make his living as a professional prophet ([7:14](#)); the "roar" of God ([1:2](#); [3:8](#)) had moved him to make the journey. His message calls for righteousness—right worship that yields right social ethics. God's people still need the prophet's help to make that connection.

Setting

In 931 BC, the kingdom of Israel split into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah). The first king of the north, Jeroboam I, did not want his subjects to go to Jerusalem (in the south) to worship, so he established shrines at Dan and Bethel. Drawing on an earlier precedent ([Exod 32](#)), Jeroboam used images of young bulls to represent the Lord ([1 Kgs 12:25–33](#)). This move typified the northern kingdom's rejection of God's revelation in defining both their worship and their ethics. Paganized Israel became an abuser of the powerless.

The calf shrines that Jeroboam I established at Dan and Bethel ([1 Kgs 12:29](#)), together with the presence of the baals (local representations of the Canaanite storm-god), reduced the worship of Yahweh (the Lord) in the northern kingdom to a pagan religion like that of Israel's neighbors. Often, the worship of Yahweh did continue, but it did so alongside the worship of local deities. The Israelites thought they would receive some desired benefit (such as rain or fertility) from worshiping these deities. When Elijah challenged the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, it was because the people wanted to worship both Yahweh and Baal. However, Elijah left them without that alternative ([1 Kgs 18:21, 24](#)). The message of Amos was similar.

When Amos arrived in Israel (shortly before 753 BC), the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. Around 801 BC, the Assyrians had captured Damascus but were forced to withdraw due to problems elsewhere. Egypt was also in decline during this time. In the resulting power vacuum, both Israel and Judah flourished, recovering some of the territory they had lost to Aram ([2 Kgs 14:23–29; 15:1–7; 2 Chr 26:1–23](#)). The two kingdoms increased in prosperity, but the greater prosperity merely increased the power of those who already had it. Those who had no power became even more oppressed.

In response to this situation, Amos traveled from Tekoa (in Judah) to the northern shrine at Bethel, where he called Israel to account for its apostasy and inhumanity.

Summary

Amos confronted Israel with the message that lip service is not enough in worship of the Lord. After a brief introduction ([Amos 1:1–2](#)), the first section of Amos ([1:3–2:16](#)) is a series of eight indictments. The prophet directs the first seven charges against surrounding nations, with the eighth against Israel itself. By first charging Israel's enemies with war crimes and theological aberrations, Amos wins the sympathy and agreement of his hearers.

But then he says, "The people of Israel, too, have sinned." What follows ([3:1–5:17](#)) is framed by three prophetic messages. The first ([3:1–2](#)) accuses Israel of abusing its privileged status as God's chosen people. The second ([4:1–3](#)) is an indictment of Israel's party crowd. The third ([5:1–2](#)) is a funeral song for the predicted death of the nation. Between the prophetic messages Amos includes rhetorical questions ([3:3–6](#)), metaphors from his life as a shepherd ([3:8, 12](#)), sarcastic irony ([4:4–5](#)), historical recitation ([4:6–11](#)), hymn fragments ([4:13; 5:8–9](#)), puns ([5:5](#)), pleas for repentance, and predictions of the doom that awaits the unrepentant.

The third section of Amos ([5:18–6:14](#)) contains two prophetic messages of woe: The first is a

warning to those who proclaim the day of the Lord as a time when God will reestablish Israel as a leading nation ([5:18–27](#)); the second admonishes those who trust in their wealth, houses, or fortifications to save them ([6:1–14](#)).

The fourth section ([7:1–9:10](#)) contains five prophetic oracles based on visions. Amos first wins over his hearers with visions of two judgments that would be averted ([7:1–6](#)), but then drives home his message with two judgments that would not be turned aside ([7:7–9](#); [8:1–3](#)). These visions are interrupted by a brief biographical vignette ([7:10–17](#)). The final vision is of the complete destruction of Israel and its religious system ([9:1–10](#)).

Finally, in [9:11–15](#), Amos promises better days to come, a time of healing and restoration when Jerusalem would be rebuilt, the dynasty of David would be reestablished in the land, and people would live in the peace of God's Kingdom.

Date and Location

Amos's ministry was brief, perhaps limited to a single year. Its setting was the royal shrine at Bethel in the northern kingdom ([7:13](#)), a short time before the death of Jeroboam II in 753 BC ([1:1](#)).

Recipients

Amos directed his message to all the Israelite people, but especially to the rich, powerful, and self-indulgent (see especially [5:18–6:8](#)). While Amos clearly considered Israel's split from Judah and the Jerusalem sanctuary as the primary cause of its moral and spiritual decline, he was aware that Judah was also slipping away from a pure worship of the Lord ([2:4–5](#)). Thus, the book includes condemnation of those "who lounge in luxury in Jerusalem," as well as indictment of the smugly secure in Samaria (see [6:1](#)).

The Prophet Amos

All that is known about the life of Amos comes from the book bearing his name. According to the superscription, he was a shepherd (noqed) from Tekoa (modern *Teku'a*), a small, fortified town about five miles south of Bethlehem in Judah.

Earlier scholars often characterized the prophet Amos as a poor sheepherder who represented the marginalized classes in Judah and who was unjustly oppressed by wealthy landowners. More recent studies have taken a different direction, however. The Hebrew word commonly used for a

shepherd is ro'eh (as in [Ps 23:1](#)), not noqed. In its only occurrence as a noun outside the book of Amos, the word describes Mesha, king of Moab, as one who regularly delivered a substantial tribute of wool and sheep to Israel ([2 Kgs 3:4](#)). The term noqed therefore probably designates someone who owned sheep rather than a shepherd who worked for someone else. A second insight comes from [7:14](#). Here Amos uses a different word for *shepherd* (boqer; literally *herder*), perhaps indicating that he owned cattle, a sign of considerable wealth. Amos further describes himself as one who tends sycamore-fig trees ([7:14](#)), the fruit of which was used for animal fodder. The word that is used (boles) does not occur elsewhere, but in the context of a boqer, it may mean someone who raised sycamore-figs, rather than a worker who tended the orchards of others.

The emerging picture, then, is not one of a simple herder who tended the sheep and trees of others, but of an owner and manager of livestock and trees. This newer perspective on Amos harmonizes well with the contents of his prophecy. The book is written in excellent Judean Hebrew and shows a keen awareness of Israel's heritage as well as its contemporary political and economic circumstances.

Meaning and Message

Moses had depicted God as ethical and as caring deeply for the powerless (see, e.g., [Deut 24:10–22](#)). But Israel's apostasy and moral corruption permitted oppression of the poor and powerless. Material prosperity erroneously came to be seen as a sign of God's favor, and the people prized appearances over substance. This violated God's requirements for a holy people.

Proper worship of the true God leads to ethical behavior toward others. But corrupt worship and theology will corrupt human relationships. Theology yields morality, right worship yields good works, and faith yields practical change. Morality cannot be defined simply as personal purity or integrity; it also includes social obligations born of the conviction that all human life is God's creation and bears his image ([Gen 1:26–27](#)). Service to God is expressed through service to his creatures.

Because this cry for humane treatment of the downtrodden applies to all people in every generation, Amos has inspired some great social reformers. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used these denunciations and exhortations in his

own preaching as a stimulus for the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.