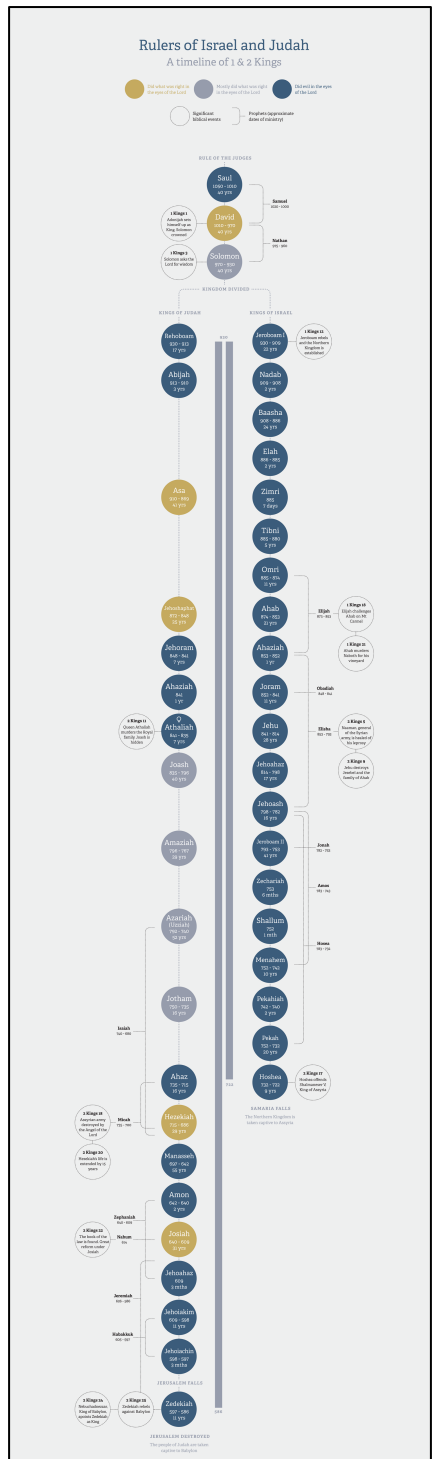


Our best introduction to Amos the man is in the autobiographical section 7:10-17. We learn that Amos was not a professional prophet, but a layman - 'a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs' (7:14). He comes from Tekoa (1:1), across the border in Judah, in the southern half of the divided kingdom.

It's the era of 2 Kings 14:23-29, early in the eighth-century BC. With Jeroboam II reigning in Israel, it's a time of prosperity, as the northern borders are extended to match the 'ideal' Israel of Num 34:7-9; Josh 13:5. With such impressive military might comes security ... and complacency (cf Amos 4:1; 6:1).

However Israel may feel about herself, God's devastating diagnosis is given just three chapters later in the story, in 2 Kings 17:6-23, as Israel effectively comes to an end. Given that timing, we're right to expect the Lord's word now in Amos at this eleventh hour will match his word at the end. 2 Kings 17 gives us our best commentary on the book of Amos.

These two bookends give the **theological** (and not just the chronological!) context for the book of Amos. As he preaches to Jeroboam II, the writer of 2 Kings connects his time to back to the start (cf 2 Kings 14:24), and Amos gives him the dire warnings that point us forwards to the end that will come in about 30 years!



The role of a prophet

The prophet is always to bring the word of the Lord ... and the people are to put themselves under that word – by hearing it and heeding it. So the prophet is 'above' the people, and 'above' the king, for God's word is how God rules his people. Telling a prophet to be quiet is brazen rebellion against the Lord's rule.

We've probably grown up with the idea that prophets primarily 'foretell' (... or we may have heard the clever saying about them being 'forth-tellers' not just 'foretellers'.) But it's better to think of a prophet (or more simply, 'preacher') as a 'covenant enforcement officer', sent by the Lord to call his people back to the covenant, reminding them of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience. Of course, there is a future element to all this (ie 'will you experience the blessing or the cursing?'), but the thrust is present behaviour.

What message does Amos preach? Let's return to those two 'bookends'.

Throughout the story of 1 and 2 Kings, the way that the writer chiefly assesses each king is according to **how well he acknowledged the Lord's kingship** (and encouraged Israel to do the same). He uses a striking litmus test (taken from Deuteronomy 12) for such acknowledgement: how well did any particular king maintain the purity and centrality of Jerusalem and its worship? (This is why we keep being told what any king did or didn't do about 'the high places' for this most clearly reveals their attitude to following the commands of the Lord.) The strongest king is the king who puts himself **under the true King**.

And that's the problem with the two Jeroboams! Jeroboam I made Israel commit a great sin (2 Kings 17:21-23) ... and his namesake Jeroboam II was no better (2 Kings 14:24): they abandoned the worship of the Lord in the place and way that the Lord had proscribed, and invented an alternative instead. Why did they do it? Because they needed Bethel as the means to prop up their shaky throne. In this way, the king and the cult are inextricably intertwined: it is indeed 'the king's sanctuary ... a temple of the kingdom' (7:13).

It is no coincidence that 'the Lord roars from Zion' (1:2) for Zion is where the royal throne and the Jerusalem temple are cited ... those two symbols of divine governance. To turn from Zion (as Israel has done) reveals the fatal flaw in their doctrine of God.

So Amos preaches at Bethel ... not simply to bemoan their bootleg religion, but more particularly **to confront the king** who failed to 'depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat'. And because this is what the king is like, national complacency is misplaced: present blessing is no guarantee of future 'light' (5:18); past deliverance is no guarantee of lasting protection (9:7-8).

The only hope now for Israel is to 'seek the Lord' (5:4), rather than to 'seek Bethel' (5:5). Any Israel king is actually only ever strong because the Lord built a sure house for him (1 Kings 11:38) and because the Lord 'saved' them (2 Kings 14:27). The five times repeated 'yet you did not return to me' (4:6-11) is the plaintive cry of the ignored Saviour, or the rejected King.

All that can lie ahead is the terrible destruction of 8:1-9:8. No wonder the centre of the book is a funeral lament for the entire nation (chapters 5-6).

Theme Sentence for Amos 9:1-15

The Lord will bring inescapable destruction; but his eternal purpose is to exalt Jesus, build the church and lavish eternal blessing and security on his people.

Structure

- 9:1-8a God will destroy (and there's no escape from his destruction)
- 9:8b-10 God will not utterly destroy
- 9:11-12 God will exalt Jesus and build the church
(and Acts 15:16-17 makes it clear that this is his eternal purpose)
- 9:13-15 God will lavish eternal blessing and security on his people

Commentary

- 1 We might easily miss the significance of where the Lord is standing, so read 1 Kings 13:1. The first act of the sinning Jeroboam I had been to stand himself by the altar in Bethel and make sacrifices (compounding the sin of the wrong location as now the wrong person [ie not a priest] does the wrong thing). Here the Lord upstages his rebellious monarch.
- 2-4 is reminiscent of Psalm 139:7-12. There it is a tremendous comfort to know that we cannot escape from God; here it is terrifying.
- 5-6 Amos has used similar 'formal' introductions to 'He who ...' (4:13; 5:8). In each case, God's sovereignty is linked to the destruction he will bring, but here perhaps it is even clearer that judgement is coming: v5 suggests the plagues in Egypt (and, like 8:8, the earthquake of 1:1), and v6 the flood in Noah's day.
- 7 says that despite God's election of Israel and their Exodus from Egypt (cf 3:1-2), Israel is no different from Cush, the Philistines and the Syrians. The logic seems to be: 'you don't think that those other nations have eternal protection from future destruction simply because God moved them around the globe to their geographical home; in the same way, your previous deliverance is no guarantee of lasting protection for you either!'
- 8b-9 Here is the wonderful 'except' that we've been waiting for since 1:1! The metaphor of the sieve is clear until you try to unpack it (- lumps that stay in a sieve are normally the bits you don't want ... the pebbles, the lumpy flour, etc)! The point is that God will subdivide the house of Israel as they go into exile, and some, a remnant, will not 'fall'. The uncertain 'it may be' of 5:5 has now become a firm commitment.

10 is where we see that Israel did believe they were safe from the disaster that is about to befall them (which is the very attitude that 9:7 seeks to undermine [cf 6:18-20]). They blatantly deny God's word (eg, in Deut 28:15f), and of course refusing to live by what God says is sin.

11-12 is quoted in **Acts 15:16-17** (NB although the wording in the NT is slightly different from our version of Amos 9, it is accurate to the Greek translation of the OT from which the apostles sometimes quote).

We drop into the middle of the Council of Jerusalem where 'the truth of the gospel was preserved for us' (Gal 2:5). As Acts 15:5-11 makes clear, the underlying question is: on what basis can Gentiles be included in God's people? James quotes from Amos 9:11-12 to demonstrate that God's plan to save Gentiles alongside Jews ...

- (a) is his eternal purpose 'known from of old', 'as it is written ...'. That is why there is such emphasis that this is all God's doing ('I will return ... I will rebuild ... I will rebuild ... I will restore').
- (b) begins with the restoration of Davidic rule. The NT's view is that that Davidic rule was restored through the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus: as he is enthroned, the promises to David (ie in 2 Sam 7) are being fulfilled.
- (c) is all about creating an entirely new people ... who are 'called by my name' rather than (as had been possible previously) as proselytes of Judaism. This new people is drawn from the nations to include believing Jews (17a) and Gentiles (17b). The Gentile Christians in Antioch, who had been called *Christians* (cf 11:26), do bear his name ... so they do belong (14)!

The restored Israel that Amos is talking about is actually the NT church rather than ethnic Israel: 'the promises given to Israel are now in the hands of the church' (Derek Thomas).

13-15 is significant. Through the OT story, prosperity in the land was like a thermometer to gauge the spiritual health of Israel. If you were enjoying it (eg 1 Kings 4:25), then you were experiencing God's blessing. And when you weren't experiencing that in Israel's history, it was short-hand to alert you that 'something is very, very wrong' (cf Deut 28:30). The promise here in Amos is that the tragedy of 5:11 is to be reversed. God's restoration will mean living again under his rule and experiencing that blessing again.

Study Outline

Theme Sentence for Amos 9:1-15

The Lord will bring inescapable destruction; but his eternal purpose is to exalt Jesus, build the church and lavish eternal blessing and security on his people.

Launching Question:

What picture of God has emerged through our sermons in Amos?

Does that picture sit comfortably alongside how you generally think of God?

Study questions:

READ Amos 9:1-8a

What pictures does Amos use to bring home the shock of what God will do to Israel?

What clues are there in these verses about why God will do this to Israel?

What is God like, in these verses?

For example ... what do verses 2-4 imply about God?

what might verses 5 and 6 be referring to?

what does verse 7 tell us about God and the great nations?

Why do people find the thought that God might 'destroy' so unpalatable?

READ Amos 9:8b-15

You may feel we've been waiting for the word 'except' for about 8½ chapters!

In what way will God 'not utterly destroy the house of Jacob' (in 8b-9)?

Who will die?

What is the 'sin' in saying 'disaster shall not overtake us'?

11-12 are quoted in NT. Before looking there, what do they seem to say here?

Now turn up Acts 15:16-17.

James quotes from Amos 9 when the early church debate the basis on which Gentiles can be included in God's people: what does James say Amos 9 tells us?

So when is Amos 9:11-12 fulfilled?

Why is it absolutely wonderful to discover Jesus hidden in the pages of Amos?

READ Amos 9:13-15 again. Compare it with Amos 5:11.

What is being promised here?

Turn up Deuteronomy 28:1-14 and see how similar the two passages are.

When do you think this promise of 'blessing' is fulfilled?

Thinking it through:

What should be our response to the God who will destroy/who will bless?

How has the book of Amos challenged your thinking about God?

How has Amos made you think differently about what brings God's judgement?

In the light of Amos, what should be our priorities as a church?

(= a deliberately very open-ended question!)