

## But let justice roll on like a river: the voice of Amos today

### Abstract

Amos, one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament, was a herdsman living in Judah, just south of the Israel border during the reign of Jeroboam II. He prophesied in the Kingdom of Israel during a time of debauchery, decadence and injustice, where he warned of God's omnipotence and His pending wrath and judgment. Amos's key message was one of social justice and surrender to God. It is this same message that echoes through subsequent Old Testament prophets and the New Testament Gospels, and continues to resonate today in a society that is still far from egalitarian, far from just, and far from God.

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### The Context

The first thing one notices when reading Amos is the poetic language and the stunning use of imagery. God's message that Amos delivers to King Jeroboam II and the subjects of Israel is all the more powerful for such passionate, vivid language.

Amos is thought to be the first prophet to write down his own words, which interestingly makes his written prophesy older than that of prophets who appeared before him; the written word of the earlier prophets, and indeed many of the earlier books of the Old Testament, are generally dated to sometime during the Babylonian exile.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly then, Amos was an educated man, and rather more complex than "one of the shepherds of Tekoa" as portrayed in Amos 1:1.<sup>2</sup> Amos hailed from Judah but was called by God to prophesy in Israel. Unlike his contemporary, Jonah<sup>3</sup>, Amos accepted the call. He was not from a line of prophets, thus not raised to stand up and speak truth to power, yet he immediately followed the call, leaving his land and presumably his herds and fruit trees<sup>4</sup>.

It was a time of relative peace, 760-755 BC, but also a time when the Israelites were falling away from their covenant with God, the wealthy classes indulging in debauchery and decadence, at the expense of the poor. It was against this that Amos spoke out. His message of social equality, distributive justice and God's judgment became staples of prophets to come. There is evidence that (the writer of) Isaiah was familiar with, and influenced by the written Amos<sup>5</sup>. Amos's influence and his message continued to extend over generations of prophets, all the way to Jesus of Nazareth, as I shall illustrate in this essay.

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<sup>1</sup> Various sources, including Graham Stevenson's Beginning Theology lecture, The Exile, and neatly summarised in table form in Dating The Bible, [wikipedia.org/wiki/Dating\\_the\\_Bible](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Dating_the_Bible)

<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is possible that Amos dictated his message to a scribe. Nevertheless the style of the text indicates a poetic imagination, beyond that which may be assumed of a simple shepherd.

<sup>3</sup> Jonah 1:3

<sup>4</sup> In 7:14 Amos tells the high priest, Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees."

<sup>5</sup> For example, compare Amos 5:21-24 with Isaiah 1:11-15, and Amos 4:7 with Isaiah 5:6

## The Message

It is perhaps difficult to imagine today how a prophet would be heard. We have an image of the prophet walking into a public square, raising his arms and speaking. And people stopped to listen? Revolutionary messages tend to come to us today, if at all, at large organised rallies, which require whole groups of people to make happen, and include stages, microphones, banners and a mass of social media coverage. Amos, and others like him had none of this. They must have been more akin to street theatre performers, something out of the ordinary, larger than life. And their message must have, at times, struck fear into the audience. For this to happen the message itself must have been one that compelled people to stop and listen. And Amos's message was certainly compelling, filled as it is with terrifying promises of a roaring God, sending fires to devour houses and palaces.

*The Lord will roar from Zion,  
and utter his voice from Jerusalem...*

*Thus saith the Lord; For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four,  
I will not turn away the punishment thereof;  
... But I will send a fire into the house of Hazael,  
which shall devour the palaces of Benhadad*

*Thus saith the Lord; For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four,  
I will not turn away the punishment thereof;  
... But I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza,  
which shall devour the palaces thereof*

*Thus saith the Lord; For three transgressions of Tyrus, and for four,  
I will not turn away the punishment thereof;  
... But I will send a fire on the wall of Tyrus,  
which shall devour the palaces thereof.<sup>6</sup>*

It is this pulsating rhythm, and the clever device of condemning all of Israel's enemies that caught the crowd's attention. We can imagine the people cheering him on as he calls out and judges each enemy, or recently conquered city<sup>7</sup>. Things begin to get uncomfortable when he calls out Judah, his own home, and Israel's sister kingdom, and then he finally gets to the point of his sermon:

*Thus saith the Lord; For three transgressions of Israel, and for four,  
I will not turn away the punishment thereof;  
because they sold the righteous for silver,  
and the poor for a pair of shoes;  
That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor,  
and turn aside the way of the meek:  
and a man and his father will go in unto the same maid,  
to profane my holy name:  
And they lay themselves down upon clothes laid to pledge by every altar,  
and they drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god.<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>6</sup> Extracts from Amos 1:1-4, 6-7, 9-10, King James Version

<sup>7</sup> Amos goes on to include Edom, Ammon, Rabbah, and Moab

<sup>8</sup> Amos 2:6-8, King James Version

Amos goes on in Chapter 3 to list Israel's inequities, and in Chapter 4 to talk of the punishments God has already meted out to no avail. The refrain, *and yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord*, is repeated several times in the chapter, warning that worse is to come. In Chapter 5 Amos calls out the false nature of Israel's piety, in language that is a devastatingly judgmental, and yet at the same time cradled in the hope of God's love for His people, and His desire for justice.

*I hate, I despise your feast days,  
and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies.  
Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings,  
I will not accept them:  
neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.  
Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs;  
for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.  
But let judgment run down as waters,  
and righteousness as a mighty stream.<sup>9</sup>*

The message here, as with all future prophets, including Jesus, is that God will redeem—and man has his part to play in that redemption. It is not free. When man turns to God, by embracing man, God will do the same. It was a radical message in 700 BC; it was a radical message in 30 AD, and it is a radical message today: we will be saved through our own acts of love, kindness and justice.

Was Amos heard? Perhaps listened to, but not heard, and not heeded. His message fell on deaf ears. Amos's warning that Israel will fall if it continues on its current trajectory is indeed what occurred. Israel fell some 30-40 years later to the Assyrian Empire. Whether their decadence contributed directly to their fall is of course debatable, but it is likely that by turning away from God, from their greater purpose, the people of Israel lost sight of what mattered, and were thus unprepared for what occurred.

Amos himself incurred the wrath of King Jeroboam's head priest, Amaziah who banished him from the kingdom. Unable to deliver his message, and back in Judah, it is thought that Amos then chose to write it down for future generations.<sup>10</sup>

### **Amos's influence on Jesus**

As mentioned earlier, Amos's call for distributive social justice, coupled with warnings of God's wrath on those behaving violently, selfishly and out of alignment with the will of God became the message of most future prophets, and was certainly at the heart of Jesus' gospel. Jesus takes it even further by implying that the very holding of wealth is a crime in itself as it inevitably involved the defrauding of the weaker (peasant) classes. Those, like the protagonist in the parable of the rich man<sup>11</sup>, who are unable to see their own breach of Mosaic law<sup>12</sup> and thus unable or unwilling to make restoration would never reach the Kingdom.

<sup>9</sup> Amos 5:21-24, King James Version

<sup>10</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amos\\_\(prophet\)#Life](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amos_(prophet)#Life)

<sup>11</sup> Mark, 10:17-22

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the words "defraud not" from Mark 10:19 do not appear in the ten commandments, but perhaps the *spirit* of those words is contained, and thus Jesus is using artistic licence to make his point.

There is another,—possibly minor, but potentially deeply significant—connection between Amos and Jesus. We see this when looking together at Amos 4:2 and Mark 1:17

*Amos: The Lord God hath sworn by his holiness, that, lo, the days shall come upon you, that he will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fishhooks.*

*Mark: Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.*

The “fishers of men” statement is most commonly, almost exclusively, taken to mean that Jesus is inviting Simon Peter and Andrew to become missionaries, proselytisers, saviours of the sinful. In Ched Myers’ commentary on Mark’s Gospel<sup>13</sup> he offers a different perspective: Jesus is inviting the fishermen to partner with him in a peasant revolution. The call is to overcome oppression by removing the rich and powerful rulers (with fish hooks!) thus preparing the way for the new Kingdom. This idea resonates more if we look at Amos 4:1, the immediately preceding verse:

*Hear this word, ye kine of Bashan, that are in the mountain of Samaria, which oppress the poor, which crush the needy, which say to their masters, Bring, and let us drink.*

If Jesus, in prophetic tradition, has come to restore God’s law, confront injustice, overcome oppressive rule, and raise up the poor, as the synoptic gospel writers, especially Mark, indicate, then Jesus could quite likely be using language directly from Amos to express this intent—language, and imagery that his contemporaries would also have been familiar with.

### **Amos Today**

In Amos 5:24 the prophet offers us a vision of a mighty river which carries God’s judgment and righteousness. This bold metaphor tells us of the power of nature, of water, of the elements, and reminds us how small we are beside such force. This is the promise that God’s love for us, exhibited both through distributive justice<sup>14</sup> and pure goodness is with us always. We may stray, and we do, but having awareness—waking up—and returning to God is all that is required to be in the flow of that mighty river. Swimming upstream is only ever a short-term possibility.

Reading Amos today, is not to read about other people, the oppressive governments of the world, our personal enemies, or those we judge for poor behaviour, but to read about, and ask questions of ourselves. Is my prayer hollow? Do I speak words with my mouth I don’t live out in my heart? And most of all, wherever I stray, how shall I return?

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<sup>13</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: a political reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (2nd Ed.), by Ched Myers, 2008, Orbis Books

<sup>14</sup> As opposed to punitive justice, the way the word is generally understood in our modern context.

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*~1,500 words, excluding scripture quotes, footnotes, and sources*