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Historical Background[1]

> Amos prophesied during the reign of Uzziah (788–736 bce). Uzziah reigned in the Southern Kingdom while Jeroboam II ruled the Northern Kingdom (789–748 bce). Jeroboam II reigned 41 years, the longest ever for a Northern monarch; and Uzziah reigned 52 years, the longest ever to that point for a Southern monarch (II Kings 15:1–7). The Book of Kings reports little about their lengthy reigns, except that there was strength and prosperity (see II Kings 14:23–29).
> The success of this period has prompted many scholars to refer to it as a biblical "silver age," second only to the golden age of David and Solomon. Tragically, many Israelites adopted a hedonistic, immoral lifestyle as a consequence of their newfound wealth and political power. They lived such opulent lifestyles, that they sold poor Israelites into slavery and engaged in other forms of corruption to meet their outrageous expenses. Their behavior earned them the fierce condemnation of Amos.
> Amos stressed that fear of God and social justice were the keys to building an enduring future. Unfortunately, most people failed to heed him, leading to devastating Assyrian invasions and the exile of the Northern Kingdom.

Social Justice Directly Affects Israel's National Fate

The Torah equates service of God and moral behavior as all divinely commanded and of absolute importance. However, the Torah and the historical prophetic books referred to as the "Early Prophets" (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) focus almost exclusively on faithfulness to God when it comes to determining the fate of the people of Israel as a nation.

The Golden Calf, Spies, and other Torah narratives about Israel's wrongdoings revolve around Israel's unfaithfulness to God. God also threatens national exile for idolatry (and violation of the sabbatical year) when specific sins are mentioned as opposed to general evil (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 4:25–28; 6:14–15; 7:1–5; 8:19–20; 11:16–17; 28:14, 20, 47, 58). Following the Torah's lead, the books of the "Early Prophets" ascribe national punishments and exile to idolatry and unfaithfulness, even as they treat moral sins with great seriousness as well.

Amos' great innovation on the biblical landscape is that Israel's moral state directly affects its national destiny. Arguably, the Book of Amos is *exclusively* about morality and social justice. Despite the fact that Israel certainly had problems with idolatry in his time, Amos never explicitly condemns it—nor any other sin pertaining to Israel's direct service of God. Instead, Amos excoriates Israel for serving God through sacrifice and other proper ritual observances while they maintained an immoral lifestyle.

In contrast, Amos' contemporary Hosea focuses primarily on Israel's unfaithfulness to God because of their idolatry and related sins. Hosea's message is far more consistent with the message of the Torah and the "Early Prophets," that betrayal of God, generally through idolatry, leads to exile.

Amos' central message may be summarized as follows: The Northern Kingdom of Israel has acted wickedly like the people of Sodom. Therefore, it will be devastated like Sodom via an earthquake,[2] other natural disasters, and the Assyrian invasion and exile.[3] Only at the very end of the book, Amos deviates from God's harsh judgment and provides a glimpse of God's love of Israel. The righteous remnant of Israel will endure forever and be redeemed in the future (9:8–15).

Prophecies against the Nations: God Hates Immorality

The Book of Amos opens with prophecies against seven nations (1:3–2:5). Each nation has sinned unforgivably, and now will bear God's wrath, expressed through the upcoming Assyrian invasion that will ravage the entire region. The sins of the six non-Israelite nations are immoral crimes, generally against Israel. The sin of Judah—the seventh nation on this roster—is general unfaithfulness against God and the Torah.

Regarding the six non-Israelite nations, it is initially unclear if God punishes them because they are immoral, or because they are immoral *against Israel* and God loves Israel. For example, Amos' first prophecy is against Aram:

Thus said the Lord: For three transgressions of Damascus, for four, I will not revoke it: Because they threshed Gilead with threshing boards of iron. I will send down fire upon the palace of Hazael, and it

shall devour the fortresses of Ben-hadad. I will break the gate bars of Damascus, and wipe out the inhabitants from the Vale of Aven and the sceptered ruler of Beth-eden; and the people of Aram shall be exiled to Kir—said the Lord. (1:3–5)

The sins of the Philistines, Tyre, Edom, and Ammon follow the same pattern. These nations harmed Israel, and now God will punish them.[4]
The prophecy against Moab—the sixth nation on the list—becomes a litmus test for interpreters, since it refers to Moab's immoral treatment of Edom, and not Israel:

Thus said the Lord: For three transgressions of Moab, for four, I will not revoke it: Because he burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime. I will send down fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the fortresses of Kerioth. And Moab shall die in tumult, amid shouting and the blare of horns; I will wipe out the ruler from within her and slay all her officials along with him—said the Lord. (2:1–3)

Based on the first five prophecies, which pertain to nations' harming Israel, several commentators conclude that Amos' prophecies against the nations reflect God's love of Israel. Consequently, they interpret Amos' prophecy against Moab in this particularistic spirit. For example, Ibn Ezra observes that Edom descends from Esau, the son of Isaac. Therefore, he maintains that the six prophecies against the nations reflect God's avenging immoral sins against the descendants of Isaac. Alternatively, Radak, Abarbanel, and several other interpreters attempt to connect Amos' prophecy to a narrative in II Kings 3:27, which (in their reading) might suggest that Moab's wronging Edom also brought harm onto Israel.
However, Rashi appears to have the most likely reading. God is outraged by all human immorality, whether or not it is directed against Israel. This universalistic message best encapsulates Amos' prophecies against the nations, and his entire book. For that matter, this message is consistent with narratives in the Torah such as God's punishing Cain for murdering Abel, bringing the Flood, and destroying Sodom—events that have nothing to do with the people of Israel.

Prophecy against Israel: Israel Must Act Morally

No other prophetic book begins with a prediction of the downfall of other nations. Most prophetic books position their prophecies against the nations after prophecies to Israel. In his *Da'at Mikra* commentary, Amos Hakham suggests that Amos may have begun his prophecy with the downfall of other nations to catch the attention of his audience and gain him support. Israel would be happy to hear of the impending doom of their surrounding enemies. Amos then would be able to shock his audience with the climactic prophecy against the Northern Kingdom[5]:

Thus said the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, for four, I will not revoke it: because they have sold for silver those whose cause was just, and the needy for a pair of sandals. [Ah,] you who trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the ground, and make the humble walk a twisted course! Father and son go to the same girl, and thereby profane My holy name. They recline by every altar on garments taken in pledge, and drink in the House of their God wine bought with fines they imposed. (2:6–8)

The Northern Kingdom of Israel is the only group mentioned in Amos' diatribe whose members inflict harm on fellow members of their society. All the other nations' crimes involve their harming people from other nations. It is significant that Amos enumerates only ethical sins for Israel. Although Amos refers to worship at shrines, his intent appears to be that the Israelites think they are righteous by serving God through their religious rituals. God responds that these rituals are worthless and hypocritical when unaccompanied by ethical behavior (Amos Hakham[6]).

The theme of Israel's hiding their immorality behind the observance of religious rituals to God finds its fullest and clearest expression later in the book:

I loathe, I spurn your festivals, I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies. If you offer Me burnt offerings—or your meal offerings—I will not accept them; I will pay no heed to your gifts of fatlings. Spare Me the sound of your hymns, and let Me not hear the music of your lutes. But let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream. (5:21–24)

Prophets regularly stress that God does not need sacrifices and other religious rituals. They are acceptable to God only when accompanied by righteous moral behavior. Sacrifices and other acts of worship are essential aspects of Israel's relationship with God, but immorality undermines the very validity of these acts of worship.[7]

Amos regularly attempted to debunk widespread misconceptions among the populace. Wealthy Israelites wrongly believed that their wealth and military power demonstrated divine favor (see, for example, 6:4–6, 13). To counter these misguided attitudes, Amos links poverty and righteousness by referring to poor people as righteous and humble (2:6–7).[8] While of course in reality some poor people could be wicked and some rich people could be righteous, Amos used this extreme formulation to refute the people's dangerous theology.

The Chosen People: Additional Moral Responsibility

Amos also deflated the people's wrongful perception of the concept of the "Chosen People."[9] The people believed that since God chose Israel, they were free to do whatever they wanted. Amos countered that God's unique relationship with Israel implies that Israel has an even greater moral responsibility than other nations (Rabbi Joseph Kara, Ibn Ezra, Radak):

> Hear this word, O people of Israel, that the Lord has spoken concerning you, concerning the whole family that I brought up from the land of Egypt: You

alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth—that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities. (3:1–2)

The Israelites' confidence in their chosenness also led them to misunderstand the concept of "the day of God," when God metes out judgment against wicked people. The Israelites believed that the day of God would be great for Israel, as it would signal God's defeat of Israel's enemies. Amos shatters this misconception, insisting that wicked Israel is vulnerable to the same judgment on the "day of God" that other wicked people are (Malbim, Amos Hakham[10]):

Ah, you who wish for the day of the Lord! Why should you want the day of the Lord? It shall be darkness, not light!—As if a man should run from a lion and be attacked by a bear; or if he got indoors, should lean his hand on the wall and be bitten by a snake! Surely the day of the Lord shall be not light, but darkness, blackest night without a glimmer. (5:18–20)

This prophecy relates back to the series of prophecies against other nations at the beginning of the book, which reaches its climax with Amos' prophecy against Israel. This prophetic idea was shocking to the popular conception of religion, which imagined God smiting Israel's enemies and then redeeming Israel regardless of Israel's religious conduct.

The book's conclusion presents one of the starkest pictures of Israel's chosenness in the entire Bible:

To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians—declares the Lord. True, I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir. Behold, the Lord God has His eye upon the sinful kingdom: I will wipe it off the face of the earth! But, I will not wholly wipe out the House of Jacob—declares the Lord. For I will give the order and shake the House of Israel—through all the nations—as one shakes [sand] in a sieve, and not a pebble falls to the ground. All the sinners of My people shall perish by the sword, who boast, "Never shall the evil overtake us or come near us." In that day, I will set up again the fallen booth of David: I will mend its breaches and set up its ruins anew. I will build it firm as in the days of old. (9:7–11)

There is nothing special about the exodus from Egypt when Israel is immoral (Rashi, Rabbi Joseph Kara). Amos' prophecy in 1:2–9:7, then, is characterized by God's universalistic concern for social justice.

The Book of Amos then concludes with a dramatic about-face, in which God's eternal love of Israel shines forth. God promises Israel's eternality and eventual redemption (Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency, Rabbi Joseph ibn Caspi). The future "day of God" will eliminate the wicked of Israel, but a righteous remnant will endure and be redeemed. In the end, Israel will not be completely eliminated like Sodom, but instead will be refined into a purely righteous nation and return to its ideal relationship with God.

Conclusion

The people of Amos' time wrongly distinguished between people who are "religious" and people who are "moral." They concluded that as long as they went through the proper religious ritual motions, God approved of their actions. They supported their claim by considering their newfound wealth and political power to be divine blessings. They also relied on their faulty understanding of what it means to be God's Chosen People.

Amos forcefully attacked their misconceptions. Social justice lies at the very heart of the Torah. God holds all nations accountable for morality, including Israel. Israel's being God's Chosen People places additional responsibility onto Israel to serve as the model moral nation for the world. God rejects religious rituals when they are unaccompanied by a righteous, moral lifestyle.

Unfortunately, most Israelites failed to heed Amos' warnings, and instead attempted to stifle him (2:11–12; 7:10–17). They were consequently exiled by the Assyrians in the following generation. For the most part, these Ten Lost Tribes continue to be lost. However, Amos' eternal message is as relevant now as then. His prophecies remind the Jewish people of their religious responsibilities to God, to themselves, and to humanity. Many people today, as then, create a dangerous dichotomy between people who are "religious" and people who are "moral." Amos returns to the Torah's message, that being God-fearing necessarily means rising to the highest levels of morality and responsibility for social justice. When Israel and the nations understand and embody this teaching, redemption is here.

Notes

[1] In this essay, I draw from the classical Jewish commentators, including Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, 1040–1105), Rabbi Joseph Kara (1050–1125), Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164), Radak (Rabbi David Kimhi, 1160–c. 1235), Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency (12th century), Rabbi Joseph ibn Caspi (1279–1340), Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508), and Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel, 1809–1879). I also integrate contemporary scholarship, most notably Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Amos* in *Twelve Prophets* vol. 1 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1990); Francis I. Andersen & David Noel Freedman, *Anchor Bible: Amos* (New York: Doubleday, 1989); Shalom M. Paul, *Mikra LeYisrael: Amos* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1994); Zev Weissman, et al., *Olam HaTanakh: Twelve Prophets* (Hebrew), (Tel Aviv, Dodson-Iti, 1997).

[2] See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, “Was Sodom Destroyed by an Earthquake? A Study of Biblical Earthquakes and Their Implications in Biblical Theology,” *Nahalah* 2 (2000), pp. 55–65; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 155–168; revised second edition (New York: Kodesh Press, 2013), pp. 123–134.

[3] The wicked city of Sodom becomes the biblical epitome of evil (see, for example, Deuteronomy 32:32; Isaiah 3:9; Jeremiah 23:14; Lamentations 4:6). It also serves as the symbol of God’s total destruction of evildoers (see, for example, Deuteronomy 29:17–22; Isaiah 1:9; 13:9; Jeremiah 50:40; Amos 4:11).

[4] Amos does not explicitly mention Israel as the victim when describing the immoral sins of the Philistines and Tyre (1:6–10). Nevertheless, most commentators reasonably assume that Amos is describing their conduct toward Israel.

[5] *Da’at Mikra: Amos*, p. 16.

[6] *Da’at Mikra: Amos*, pp. 13, 28–29, 36–37. See also Amos 4:4; 5:5; 8:14. Rashi, Rabbi Joseph Kara, Ibn Ezra, Radak, and several other classical commentators interpret these references as related to idol-worship, but it is unclear that Amos ever explicitly condemns idol-worship.

[7] See also, for example, I Samuel 15:22–23; Isaiah 1:10–17; Jeremiah 7:22; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:4–8; Psalms 51:18–21.

[8] Shemuel Ahituv discusses the linguistic and conceptual similarities between humble (‘*-n-w*) and poor (‘*?n?y*), which both derive from the same root (‘*-n-y/‘-n-h*). Cf. Isaiah 29:19; Psalms 22:25–27; 69:33–34, where the two terms appear together as poetic parallels (*Mikra LeYisrael: Zephaniah* [Hebrew] [Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006], pp. 31–32).

[9] See Hayyim Angel, “‘The Chosen People’: An Ethical Challenge,” *Conversations* 8 (Fall 2010), pp. 52–60; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 25–34; Angel, *Increasing Peace Through Balanced Torah Study. Conversations* 27 (New York: Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2017), pp. 38–47.

[10] *Da’at Mikra: Amos*, p. 44.