

INTRODUCTION AND AMOS 1:1 - 5:17

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2006 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

I. Political and Economic Background

A. Kingdom of Israel divided in 931 B.C. following the death of Solomon. Israel was the northern kingdom; Judah was the southern kingdom. This division was ordained by God as punishment for Solomon's idolatry (1 Ki. 11:1-13).

B. The eighth century B.C. ushered in prosperous times for both kingdoms. Jeroboam II ruled in Israel from 793-753 B.C., and Uzziah ruled in Judah from 792-740 B.C. Assyria, under Adad-nirari III (810 - 782 B.C.), had vanquished Damascus in 802 B.C., which freed Israel from Aram's dominance. Then in the first half of the 8th century B.C., Assyria itself went into a temporary decline. Under these circumstances, Jeroboam II and Uzziah brought Israel and Judah to a prominence second only to Solomon's golden age. The kingdoms prospered financially and expanded their borders. According to 2 Ki. 14:25, at some point under Jeroboam II's reign, Israel expanded as far as Lebo Hamath to the north, which is about 40 miles north of Damascus (about due east of Byblos).

C. Unfortunately, as the kingdoms of Israel and Judah grew more economically and militarily powerful, moral decay was eating at their insides. The people became increasingly indifferent to their covenant responsibilities. Although they clung to certain rituals or forms of religion, they engaged in idol worship and ignored their duties to their fellow man.

D. The improved economic situation in Israel led to a disparity in wealth among the people; some prospered and others did not. Evidence of this social revolution has been uncovered by archaeologists. In several excavated cities, houses in the 10th century B.C. were of uniform size, but in the eighth century there was a quarter of large, expensive houses and a quarter of small huddled structures. The wealthy not only neglected the poor but used them to increase their own wealth. (The intrusion of the non-ethical or ritualistic Canaanite religion into Israelite religion probably facilitated the abandonment of O.T. ethics.)

II. The prophet

A. Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa, a town about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. He also tended sycamore trees (in the coastal plain or the Jordan valley) during certain seasons of the year (7:14). (Tekoa is over 2000 feet above sea level, and sycamore fig-trees are not found more than 1000 feet above sea level.)

B. Although he was a Judean, he appears to have prophesied exclusively in the northern kingdom.

III. Date

A. 1:1 tells us that Amos prophesied when Uzziah was king in the south and Jeroboam II was king in the north. This sets the latest date as 753 B.C.

B. The conditions of wealth and false security that are reflected in the book seem more consistent with the latter part of Jeroboam's reign. This sets the earliest date around 763 B.C.

C. Evidence of "the earthquake" mentioned in 1:1 may have been found (by Yigael Yadin) at Hazor dating to approximately 760 B.C.

Amos 1:1 – 5:17

I. Introduction to the Prophecy

A. 1:1 - Superscription identifying Amos and the time of his prophecy.

B. 1:2 - The withering effect of God's roar is a sign of impending judgment on Israel.

II. The Prophetic Oracles

A. Oracles of Judgment Against Surrounding Nations (1:3 - 2:5)

1. Damascus (representing Syria/Aram)

a. It will be punished for having "threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth." Gilead was rich territory on Israel's frontier, east of the Jordan River. In 2 Ki. 13:1-9 a Syrian incursion into Israel during the reign of Israel's king Jehoahaz (814-798 B.C.) is described as making the army of Jehoahaz "like the dust at threshing time" (v.7). The metaphor implies extreme decimation and may suggest unusually cruel or inhumane treatment.

b. This was fulfilled around 732 B.C. when Tiglath Pileser III, king of Assyria, took the people of Damascus captive (2 Ki. 16:9). Tiglath Pileser III sometimes is referred to in Scripture as Pul (2 Ki. 15:19; 1 Chron. 5:26).

c. We have Tiglath Pileser's own account of his victory over Damascus. He boasts, "592 towns . . . of the 16 districts of Damascus I destroyed (making them look) like hills of (ruined cities over which) the flood (had swept)" (ANET, 283). Elsewhere he speaks of the defeat he inflicted on Rezon, the king of Syria (ANET, 283).

2. Gaza *et. al.* (representing Philistia)

a. They will be punished for selling unnamed communities to Edom as slaves. This probably refers to border raids against Israel, but it is impossible to be sure about this.

b. This was fulfilled over a period of years:

(1) Gaza - In 734 B.C. Tiglath Pileser III conquered Gaza, forcing its king (Hanno) to flee to Egypt. He placed images of his gods and his own image in the royal palace and declared them to be the gods of that country (ANET, 282-84). After Tiglath Pileser's death in 727 B.C., Hanno returned to rebel against Assyrian control. In 720 B.C. Sargon II recaptured Gaza and took Hanno captive (ANET, 285; ISBE, 2:416). Over a century later Gaza was captured by Nebuchadnezzar II, king of Babylon and its king deported to Babylon (ANET, 307-308; ISBE, 2:416).

(2) Ashdod - In 720 B.C. Sargon II subjugated Ashdod and installed one of his own officers its ruler (ANET, 284-85), but in 711 B.C. Ashdod rebelled and deposed this ruler. Sargon severely punished the city for this revolt (ANET, 286-87; ISBE, 1:314). This is referred to in Isa. 20:1. A century or so later, Jeremiah referred to "the remnant of Ashdod" (25:20), and Zephaniah still spoke of its desolation (2:4). When Babylon became the ruling world power, Nebuchadnezzar captured Ashdod and deported its king (ANET, 307-308).

(3) Ashkelon - In 734 B.C. Tiglath Pileser III conquered Ashkelon (ANET, 282-83). In 701 B.C. Sennacherib again conquered the city and deported its king and his entire family (ANET, 287). It remained under Assyrian control until the decay of that empire. In later years it was overrun by Scythians, Babylonians (ANET, 308), and Persians.

(4) Ekron - Although it may have come under Assyrian domination earlier, Ekron is specifically mentioned among the cities conquered by Sargon II in 711 B.C. (ISBE, 2:47). In 701 B.C. it rebelled against Assyrian rule and was quickly subdued by Sennacherib. The leaders of the rebellion were impaled on stakes outside the city and supporters of the rebellion were exiled (ISBE, 2:48; ANET, 288). Ekron paid tribute to later Assyrian kings (ANET, 291, 294). Its fate during the Babylonian and Persian empires is not known.

3. Tyre (representing Phoenicia)

a. It will also be punished for enslaving communities in disregard of a treaty of brotherhood. This may refer to the treaty between Hiram of Tyre and Solomon (before the split; see, 1 Ki. 5:12, 9:13) or to the generally amicable relations between Tyre and Israel.

b. Tiglath Pileser III collected tribute from Tyre (ISBE, 4:934; ANET, 282-83). During Esarhaddon's reign (681-669 B.C.), the king of Tyre managed to hold his throne by signing a treaty of vassalage (which has been discovered). Esarhaddon besieged the city in 671 B.C., and Ashurbanipal besieged it in 663 B.C. Tyre was only able to retain its

autonomy by giving formal homage to these kings (ISBE, 4:934; ANET, 291, 295-96). The city was greatly weakened by the 13-year siege of Nebuchadnezzar (585-572 B.C.) and entered a period of decline. In 332 it was finally destroyed by Alexander the Great.

4. Edom

a. It will be punished for pursuing his brother with a sword. Edomites were descendants of Esau, Jacob's (Israel's) brother. They had a long history of hostility toward Israel.

b. Edom paid tribute to Tiglath Pileser III (beginning in 732 B.C. - ANET, 282) and to a succession of Assyrian kings (ISBE, 2:19-20). It was destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th century B.C. (ISBE, 2:20) and was later overrun by the Nabateans.

5. Ammon

a. It will be punished for ripping open pregnant women of Gilead to enlarge their borders. This apparently took place during one of their attempts to enlarge their borders at Israel's expense. (Rabbah, the capital of ancient Ammon, is the modern city of Amman, Jordan).

b. Ammon paid tribute to Assyrian kings from Tiglath Pileser III at least through Esarhaddon (ISBE, 1:112). After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar sacked Rabbah and took large numbers of citizens captive (McComiskey, 290).

6. Moab

a. It will be punished for desecrating the corpse or bones of the king of Edom. Some speculate that this occurred when the coalition of Israel, Judah, and Edom tried to suppress a Moabite rebellion (2 Kings 3), but there is no way to tell.

b. Moab became subject to Tiglath Pileser III in 734 B.C. A later rebellion against Assyria was quelled by Sennacherib. Still later Moab was forced to pay tribute to Babylon, and when it rebelled against Babylonian rule shortly after 598 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar conquered them (McComiskey, 291).

7. Judah

a. It will be punished for rejecting the law of the Lord and not keeping his statutes.

b. In 733 B.C. Tiglath Pileser III subjugated Judah (2 Chron. 28:16-21), which remained submissive throughout Ahaz's reign (Bright, 278). In 701 B.C. Sennacherib quelled a rebellion by destroying forty-six of Judah's fortified cities and deporting their residents

(Bright, 286). The Taylor Prism, a six-sided cylinder which includes Sennacherib's account of his raid into Judah.

(1) Given the usual bragging done in royal records, you can be sure that if Sennacherib had captured Jerusalem he would have boasted about it. And you can be equally sure that if he had suffered a humiliating defeat, he'd turn that sow's ear into a silk purse or not report it at all.

(2) Regarding 2 Ki. 19:35-37, Paul House writes: "No other ancient texts record [the Lord's killing of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers], which is not surprising in view of their consistently positive viewpoint. Normally only victories were recorded. Assyrian texts do refer to Sennacherib's return to Nineveh, and Herodotus [a 5th-century B.C. Greek historian] shows that there was in Egypt the memory of an Assyrian retreat following a divine intervention" (though that memory had the event at the Egyptian-Palestinian border and attributed the deliverance to an Egyptian god). The truth is that the Lord delivered Jerusalem just as reported in 2 Ki. 19:35-36.

c. In 605, 697, and 587 Nebuchadnezzar came against Judah, the last time destroying Jerusalem. In 1935 and 1938, 21 ostraca, which are broken pieces of pottery, on which letters had been written were discovered in the ruins of Lachish. They were written during the time of Jer. 34:7, when Nebuchadnezzar's army was advancing on Jerusalem. Jer. 34:7 mentions that Lachish and Azekah were the only fortified cities in Judea still holding out against Nebuchadnezzar's assault. Azekah is west of Jerusalem, and Lachish is south of Azekah. Most of the Lachish letters were dispatches from a Jewish commander named Hoshaiiah who apparently was stationed at an outpost north of Lachish and was responsible for interpreting the signals from Azekah and Lachish during that time. Lachish Ostrakon IV includes: "And let my lord know that we are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all the indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Azekah."

B. Oracles of judgment against Israel (2:6 - 6:14)

1. first oracle of doom (2:6-16)

a. understanding the text

(1) their sins: abused and exploited the underprivileged (2:6-8)

(a) To "sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals" may mean that creditors, using a corrupt legal system, sold innocent debtors into slavery to obtain payment for small debts or that judges sold poor people with just causes into slavery because of bribes from wealthy creditors. (Note 8:6 refers to the poor being *bought* for silver and a pair of sandals.) Either way, it was an abuse of the rights of the poor, as 2:7 makes clear ("They trample the heads of the poor . . . and push the afflicted out of the way" [NRSV]; or

"and deny justice to the oppressed" [NIV]). 5:12 mentions the righteous poor being deprived of justice by means of bribes.

(b) They were sexually exploiting the poor by disregarding the rights of young women sold to them as slaves-concubines (see, Ex. 21:7-11); they treated them as "community property." See, Gen. 35:22, 49:3-4, and 1 Chron. 5:1.

(c) They deprived the poor of their garments given in pledge, contrary to Ex. 22:26-27, and used the corrupt legal machinery to impose fines to support their luxury. They enjoyed the fruit of this oppression in the very places where they purported to worship God!

(2) their rejection of the God who blessed them (2:9-12)

(a) Amorite is an O.T. term sometimes used for the pre-conquest population of Canaan (Gen. 15:16). God reminds Israel that he brought them out of Egyptian bondage and gave them the Promised Land by destroying the apparently invincible Amorites.

(b) He cared for Israel's spiritual welfare by providing spiritual leaders in the form of Nazirites and prophets. Nazirites made a special vow of separation to God which involved abstaining from any product of the vine, abstaining from all fermented drinks, never cutting their hair, and never touching a dead body (Num. 6:1-12). Their devotion was a positive spiritual influence. Prophets, of course, provided inspired spiritual guidance to the people.

(c) But Israel rejected God, as shown by their rejection of the Nazirites and the prophets. They forced the Nazirites to break their vows and muzzled the prophets (for an illustration of the latter, see 7:12-13).

(3) their punishment (2:13-16)

(a) Their nation will be militarily defeated. This, of course, came to pass, culminating in the capture of Samaria in 722/721 B.C. (2 Ki. 17:3-6, 18:9-10). The siege of Samaria apparently was begun by Shalmaneser IV and completed by Sargon II, who succeeded Shalmaneser as king of Assyria in the latter part of 722 B.C. or the early part of 721 B.C.

(b) Among the inscriptions discovered at Khorsabad, Sargon boasts: "At the beginning of my royal rule . . . I besieged and captured Samaria, [and] led away as booty 27,290 inhabitants of it. . . . I installed over them an officer of mine and imposed upon them the tribute of the former king." (ANET, 284-285).

b. applying the text

(1) God is concerned about the poor and needy. In Jer. 22:15-16, God says about King Josiah: "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me? declares the LORD." As God's people, we must also be concerned about them.

(a) We must never treat the poor and powerless in our society as though they are less worthy or less important than we are. See, Jas. 2:1-9.

(b) A similar kind of thing was happening in the church in Corinth with regard to the fellowship meal (or "love feast") that often accompanied the Lord's Supper in the early church. When the Corinthians gathered, the wealthier Christians, who no doubt supplied most of the food for the fellowship meal, somehow were taking a disproportionate share of it, eating their "own supper." The haves had more than enough, as indicated by the excess of wine they consumed, but the have-nots were left hungry and were humiliated in the process. In 1 Cor. 11:17-32, Paul rebukes them for that behavior. He tells them that, by the wealthy discriminating against the poor in the fellowship meal, they were negating the very point of Christ's death, which was to create a new people for his name, a redeemed community in which the old distinctions of human fallenness -- such as social divisions based on class or wealth -- no longer hold sway.

(2) Our turning from God is all the more outrageous in light of how he has blessed us. He has defeated an enemy greater than the Amorites (Satan, spiritual death - Ephesians 2), transferred us into a realm (kingdom) with glorious fruit (now - Gal. 5:22-23, and then - Rev. 21:1-4), and provided us prophets (Scriptures) and examples of consecrated men. See, Heb. 10:26-31; 2 Pet. 1:9.

(3) Those who despise or ignore God seek to compromise his saints and to suppress his word. This is obvious in the case of non-Christians (e.g., 1 Pet. 4:4; Acts 5:27-28), but it even occurs among those born again. Among Christians there is sometimes talk of "not getting carried away" with one's faith. Among Christians there is sometimes suppression of bold preaching (racism, materialism, evangelism).

2. second oracle of doom (3:1 - 4:3)

a. the responsibility of election (3:1-2)

(1) The point - Israel's special relationship with God did not operate to excuse their sin; rather, it made their sin more culpable! To be God's elect is a position of responsibility. They should have been the last nation to reject the Holy One.

(2) Application

(a) The church's intimate relationship with God must never be used to excuse or justify sin. By God's grace, we have a special relationship with him; we have been chosen by him in Christ to be his children. Our response is to be one of obedience and holy living, not one of indifference or rebellion (e.g., Mat. 5:14-16, 48; 1 Peter 1:14-15).

(b) Yet the voices that seek to pervert our intimacy with God into license have always been present (Rom. 6:1; Jude 4). This describes the Christianity of many today; they have swallowed the notion of "cheap grace."

[1] According to a Gallup poll in March 1988, 66% of American adults claim to have made a commitment to Jesus Christ, yet according to a book published in 1991 (*The Day America Told the Truth* by James Patterson), 9 out of 10 people lie regularly.

[2] As Ronald Sider points out in his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (excerpted in *Books & Culture*, January/February 2005), polls show that Protestants who claim to take the Bible and their faith seriously ("evangelicals") divorce their spouses just as often as their secular neighbors, beat their wives as often as their neighbors, and are almost as materialistic and even more racist than their pagan friends. Sider writes: "Scandalous behavior is rapidly destroying American Christianity. By their daily activity, most 'Christians' regularly commit treason. With their mouths they claim that Jesus is Lord, but with their actions they demonstrate allegiance to money, sex, and self-fulfillment."

(c) So many claim to have fellowship with God and yet walk in the darkness. As the apostle John made clear in 1 Jn. 1:6, such people are lying about their relationship with God.

b. defense of his prophetic mission (3:3-8)

(1) The point - the prophet is just a messenger

(a) the climactic truism: the Lord causes the destruction of cities (3:3-6)

(b) the Lord does not do such without revealing his intention to his prophets (3:7)

(c) the Lord has announced the destruction of Samaria; Amos simply is the messenger (3:8)

(2) Application - Scripture is from God (2 Peter 1:20), so we are not responsible for its content. Our job is to deliver God's message accurately. We must not distort the message to make it more pleasing to our hearers (as so many groups do with the truth of discipleship). If our hearers do not like it, their fight is with God, not us. See, 2 Tim. 4:2-5.

c. summon of witnesses to upheaval and oppression in Israel (3:9-10)

(1) The point - even the world (note Ashdod may be Assyria), that does not possess or accept the guidance of Scripture, knows better than to act like Samaria! They had lost their sense of what is honest, decent, just, and proper.

(2) Application - It is an outrage for the people of God, with their high calling, to sink to a lifestyle beneath the world. See, 1 Cor. 5:1. Yet we see this going on today in groups wearing the Lord's name (e.g., accepting homosexuality by ordaining practicing homosexuals and blessing homosexual marriages). According to *Newsweek* (9/14/92), most Americans still believe that homosexuality is an unacceptable lifestyle (51% to 41%).

d. their punishment stated (3:11)

e. their punishment elaborated upon (3:12 - 4:3)

(1) only a remnant left (3:12)

(2) fate of altars and luxurious homes (3:13-15)

(a) Point - The things on which they base their security, the things in which they place their hope, i.e., heartless religious ritual and wealth, will not save them. They will prove to be a vicious deception.

(b) Application - Will address this in a couple of weeks with regard to 5:18 - 6:7.

(3) fate of the pampered women behind the oppression (4:1-3)

(a) Point - Their insatiable desire for luxury drove their husbands to exploitation and oppression, to squeeze out everything they could. Those who thus inspire and motivate others to sin will not escape God's judgment.

(b) Application - Those who use their relationship with Christians to pull them from their commitment to Christ, to encourage them to ignore the will of God, will not go unpunished. It is a serious thing to be a stumbling block to God's people (Mat. 18:6-7).

3. explanation of doom; refusal to repent under God's discipline (4:4-13)

a. there was a total disconnect between their religion or ritual and their lives (4:4-5)

(1) Bethel and Gilgal were two great Israelite sanctuaries or worship centers. It is easy to be deceived into thinking one has a relationship with God while living in rebellion. We have a great capacity for fooling ourselves into thinking that God is not concerned with daily living.

(2) Magic Johnson contracted AIDS from having sex with hundreds of women, and yet claimed on the Arsenio Hall Show that God is the top priority in his life! According to a Gallup poll in March 1988, 66% of American adults claim to have made a commitment to Jesus Christ, yet according to a book published in 1991 (*The Day America Told the Truth* by James Patterson), 9 out of 10 people lie regularly.

(3) The truth is that there cannot be a divorce between religion and life. See, 1 Jn. 1:5-7, 2:3-6. If faith is not reflected in life, it is not genuine faith.

b. their condition was due to their repeated refusals to heed God's discipline (4:6-11) - How often do we ignore God's discipline? See, 1 Cor. 11:27-32; Heb. 12:3-11. (Note: As Job shows, not all suffering is discipline, but it is a possibility that must be considered.)

c. they must now meet God in judgment (4:12-13) - It is a terrifying thing, not something to joke about. See, Mat. 13:47-50.

4. lament over Israel (5:1-3)

5. explanation of doom; refusal to repent at God's direct invitation (5:4-17)

a. God's invitation and their practice (5:4-15) - God, through his prophets, directly urged them to repent, to turn back to him for forgiveness and blessing, but they refused. God, through the Scripture, issues warnings to wayward Christians to repent, to wholeheartedly return to him (Rev. 3:15-19). God's grace toward the penitent Christian is limitless, but we cannot live in rebellion.

b. the result of their refusal (5:16-17) - They will suffer judgment. The wayward Christian who stubbornly refuses God's invitation to repent will likewise suffer judgment. See, Heb. 10:26-31.