

CHAPTER IV

AMOS

THE STRUCTURE OF AMOS

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The Author.

SOME twelve miles south of Jerusalem on the brink of the drop down to the Dead Sea lay the fortified village of Tekoa,¹ near enough to the desert to bear its stamp, near enough to the high-road up the backbone of the country through Beer-Sheba, Hebron and Jerusalem to know what was happening in the world. This was the home of Amos, who lived the arduous life of a shepherd (cf. Gen. 31: 39f). He may have been the owner of his flock, for the same technical expression is used of him and Mesha, king of Moab (II Kings 3: 4), *i.e. noqed*.

Amos offers us no indication of his spiritual history or of how God called him (but see p. 33). We can, however, from his prophecy recognize how he had been stamped in his thinking by the desert, where there is no place for half tones, for fine distinctions between light and dark, right and wrong. G. A. Smith is probably correct in suggesting² that Amos will have visited the towns of Israel on business, and that what he saw there must have created the certainty of Israel's doom in his heart. Then in rapid succession came the signs of God's wrath, drought (4: 6ff), locusts (4: 9; 7: 1), plague (4: 10—it ravished the Near East in 765 B.C.) and a total

¹ For a description of the landscape see G. A. Smith, I, p. 74.

² *ibid.* p. 79.

eclipse of the sun (4: 13; 5: 8; 9: 6—763 B.C.). It was clear to Amos that the coming doom was at hand, so he wrapped his cloak around him and went off with his message—"The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" (3: 8). It was as simple as all that.

It is vital to realize that Amos represents something new in Hebrew religion. The indignant denial, "I am no prophet, neither am I one of the sons of the prophets" (7: 14, R.V. mg., R.S.V., N.E.B.) goes beyond the rejection of the idea that he prophesied for money. Once he finished his brief ministry in the North, he will have gone back to his flock, and he probably never prophesied again, *i.e.* he was never an official prophet at all. He represents that challenge to established form and order which has repeatedly been necessary to free the Church from the tyranny of tradition.

Though Amos' great successors could not have echoed his indignant denial, for they had known God's appointment as prophet, yet in their opposition to the "false prophets" and the official worship, in their long silences and their willingness to stand outside the normal framework of society they show that they had learnt the lesson of Amos' activity. The passage 3: 3-8 is particularly interesting as showing the spiritual compulsion behind his message.

The actual course of Amos' activity is not clear. It cannot have lasted long; it will have been cut short by the authorities, for in spite of the king's indifference Amaziah will have had the power to enforce his demands (7: 10-13). But it seems reasonably certain that his prophecy was given at the great autumn, *i.e.* New Year, festival at Bethel. It was probably spread over three days.

It may well be that it was Amos' prophecy of the coming earthquake (8: 8; 9: 5)—a prophecy fulfilled by one of the worst in Palestinian history (1: 1), for it was still remembered two and a half centuries later (Zech. 14: 5)—that stamped his message on men's minds and caused them to approach him with the request that it should be written down.

Amos' Message.

It will be no coincidence that Abraham, Moses and David all knew the wilderness, all had worked as shepherds, for under God this was a life that could teach a true scale of values. This was Amos' school in which he came to realize one of the foundation stones of true religion, that God was not merely just Himself, but demanded justice from men, and especially from those that worshipped Him. As preached by Amos it is over-simplified and gives a one-sided picture of God, but it was a foundation stone on which others could build. Until

He could reveal Himself perfectly in His Son, God's self-revelation had to be "in sundry ways and divers manners."

There was nothing intrinsically new in Amos' message. It breathes in the stories of Genesis, in the judgment of the Flood and of Sodom and Gomorrah, in Abraham's plea, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" and in God's commendation of him (Gen. 18: 19). It is made clear in the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20-23, cf. 24: 4, 7), the fundamental law code of the people. The judge stands in the place of God, and to go to the judge is to go to God (Exod. 21: 6; 22: 8, 9, 28—cf. R.V. text and mg.). No distinction is made between civil and religious law, but the former is embedded in the latter. It is a leading feature in the teaching of the early prophets, e.g. I Sam. 15: 22f, II Sam. 12: 1-15, I Kings 21 (note that Ahab's and Jezebel's judicial murder of Naboth was relatively a greater sin than all the Baal worship). Nothing alienated the affections of the people more readily from David than the suggestion, true or false, that he, God's representative, was not caring for the administration of justice (II Sam. 15: 1-6).

Amos does not analyse the reasons why this fundamental concept had been so largely ignored—that he was not exaggerating is shown by his later contemporaries Hosea, Isaiah and Micah—nor does he suggest reformations in religious and civil life which might result in increasing social justice. He demands the doing of justice as the only way of averting the otherwise inevitable judgment of God.

The Background.

As is almost universal in the prophetic message, Amos addresses himself to the rich and influential, to the rulers of the people. This is mainly due to the structure of oriental society, and to the fact that earlier Israelite religion, while never losing sight of the individual, did subordinate him to the community as a whole. It is our familiarity with the Psalter (and even here the community plays a larger role than we often realize) that often prevents our recognizing this fact. It is perhaps best demonstrated by Matt. 11: 5 where "and the poor have good tidings preached unto them" is given by our Lord as the clinching proof that He is the Messiah.

The sins he accuses them of group themselves roughly into three types. There are the gross violations of the ordinary decencies of life. Here come the crimes of the surrounding nations (1: 3-2: 3), gross immorality (2: 7b), inhumanity (2: 8a, cf. Exod. 22: 26f) and fraud (8: 5b). Then there are injustice, the perversion of justice and the luxury that leads

to them. The only guarantee of justice in Israel was either the integrity of the judge or the power of one's own family and connexions. That is why the sad plight of the widow, orphan and stranger is so often stressed. God had entrusted the care of the weak and helpless into the hands of them that bore rule and judged (generally synonymous terms), and so injustice and the perversion of justice were peculiarly affronts to God (cf. Exod. 22: 21-24; 23: 1-3, 6-9). Amos' attacks on the luxury of the rich held nothing of the fox's rejection of the grapes beyond his leap as sour. Throughout the Bible period, and especially in the Old Testament, Palestine was an agricultural land with only those artisans that its internal economy needed. In such a society great riches could only be obtained by great wrong. The women's ornaments (Isa. 3: 16-23), the ivory couches and the eating of immature animals (6: 4), the drunkenness and indolence had all been made possible only by the grinding of the face of the poor and by gross injustice and perversion of justice.

The third group of sins includes all those acts that imply ignorance of or indifference to God's character and the privileges He had bestowed. Such were Judah's sins (2: 4), the rejection of prophet and Nazirite (2: 11f), a pretentious, hollow worship (4: 4f; 5: 21ff), and the ignoring of God's warnings (4: 6-11).

The main reason for Israel's moral condition was religious. It is dealt with especially by Hosea (see p. 37). Having conceived of Jehovah as merely their Baal, a god of the same type as the Baalim of their neighbours, they attributed to Him the capriciousness and non-moral character of the Baalim and assumed that the sacrificial ritual carried out with extreme elaboration and punctiliousness was the matter of prime importance to Him. Amos had the great gift of being able to put first things first. He did not ask whether the Northern sanctuaries were God-willed, whether the golden calf-images were a breach of the Sinai covenant, whether the ritual conformed to the divinely ordained pattern. He knew that reform along these lines would be and would remain external—examples are the abortive reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. He knew that all the error came from a false conception of God, and that if the people came to a true conception of God, the other matters would reform themselves.

This is one of the chief lessons which Amos has to teach the Christian Church, for the tendency has at all times been strong to put correct Church order in the first place. But "correct" order is no guarantee of a "correct" knowledge of God, and still less of "correct" living.

The Crimes of Israel and her Neighbours (Chs. 1, 2).

The mention of all Israel's neighbours as ripe for judgment will have made the people think that the New Year was ushering in the Day of the Lord. Note that in at least one case (Moab, 2: 1 ff), and possibly in two others (Philistines, 1: 6ff, and Tyre, 1: 9f), the crimes condemned are not against Israel at all. God will not punish the nations because they have harmed Israel, but because He is the Judge of all the earth.

For the Nazirites (2: 11) see Num. 6: 1-21. Their purpose was obviously to enable the Israelite who had no other possibility of publicly serving God to show his zeal and love. The opposition to them arose probably from the Nazirites' rejection of the grape-vine and all connected with it, thus reminding the people of the contrast between the wilderness (cf. Hos. 2: 14f; 9: 10, Jer. 2: 2), where the covenant was first made, and the settled life of the land of Canaan.

Israel's Crimes and Doom (Chs. 3-6).

Amos' second message begins by stressing that not merely is God's justice even-handed—the inference from the first—but also that from him to whom much has been given, much is expected. Privilege implies responsibility. This is implicit in passages like Deut. 7: 6-11; 10: 12-17. Later prophetic passages repeat it, e.g. Isa. 40: 2b (see p. 56).

The passage 3: 3-8 is primarily a vindication of Amos' right to prophesy, but it is far more. It affirms that God's dealings with men follow consistent principles, which at least in general outline are understandable by men. The R.V. mg. in ver. 3 is correct, cf. R.S.V., N.E.B.

The kine of Bashan (4: 1) are of course the rich women, living in luxury, who by their demands on their husbands encourage them in their oppression of the poor (cf. Isa. 3: 16-4: 1; 32: 9ff).

Since by the Deuteronomic legislation the third year was of special importance in tithing (Deut. 14: 28; 26: 12) and Elkanah's practice (I Sam. 1: 3, 21) suggests that the average Israelite concentrated on an annual visit to the central sanctuary, which could be entirely independent of the three pilgrim feasts, it is reasonable to assume that 4: 4 represents the prophet's sarcastic exaggeration of normal custom—the A.V. is incorrect here. If so the use of leaven on the altar (4: 5 mg.) will not be a reference to a new custom in Bethel, but a continuation of this sarcastic exaggeration. According to Lev. 7: 13 leavened cakes were part of the sacrifice of thanksgiving, but they were not brought on the altar. If we have rightly understood the passage, 4: 4f is not a condemnation

of the form of the Bethel ritual, but its rejection because for all its elaboration it was mere outward ceremonial. 4: 6-11 shows how empty it all was. The worshippers had not realized that the repeated calamities that had overtaken them were the best evidence that God had rejected their offerings.

Beer-sheba (5: 5; 8: 14), owing to its association with the Patriarchs, had maintained its importance as a sacred place. For an Israelite to pass by Jerusalem to visit the unofficial sanctuary in the extreme south of Judah was an extreme example of will worship.

For the Day of the Lord (5: 18ff) see p. 20. The judgment of this Day cannot be averted by any ritual (5: 21ff)—the songs of ver. 23 are the psalms which even at this date accompanied the sacrifices, "the melody of thy viols" the musical accompaniment. The only thing that could avail was moral reformation (ver. 24).

The concluding verses of the chapter (5: 25ff) present major difficulties of interpretation, as may be seen by the LXX misunderstandings reflected in Stephen's quotation (Acts 7: 43) and in part in the A.V. rendering. Harper is probably correct in rendering ver. 25, "Was it only sacrifices and offerings that ye brought me in the wilderness during forty years."¹ Loving obedience was far more important than the sacrifices the people brought (cf. Jer. 7: 21ff and p. 85). In the next verse either the present (Harper) or the future (R.V. mg., R.S.V., N.E.B., Driver,² G. A. Smith³) is preferable to the past. Siccuth and Chiun (R.V.) are generally taken to refer to the Assyrian star-worship, which was becoming popular, but N.E.B. does not recognize them as proper names. If we take the verb as future, it means that the people and their idols would go into exile together.

Five Visions of Doom (Chs. 7-9: 10).

These visions, though told at the end of his public ministry, in all probability are part of Amos' call. Amos' message will have wakened fierce hostility not merely in official priestly circles (7: 10-13). So it is that in his second group of messages he had to give a general justification of his prophesying (3: 3-8), but now in his final appearance he had specifically to justify his message by an appeal to divinely given visions.

The visions contain a number of references to primitive ideas about the world, *viz.* the great deep (7: 4), the position of Sheol (9: 2), the great sea-serpent (9: 3). The force of the

¹ Amos and Hosea (I.C.C.), p. 136.

² Joel and Amos (C.B.), p. 192.

³ G. A. Smith I, p. 171.

fourth vision (8: 1f) lies in a play on words; end=*qets*, autumn fruit=*qaitis* (cf. Jer. 1: 11f, and p. 64).

The sin of Samaria¹ (8: 14) is generally taken to be the golden calf of Bethel—cf. “thy God, O Dan”—but on the basis of Hos. 8: 5f it is simpler to assume that a bull image was set up in Samaria as well, when it became the capital. This passing expression shows that Amos’ virtual silence about the idolatrous, Canaanized worship of the North in no way implied approval or acquiescence.

Amos closes his message of doom by going beyond his earlier denial of Jehovah’s favouritism (3: 1f). He not merely implicitly denies the commonly held view that Jehovah needed Israel, but explicitly affirms that essentially all peoples are God’s people, and that all movements of the nations are as much God’s doing as the Exodus from Egypt (9: 7). Therein lies the certainty that a just God will justly judge Israel. The A.V. mg. is correct in 9: 9, “. . . yet shall not the least stone fall upon the earth,” so R.S.V., N.E.B. God is not merely the God of the nation, but also of the individual, and ultimately His judgments are individual judgments.

Final Blessing (Ch. 9: 11–15).

These verses (or 9: 8c–15) are commonly denied to Amos, but the reasons seem inadequate. We agree that were we to picture Amos speaking these words in Bethel, it would imply an impossible contradiction with his previous message. But they will be the prophet’s addition as he records his message for posterity. Nor is it fair to see a contradiction between the message of complete judgment in the prophecy as a whole and the promises of restoration here. However pessimistic a prophet might be about his own generation, he was completely optimistic about the future. Sooner or later God’s purpose in the choice of Israel was bound to be vindicated.

There is hardly any contradiction between Amos’ ethical position and the purely material picture here. A comparison with Joel 3: 18f suggests that he is using traditional language. Moreover if Isaiah consistently uses pictures of transformed nature as implying transformed men and that without formal explanation, it would be dangerous to assume that this was not traditional prophetic usage.

A much fuller treatment of the book will be found in my *The Prophets of Israel*, chs. IX, X.

¹ The rendering of R.S.V., N.E.B. is far from certain.