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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## AMOS<sup>1</sup>

It may be said that the times have intervened and prescribed a subject for us. Various topics in the field of recent Old Testament studies merit attention. But the hour beckons us on past the outposts to the citadel of truth, to the more solid and central teachings of Scripture itself. A great historic resort of those who are caught in a crisis is Old Testament Prophecy, that treasury of the things by which men live. A fine representative of the prophetic school is found in Amos, with his tenseness and vigour, his arresting and awesome power. And we, whose lives are cast in the spacious places of the Pentecostal age, must needs bear in mind, with Peter, that the ancient word of Prophecy holds for us a new certainty and glory. The Old Testament philosophy of history, developed in the New Testament according to its true inner genius, still holds good and constitutes an indispensable part of the Christian equipment for grappling with the ever-recurring problems of life.

We shall confine ourselves to certain aspects of the book of Amos which have a more or less direct bearing on the situation confronting us to-day, in the expectation of receiving guidance and spiritual quickening in view of our tasks in Christian living and especially in the Gospel ministry.

Amos was commissioned by Jehovah to make a startling announcement to the Northern Kingdom, supporting the unwelcome news by resistless arguments and indicating the happy issue of it all.

### I

First, the message of Amos was fraught with the heavy tidings of imminent judgment. Looming up through the blue haze of the future the prophet descries a formidable Shape, which threatens the land, and which he shrinks from describing. That eloquent reserve is lost on undiscerning Israel. The spectral form creeps closer, and now the roar of a springing lion, followed by the rush of a withering desert-wind, is heard.

<sup>1</sup> Inaugural Lecture delivered in the Free Church College, Edinburgh October, 1939.

And still the alarm means nothing to the self-confident people. Parables must give way to plain speech, and the utterance of the prophet which follows leaves nothing to be desired in the matter of arresting power. With a lurid, Hogarth-like brush, he paints a picture of well-nigh insupportable horror. A series of desolating natural calamities will overtake the kingdom and pave the way for a supreme disaster. A

. . . two-handed engine at the door  
Stands ready to smite once and smite no more.

An unnamed enemy is being "raised up" by Jehovah and equipped for his dread mission. The avenging hosts are gathering, they swarm onwards and anon encompass little Israel's home. The defending troops yield before the crushing pressure of the foe, and are soon overpowered and routed with terrible slaughter. Bereft of armed forces to stem the tide of invasion, the defenceless Israelites sink into the last extremities of impotence and suffer the final defeat of knowing themselves defeated. Grief uncontrolled seizes the stricken nation and the city squares, notorious for gaiety and the vineyards proverbial for mirth unconfined, become very schools for lamentation. And still the tidal-wave of terror and destruction mounts. In vain do small groups inspired with the courage of desperation carry on the unequal strife; in vain do fugitives unmanned by panic seek asylum at the altar or in dens and caves of the earth. And with the siege of the capital a fresh climax of the rational woe is reached. The magnificent situation of Samaria, the ample resources of the citadel, and the desperate valour of the garrison only prolong the tale of agony, and add terrors to the nightmare of the inevitable capture and sack of the city. The whole land is now engulfed by the flood. Palace and temple, mansion and hovel,—all go down in one common ruin. Those who have taken to flight are pursued relentlessly, and the battered survivors are dragged into exile to the accompaniment of every kind of indignity and with the prospect of unceasing outrage and oppression. And that is not all. The crowning calamity of outcast Israel is the inexorable silence of her God. In the throes of the national dissolution the frenzied shriek of prayer rends the heavens only to come back as a mocking echo. The spring of divine consolation,

long neglected, long spurned, has now ceased to flow. Ossa is piled upon Pelion, and the torments of spiritual thirst aggravate the pangs of material misery. Over Israel "The End" is written in letters of fire and blood.

A generation went by and the dark fate forecast by Amos came upon the doomed kingdom. The proud, prosperous, self-confident nation suffered extinction and exile at the hand of that fleshless instrument of cruelty, known to history as Assyria, Assyria the Savage.

The Fall of Samaria marks one of the stages in the Captivity, and ever since the Jewish people have been virtually without an independent national life, without a land that they can call their own. And who can reckon the sorrows of the disinherited and homeless Diaspora at the hands of the alien races among whom they lived? Man's inhumanity to man may be said to touch the nadir of infamy where the treatment of the Jew is concerned, and is so stupendous that the very imagination is benumbed.

We are still confronted with the oppressive problem of Jewish suffering. Is there in the persecuted race some superfluity of naughtiness that would explain the monstrous anger of the Gentile peoples? Are we entitled to count our comparative felicities as a token of superior rank and worth? The voice of Scripture leaves us in no doubt on these points. The spirit of racialism has no affinity with the spirit of Christianity and opens the door to the most soulless discrimination and tyranny. Explicit warning is given us by the Apostle to the Gentiles against the spirit of anti-semitism: "Beware of boasting against the natural branches: if God did not spare them, neither will he spare you." And fuller light on this dark mystery comes from our prophet.

## II

For, second, the message of Amos is vocal with the austere accents of eternal truth. The curse causeless would not come. The lightning of justice in its unbending claims flashes through the gloom that broods over the pages of the prophet. The appalling judgment denounced against Israel is the reaction of the divine righteousness against high-handed and sustained sinning. Amos knew his day, and he brings against it an impeachment that could not be challenged. Common morality

is being cast to the winds, and the commands of the Covenant-God trampled under foot. The great mass of the people is groaning under a cruel yoke of oppression. Heartless corruption and grinding tyranny prevail everywhere. The poor are robbed of their patrimony, denied the means of a bare livelihood, and not infrequently deprived of their personal freedom. There is no redress for their grievances, for venal judges award verdicts in the courts to the highest bidder. In fact things have come to this pass that the acme of prudence for the victims of wrong is to suffer in unprotesting silence! And gross sensuality flourishes alongside social injustice. Lewdness lifts its head in every corner of the land. The luxurious magnate and the down-trodden helot are alike ridden by lust, and dissipated dotage is engaged in hot rivalry with licentious youth. And it is significant that intemperance goes hand in hand with immorality. Strong drink is blighting the nobler faculties and inflaming the lower instincts. Of special ill-omen is it that in the higher ranks especially the women of the nation aid and abet their lords in the vilest excesses of debauchery. An uncontrolled animalism results, issuing oft-times in the most repellent abominations. And, most shocking of all, this hideous moral abandonment flaunts itself in the garb of religion and masquerades as divine worship. And the blame for such unbridled bestiality is laid at the door of Jehovah himself, and the stock defence of the voluptuary is put forward:

And the light that led astray  
Was light from heaven.

The Medusa-head of degrading indulgence is turning the heart of the nation to stone, and among the governing classes there is a grievous lack of responsibility and a callous disregard of the ills of society. In the hands of the northern leaders the pure and ennobling faith of Israel is growing earthly, sensual, devilish. The supreme sin of the nation consists in this that the well-appointed, pretentious worship of the day is the religion of the holy Jehovah only in name, and represents at bottom the foul and benighted heathenism of the reprobate Canaanites. Religious apostacy, issuing in moral corruption and spiritual atrophy, is the heart of the indictment which Amos brings against God's people.

And the guilt of the nation wore a still darker hue. The exceeding abundant privileges of the Chosen Race added immeasurably to the heinousness of their offences. Triumphantly delivered from the overwhelming power of Egypt, sustained by angels' food and trained by revelations from heaven in the wilderness, settled in the choice land of Canaan, and granted the gifts of prosperity and freedom and the far better gifts of good men to direct them, the house of Jacob had clearly received much from Jehovah and would surely render much to Him! Far otherwise did Israel act! She forgot her glorious past and despised her lofty rank. She debauched the holy recluses and silenced the inspired seers in her midst. The stern call of the more recent national catastrophes went unheeded, and now how would the people receive this fresh and urgent message from Jehovah by the mouth of Amos? Patiently, thoroughly did the prophet demolish their specious arguments and explode their ill-founded confidence and fantastic hopes, and their final response was only an indignant repudiation of his charges and a murderous rage at his solemn threatenings. The whole generation was bent on strangling the truth and bidding defiance to the counsels of wisdom. Universal justice was clamouring for action.

Where the great offence is let the great axe fall! And the universal Lord made reply: 'My sword which is bathed in heaven shall come down on this sinful people to judgment!' Did not Amos well to denounce against that seed of evil-doers indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish?

But the shield of truth has another side. Truth, the truth of Jehovah, is indeed instinct with justice. But it is also replete with mercy. The great pronouncement of Amos flashes with the terrifying glitter of adamant law. But it is not lacking in the rich glow of boundless grace. The central idea of Old Testament prophecy is not the inexorable righteousness but the covenanted loving-kindness of Jehovah. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities." That pregnant word summarizes the message of the prophet and lays bare the heart of the Lord. What fathomless deeps are in that "knowledge"! Sympathy and understanding, tender care, yearning pity, unrepenting kindness! And He will take means to make them fit to enjoy His favour and fulfil His will again! The fire of "punishment"

is the way, the only way through to the wealthy place of prosperity and peace. The rigours of the coming judgment are a signal expression, a necessary outcome, in the existing circumstances, of Jehovah's profound and unchanging love for Israel! Is this but untimely trifling, the bitterest irony on the part of the preacher? God forbid! This strange doctrine issues from a deeply serious view of the question and goes down to the roots of life and godliness.

In the descending blow is seen for one thing the righteous activity of the Judge of all the earth, vindicating the innocent and overthrowing the oppressor. In it, too, He gives an anxiously-awaited proof that He still occupies the throne of the universe and governs men according to the principles of morality. His great object is, as someone observes, not merely to make people happy; it is rather to make them deserving of happiness. The experiences of life which He appoints are designed to produce noble character rather than pleasant feelings. It has been indeed maintained that "The only justification which suffering requires is that it serves moral ends". That view is somewhat shallow and inadequate. The mystery of evil is not entirely solved by it. Much remains unexplained and probably inexplicable. But it is such stubborn questionings that give an opening for faith. Once again, it is supremely as Jehovah, the God of Salvation, that He exhibits Himself in the events of history, exercising the mighty constraint of His sovereign grace. Nothing is so exacting in its demands and indeed so severe in its methods as the best human love, and God's fatherly love cannot fall short of the highest we know on earth. The election of Israel imposed the obligation of exemplariness. The nation must live worthily and to some purpose. But Amos was no mere moralist for all his emphasis on the inflexible demands of universal law. He was jealous of the prerogatives of Jehovah, and based his appeals on the grounds of the ancestral Faith. He urged the pledged and proved love of God as the grand motive for a new surrender, and the unfailing power of God as the mighty inspiration of an obedient life. It was a lofty conception and a profound experience of the divine grace that impelled the shepherd-seer to address reiterated, passionate calls to his recalcitrant neighbours: "Avow sin and mourn it; discard sin and hate it; return to Jehovah and taste again the comforts instead of the terrors of His power; seek His mercy, plead His

promises, and accept that favour of His, which is life. Israel must and shall respond. The Lord will see to it that the call of mercy is effectual. He has a recognized historic method of renewing the loyalty of his followers who have resiled from their former ardent adherence to His cause. He withdraws His presence and withholds the comforts of believing. He disappoints their hopes, and frustrates their plans, and makes life a very wilderness for them. At last He proceeds to extremities, and lifts the rod of affliction, destroying their defences, shattering their idols, leaving them in the slough of helplessness and desperation. No way of escape and safety is left but one—the upward way. They are driven to God by disaster and disillusionment, they are drawn to Him by the magnetism of His all-availing grace. And in unreserved surrender, they are sure of the wondrous amnesty of heaven, the recovery of the divine favour and the freedom and joy of the divine service. All history and experience attest the gracious rule of the Mighty Lord, serving to dissolve men's darkest problems and to make their life an inexpressible song of triumph.

It is to be seriously considered if God be not employing a like procedure in the uncertainties and stress of our own day. Are not these wars and rumours of war a loud summons from heaven to set our house in order? The times are notoriously out of joint. What is the great controversy of society which is being increasingly submitted to the cruel arbitrament of the sword? The most obvious feature of recent times is the apparition of a sinister despotism, strong and arrogant, aggressive in its nature and unscrupulous in its methods. In a general sense the immediate causes of the disturbing phenomenon are tolerably clear, and matter for anxious concern to us all. Behind the new menace to the liberty and welfare of humanity lie the mistaken and vacillating policies of the League of Nations. Despite its solid promise and remarkable achievements, it has failed to secure the peace of the world, and the secret of the unfulfilled promise would seem to be the hold which the old narrow and ungenerous nationalism has on the peoples. Not a statesman at the centre of affairs but knew that a more liberal and farseeing co-operation was essential for a judicious settlement of international affairs, and not one prevailed to overcome the entrenched prejudice and inertia of his own nation, and that lamentable lack of vision and courage among leaders and their

following have had a tragic outcome in world-economics as well as in international jurisprudence. The amazing advance which the last hundred years has witnessed in science and industry has put man in command of illimitable resources and abundant leisure through the growing mastery of nature. The fundamental condition, however, of unrestricted access to the treasures of the modern cornucopia is friendship between the countries, co-operation, confidence, and freest intercourse and exchange. On this point modern man has failed. The obsolescent brand of nationalism has spread rather than diminished, and this barren conservatism has been insulating the nations from that genuine amity and association through which alone society as it is organized at present can flourish or even exist. The unhappy trend of affairs has been towards separation, alienation, and an illusive self-sufficiency, with the inevitable drift towards economic depression and the rupture of peaceful relations. Our generation has been stemming the natural currents of the ocean of world-prosperity and inducing stagnancy into its freshness and life-giving potency. The talent has been hoarded instead of being profitably invested. Can we escape responsibility for the grim paradox of poverty amid plenty, for denying ourselves and others the lavish and unexampled bounty of God to our modern age?

And a kinship can be traced between the ills and errors of organized society and the warped moral life of the day. The symptoms of ethical subnormality cannot be concealed. The civilized world itself is a self-confessed devotee to a dangerous degree of the materialistic outlook. The noble powers of humanity are laid waste with getting and spending. The fierce struggle of competition in all the great departments of life is wearing for the winners and worse for the victims. Of gravest ill-omen is that phase of modern life which with unconscious irony styles itself the "new morality," in which there is a frank acceptance and deliberate defence of tenets subversive of all family life and offering a bold challenge to the eternal verities of the divine law. A strange insensitiveness has been discernible by which people seem incapable of keeping up the mood of indignation or healthy interest for any length of time, and may well be the fruit of those excitements and sensations to which many have been so madly subjecting themselves. And after all, it is the neglect and indeed contempt of the simple and prosaic virtues that is the chief trouble. Pride and greed, envy

and ambition and selfishness—these have much to do with the disharmony and misery of the domestic sphere, and the distrust and rivalry and fighting in the international arena.

And the prevailing disorders, we are forced to conclude, take their rise in the region of the spirit. The severe religious recession can well explain the moral disarray and the social and political frictions which abound. The broad fact is that the secularization of life has been advancing at an alarming rate, and no institution, however venerable or sacred, is immune from its encroachments. A practical atheism has won the suffrages of great multitudes everywhere, and it is not surprising, therefore, that there is a disquieting dearth of dependence on God in private and public life, but more than enough of self-complacency and boastfulness of spirit. And not a little of the blame is to be laid at the door of the professed representatives of Christ in the world. For the last few generations powerful anti-Christian waves of thought have swept the communions of the one great branch of the Church, and the other great branch of it continues to present the traditional type of the Faith which mechanizes the spiritual and exalts the human. The many varieties of the historical evangelical religion—largely outside the organized churches—have been cultivating rather an anaemic and hot-house species of piety. And the threshold of spiritual health cannot thus be lowered with impunity. The inevitable counterpart of a reduced Christianity is a rejuvenated paganism. The ferocious ideologies of the Absolute State are replacing the benign doctrines of the Church Catholic. The obscuring of revelational light can only issue in the return of the Dark Ages of history.

Thus we can hardly resist the conclusion that the demonic spirit of Totalitarianism is more or less at home in modern civilization as a whole, and is ready to break out in unexpected quarters in its native frightfulness. And it is in entire accordance with the practice of God to chastise men with whips of their own making, as we believe He is doing to-day. One would fain dwell on the many bright and reassuring aspects of the moral and spiritual life of the moment, but must refrain. It may fairly be held that the most favourable survey of the general situation in the light of the Christian ideal leaves no room for complacency, and compels us to ask if the goal of it all is not a life lived apart from God and organised against Him. And our

prayers for the world must be personal as well as intercessory. Few escape compliance with the spirit of the age, and none are free from complicity in the life of the day. And the harder it is to make a clean breast of some besetting sin—that of our group, of our own heart—the more urgent it is to do it. And we exercised with the *impasse* of the present situation? Let us search out the principles that have conducted us hither, and deploring and renouncing them in the sight of God let us turn our faces to the light that leads to life. The business requires haste. We should act while the impression is fresh and strong upon our spirits. Few things make for dullness and sterility of heart like the failure to employ the emotional experiences of the big moments of life for the fitting moral decisions and growth in holiness.

There is a grand consistency in the attitude and activities of God to humanity everywhere and always. To the upright He shews Himself upright, and to the froward He shews Himself froward. At the moment He is addressing our backsliding generation in stern tones full of majesty. The colossal evil of war does not disprove His existence, or His greatness, or His good will towards men. Far other. His active rule is demonstrated. His unsleeping righteousness is attested. His grand purpose of redeeming the world is manifestly being pursued with unslackening ardour. The inwardness of these sad calamities, accompanied as they are by surprising mercies, is, in a haunting prophetic figure, that Jehovah is "alluring" his people into the wilderness and there, in the solitudes, is reminding them of His changeless love and His all-availing sufficiency. He would have us return to Him in undivided allegiance and resume in unswerving devotion His gracious service. And we on whom the ends of the ages have fallen ought to know more than Amos and his day of the majestic instancy of God's pursuing love and the inexorable riches of His redeeming grace, the readiness with which He forgives and the completeness with which he restores, and the lavish gifting of a new enabling power to live nobly and to achieve triumphantly. For each and all an enthralling prospect opens up: the soul shriven, sin forsworn, the desire of the heart fulfilled, God Himself possessed! *That* is the fate which He would have us to meet, the fate which these dire events of experience and these precious promises of the Gospel constrain us to accept at His gracious Hand.

## III

And finally the message of Amos is touched with the tender light of sure hope. Israel would survive and recover and hold on her way: the fit and indispensable dènouement of the sombre drama. With the skill of inspired genius, the man of Tekoa distributes his emphases in delivering his message. Long and awesomely is the knell of doom sounded forth. In short blasts does the clarion-call of truth pierce the air, swift to convict and potent to stimulate. And then, when the echoes have died away, one clear silvery note is heard, the announcement of deliverance. Jehovah will "raise up" His humiliated and broken people. And that picture closes the prophet's vision. For a brief moment it flashes out and then is gone. But that is enough. We see what we cannot forget. Israel had been long descending the slopes of declension, and now could not recover herself, but must plunge into the very depths of the valley-bottom and there meet her Lord in the awfulness of final controversy. The din and murk of that terrible encounter fills the pages of Amos. At long last the scene changes and we pass with the prophet from the gloomy gorge, filled with "the confused noise of the warrior and garments rolled in blood".

When I see day succeed the deepest night  
 How can I speak but as I feel  
 Throughout the darkness—it will end!

A fairer prospect and a surer hope stirs the soul of the prophet, for beyond the valley of the shadow he beholds sunlit heights and up slopes of green access he traces the march of Israel, the Remnant that has been purified and renewed in the fires. They mount the ridge of spiritual quickening and anon climb the rise of restoration to their well-loved land. And finally they are seen for a moment on the shining plateau of a jubilant and abiding prosperity.

Words fail to indicate the far grander hope of the latter-day church. And the calm entrancing vision of coming rest and glory for our sin-stricken earth ever casts back a soothing light on the present with its imperfections and dreariness, its confusion and travail. The wheels of God's purpose go straight forward and the world is being infallibly conducted to its glorious destiny. Obdurate impenitence will be swallowed up in the unlit

darkness, while the stricken spirit of the righteous will know a second springtime of revival. The Israel of God will outlive every judgment and exact tribute from every trial. The preacher with a passion for righteousness and a love of truth is the true optimist, the true guide of humanity. If men resume their loyalty to the Lord and maintain their witness to His almighty grace, they will abide every shock of circumstance and ordeal of experience and achieve the Christian victory in the end of the day. They shall endure as seeing Him that is invisible, and calmly watch His working, with whom one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day.

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