

**A Critical Interpretation of Amos**

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There are many stories in the Bible that are immediately recognized to be stories, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Stories such as the tale of Noah and the Ark or Jonah and the whale fall into this category. However, other books in the Bible seem to develop from nothing and lead to nowhere, at least at first glance. Yet, many of these also have structure and meaning when examined in closer detail. The Bible's book of Amos is one of great applicability to modern times because of its series of parallels struck between the nation of Israel and the nations of the world today. However, it is easy to miss the storyline developing in the series of warnings given and rage-filled announcements made. The story of Amos is the story of a simple man who undertakes the tremendous challenge of trying to change the world he lives in with sufficient time to save his people from certain destruction. That God recognizes the task will fail before he even starts out does not lessen the effort brought forward on the part of God and Amos. That the book does tell a story, complete with plot development, characterization, shifts in point of view, a steady sense of the progression of time and the use of repetition will be the focus of this paper.

### **Plot Development**

At first glance at the book of Amos, in which a series of oracles is presented to the reader in short verse sections, it is easy to assume there is no true plot development included in the story. After all, a plot is supposed to proceed logically from one event to another and the series of verses presented don't immediately jump out as indicating events so much as simply a series of statements. However, a closer look into the warnings given, the dialogue taking place between God and Amos and the interactions

that occur between Amos and the people of Israel illustrates an active storyline with significant development of plot.

The book begins with the introduction of the prophet as a rather unimportant shepherd from the kingdom of Judah. This brief statement seems like a simple statement of fact rather than the beginning of a logical sequence of events. Yet, this introduction is important as an event in itself. The pastoral, remote location of Amos' homeland, in the sheep country south of Jerusalem, is the lowly starting point from which all of Amos' statements are based as he continuously works to bring the people of God back to a true worship. The concept of a lowly shepherd coming forth from this wilderness professing doom and gloom upon the nations if they don't refuse some of their more lavish, unGodlike ways mirrors the next passage in which the Lord shepherd who normally guides and protects instead "roars from Zion" with the voice of a lion, establishing the first natural progression.

Verses 1:3 through 2:6 further the plot by illustrating the prophecies that apply to the various communities surrounding Israel. In each pronouncement, the reasons for God's wrath are cited and the punishment to be dealt is discussed. These pronouncements are given for Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab and even Judah. In each case, the destruction of each city is reported as definite, offering no chance for succor or restraint. At the same time, each pronouncement demonstrates how the city has violated others. Damascus and Edom are doomed because of their warlike attitude toward their neighbors, reveling in murder and destruction. Gaza and Tyre are condemned for profiting from slaves taken from their neighbors. The greed of the citizens of Ammon, bringing war in an effort to extend their boundaries, is given as the

reason why this community has incurred the Lord's wrath. Moab's willingness to profit from their enemy's losses, illustrated through the death of the Edom king, is the reason given for the destruction of that city. Judah is condemned "because they have rejected the law of the Lord, and have not kept his statutes, but their lies have led them astray" (2:4).

Yet the sins of Israel comprise the longest list of sins against God. In verses 2:6-8, Amos indicates the people of Israel "sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes – they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted; a man and his father go in to the same maiden, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar upon garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined." In this passage, Israel is seen as guilty of all the sins of the other nations despite their knowledge of God's law against these things. For this reason, then, it is justified that Amos should spend the rest of the book focused on Israel. This apparent shift in the narrative also paves the way for the remainder of the book which strives to save Israel from the fate decreed. This first portion of the book, then, can be seen as a means of gaining Amos his audience as well as an introduction to the real subject which is the concern for Israel as a result of her turning her back on God's law.

Like the previous verses, the case against Israel develops from the listing of its sins to the description of what will be done to destroy Israel. Because God has done more for them than for other people and because they have had knowledge of his wishes, Amos says that God will punish them more severely than he plans to punish these other cities and nations. This is further punctuated by the detail in which the destruction of

Israel is depicted, allowing no hope for escape or even a remnant survival. The case is made more detailed with a reminder to Israel of the various things God has done for its people as well as the various ways in which he has attempted to call his people back to him, all to no avail. Through Amos, in chapters 5-6, God asks the people of Israel to reject the religious practices they have undertaken, worshipping at false idols and revering wealth above God's laws: "Seek the Lord and live" (5:6). The greatest case in these chapters is made against the oppressive rich, regarding both their tendency for false worship and their disdain for the poor in favor of their own comfort.

Once the case against Israel is made in detail, Amos shifts away from repeating the words of the Lord to revealing the visions he's been given regarding the future of the Israelites. This represents a turning point in the story as Amos begins to provide evidence that Israel's destruction is already in the making and as true dialogue between characters is introduced. In the first two visions reported, Amos sees God preparing a plague of locusts to destroy the crops and then a fire to dry up the waters. In both instances, a dialogue with the Lord is opened when Amos prays for him to spare the people and God relents. However, in his third vision, Amos' dialogue with God indicates that his prayers will no longer be enough. Instead, the people had proven themselves crooked and must follow God's plumb line rather than their own. In the face of this, Amos is left without words to defend them. Conflict is introduced in the dialogue opened up between Amos and the people he's trying to save as Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, speaks out against Amos' words, warning the ruling party that Amos is leading the people astray. Because of their unwillingness to listen to the words of his prophets, God sends a fourth vision to Amos. This vision is similarly allegorical to the third vision as

God shows Amos a basket of ripe fruit and discusses the various ways in which his people have become like ripe fruit, past the time when they could change their ways and ready for punishment. Again, Amos is left without words to argue.

The fifth and final vision represents the climax of the story, when all action ceases and everything is brought into focus in the image of God standing at the altar and pronouncing his final judgment. In this fateful pronouncement, the complete destruction of the nation of Israel is foreseen, yet hope is left that not all of the family of Jacob would be destroyed. “Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground; except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,’ says the Lord” (9:8). The fate of Israel has been cast in stone, there is no repentance now. From here forward, there is nothing to do but plan for Israel’s eventual restoration, recreated in the image of God as he has decreed.

The resolution of the book is contained in the final verses of chapter 9, following God’s terrifying revelation regarding the fate of the nation of Israel during Amos’ time. Once the people have been sufficiently punished for turning their backs on God and have returned to observing his laws, God promises to restore Israel and provide for his people with abundance. Unlike the beginning of the book, no specific time frame is given and no specific direction regarding how this will come to pass is provided. “The hallmark of these visions is their simplicity and unity. Each vision is a self-contained whole developing around a single episode yet reaching ahead to the logic of the next” (Doan & Giles, 2000). In this respect, as well, the visions are extensions of the earlier pronouncements, each of the earlier statements leading logically into the justified execution of punishment decreed for the Israelites, both rich and poor, in the end.

## **Characterization**

Through his introduction as being “among the shepherds of Teko’a”, Amos is established as a commoner rather than one of the professionally trained prophets who might have found employment at the king’s high court. This fact immediately characterizes him as a relatively simple man with little to no ulterior motives for his actions, contributing to the concept of his simple honesty. His humble stance is heightened later in the book when he tells Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees” (7:14). Though his previous profession had probably not brought him great wealth and prestige in his town, Amos was also probably not among the most downtrodden of his people and therefore could be seen as a suitable intermediary for God. Because he would not necessarily gain from a change of heart among the elite class, Amos could be interpreted as having no hidden personal agenda in his decision to turn prophet for Israel.

The idea of Amos as a simple man from the country is carried out through his choice of analogies and language as he delivers his visions to the people of Israel. He begins his book with a personal announcement that illustrates how God is affecting the remote pastures in which he raises his sheep: “the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers” (1:2). Although the first portion of the book is attributed directly to the words of God as he pronounces his punishment to the neighboring communities of Israel, when the narrative reaches the point of discussing Israel directly, it takes on more natural images for analogies: “Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and who was as strong as the oaks; I

destroyed his fruit above, and his roots beneath” (2:9). The pastoral nature of the prophet brings the image of God’s intention into a readily understood analogy based upon knowledge of the land in this passage, indicating how completely such a mighty being could be brought down. Similarly, in the same chapter, Amos’ illustration of a “cart full of sheaves presses down” (2:13) becomes readily understood by even the simplest of men.

Despite the dire consequences of the visions he is given, Amos seems to remain calm and collected throughout his story. Rather than interjecting much of his own words or ideas, he strives instead to focus as completely as possible upon the words of God. Indeed, throughout the first half of the book, he succeeds in keeping himself out of the visions almost completely, only succumbing to a few brief analogies from straight off the farm to illustrate the words that God has said. It isn’t until chapter 7 that Amos finally allows his own words to enter into the text, when it becomes necessary for him to tell the people of what the Lord has shown him regarding the future of Israel. In his first two visions, Amos loses some of his calm as he begs God to forgive Israel and give it a chance to grow: “I said, ‘O Lord God, forgive, I beseech thee! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!’” (7:2). However, when he gets to his third vision, Amos is once again calm, yet sadly resigned to the fate Israel has defined for herself. All he can do in this vision is respond to God’s question with a statement of fact regarding a plumb line, a common measuring tool used to determine whether a wall or fence has been made straight. While he seems to understand the implications of this plumb line held by God, there is nothing he can do to argue against its use. When he is confronted by Amaziah and told to leave the city and stop inciting the public against the elite classes, Amos merely replies that his

mission was assigned by God and indicates the personal fate that awaits Amaziah if he does not also change his ways.

In contrast to Amos' rather calm delivery of his visions from God to the people of Israel, God is seen as livid regarding the Israelites' willingness to ignore all that he has taught them or provided for them. Although he is typically perceived as a shepherd, gently watching over his flock, an image reinforced by the introduction of a shepherd as messenger in the person of Amos, God is instead announced as "The Lord roars from Zion" (1:2) like a lion, his voice thundering across the nations and shaking everything loose. His anger seems immense as he strings off a list of cities, nations, crimes and punishments almost like an angry sailor. In each case, he can be seen as a the long-suffering father who has tried and tried again to forgive these people for their sins, but continues to be disappointed in promises to do better. Also in each case, he promises to destroy the cities with fire, an image most associated with hell, underscoring the level of fury God is expressing in these lines. He does not take pity on anyone in these cities regardless of their part in the crimes that have been committed. Rather, he simply destroys them, allowing new nations to enter and enslave or exterminate the people of the old. This relentless, blanket punishment seems dire yet justified to the people listening to it, making God seem like a liberator, a deliverer of justice and a champion for the people. He is fearsome, yes, but only if you belong to one of those communities that are not the favored ones of God.

This characterization changes yet again when Amos and God turn their attention to Judah and Israel. If God was a lion before, he is ten times a lion now as his anger grows regarding the ungratefulness of his people in Israel. While the other nations may

have sinned, they had not had any prior understandings with God and were not aware of his laws. As the sins of Israel are listed out in careful detail in verses 2:6-8, God's wrath seems to grow even as a sense of betrayal seems to edge in as he lists the many things he has done for them in verses 3:10-11. The attention he gives to describing both the many things he's done for them as well as the many ways they've betrayed him indicates the level of his rage as well as provides justification for his actions, indicating both his power and his sense of fair play. In all cases, God intends total and complete destruction of those peoples who have committed crimes against him, but his character is made more complex through the ability of the author to evoke a sense of how and why God's anger and disappointment in the people of Israel reaches greater heights.

However, God is also characterized as a forgiving and compassionate God that lives up to his own promises regardless of how others behave. This is shown primarily in the visions portion of the book (Chapters 7-9) through the dialogue that occurs between Amos and God. In both of the first two visions reported, Amos' plea to God to spare Israel is heard and granted with little argument or commentary. Amos simply asks God to forgive and God does so immediately. However, his patience wears thin as he gives Amos a third vision, leaving Amos no room to object as he demonstrates the measure by which he will judge his people. Rather than showing this action as a means of swift and terrible punishment, the destruction of Israel measured against the plumb line is seen instead as simply setting things straight, building them strong and tall as they should have been to begin with. Likewise, the basket of ripe fruit is seen as an unavoidable and natural progression of events. Instead of forcing this destruction upon Israel, God shows

how it is Israel that has grown too ripe to remain in its current state and now requires cleansing if it is not to be left to rot.

Even in the terrifying final vision that follows detailing the complete destruction of Israel, God shows his mercy in his intention to remember his promises: “In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old” (9: 11). From this passage, the book resolves itself to the hopeful long vision of the future of Israel in which God promises so much abundance that “the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land which I have given them” (9:13-15). Despite his great anger and outrage, he is able to see a future in which he can deliver on his promise to Israel, indicating even before their destruction that there is reason to hope for a better life for their children or their children’s children.

Although he only appears in one small section of the book, the character Amaziah plays an important role in the story as he serves to represent the reactions of Israel’s elite to the words of the prophet. Rather than heeding the warnings he’s been provided and recognizing his own actions in the words that have been spoken, Amaziah chastises Amos and orders him to return home and stop causing trouble. He accuses Amos of trying to start a conspiracy against the king and insists that the ways of the temple and the king’s sanctuary are the only ways that are necessary. This lack of ability to see his own

actions in the warnings Amos is giving indicates the level of blindness with which the people of Israel had inflicted upon themselves as well as the level of complacency with which they accepted their lives. It was harder to change and become what Amos was suggesting, so they preferred to risk the wrath of God in not heeding Amos' words.

### **Point of View**

The point of view in the story is kept somewhat omniscient at first, introducing the prophet from a third person perspective in phrases such as “what he saw concerning Israel” (1:1). However, the specific mention that Amos comes from the town of Teko'a, a small town located approximately ten miles south of Jerusalem in rugged sheep country, immediately establishes his point of view as being that of a commoner rather than one of the wealthy professionally trained prophets who worked in the king's court. This is an important point to consider as the people of ancient Israel were divided into only two classes, the ruling elite and the downtrodden poor. If Amos was not part of the elite, then he was part of the majority poor. As such, his words were not only the words of his own unique experience as well as the words of God, but they were also the words of a lowly peasant to the powerful rich.

Given this early introduction to Amos, it is not surprising to note a subtext of resentment against the rich minority being introduced as Amos begins listing the sins committed by Israel that have incurred the wrath of God. His point of view has always been from the lower class, the oppressed and the hungry. Although the words are attributed to God, Amos' anger at having to work so hard for so little is evident in the subtext as he criticizes the Israelites for their luxury, saying “Woe to those who lie upon

beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the midst of the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David invent for themselves instruments of music; who drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" (6:4-7). Nothing is held back as the sins against God committed by the rich minority of the population are enumerated by Amos, but little mention is made of anything that might be happening in the ranks of the poor majority. That crimes such as worship to false idols, lack of compassion for fellow man or prostitution must have occurred just as frequently among the ranks of the poor as among the rich is obvious in the fact that God, seen as just, patient and forgiving in the next chapter, still finds it necessary to completely destroy the entire nation.

Throughout most of the book, however, the point of view is accepted to be that of God. Almost all of chapter 1 and most of chapter 2 are words attributed to God and indicate God's view of the neighbors of Israel, including Judah and Israel herself. He indicates both his reasons for his anger at these cities and nations as well as his intentions regarding their punishment for these actions that have so angered him. Although it might not be expected that a lowly shepherd from the wild country would know the intimate details of what other nations have done in recent years, it is expected that the all-knowing Lord would know of these things. Likewise, while Amos might not be intimately familiar with the backgrounds of some of these neighboring communities, God knows all and recognizes the sins of the past growing into the future as well as the need to stamp out these weeds while they are still young.

While he is angry over the ways in which the neighboring communities have behaved, they are still not God's chosen people and have not received or accepted his laws as their own, something God understands and which is reflected in his glossed over summary of their fate. They will be punished, but God's wrath against them remains limited because of the lack of a covenant held between him and these other people. If the words were related from Amos' point of view, however, a man who left his entire livelihood and family to deliver the words of the Lord to Israel, it would have been difficult for the man to have separated the gentiles from their crimes in so succinct a fashion. Israel, on the other hand, is supposed to know better and this willful disobedience incites God to new expressiveness. While he devotes only passing reference to each of the other nations and towns he plans to destroy for their sinful ways, he waxes eloquent on the sins of Israel, including their ability to forget what they have been taught.

The idea that he is a just Lord is also important to God in sending Amos, again illustrating his point of view in making sure the people understand him. Although he has decreed that the destruction of Israel is imminent, he continues to provide warnings to the people to change their ways and find the true God. This is made evident in his statement, "Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (3:7). He knows Israel will be destroyed to such a degree that those who lived there will not find a home there for many, many years and will fill that time with more suffering and oppression. He also knows he will begin this punishment from the altar itself, alluding to it in verse 3:14 with "that on the day I punish Israel for his transgressions, I will punish the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off

and fall to the ground.” This action is reinforced later with God’s pronouncement that “I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel ...and they shall oppress you from the entrance of Hamath to the Brook of the Arabahfifth” (6:14), which is exactly what Assyria did not 50 years later, something only God could have known at the time. The final vision of Amos in which the prophet reports, “I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and he said: ‘Smite the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people; and what are left of them I will slay with the sword’” (9:1)

Because he knows the hearts of the people who have come to worship him, God is also aware of the superficiality of these worshippers who leave the temple boasting of what they have left, desecrating the temple with unholy acts and preparing elaborate feasts and assemblies that do nothing to glorify God but do much to further depress the poorest of the community. Unlike Amos, who would have been somewhat overwhelmed by the opulence of the upper class, God can see straight through these elaborate schemes to the truth that these powerful elite are not glorifying God as much as they are seeking to glorify themselves. God is also aware of the laziness of these powerful upper class individuals in their failure to look out for the welfare of the country and its people in favor of pampering their own selfish whims and comfort. Because he knows their hearts, he is able to state repeatedly that the fate of Israel will be a quick and complete destruction and dispersal, yet he continues to plead them to change their ways: “Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (5:14-15). He knows that a small few will hear him and he will be able to also fulfill the promise he

made both in the past and will make by the end of Amos' book, that Israel will be restored.

In some instances, the point of view seems to blend between that of Amos and that of God. From God's point of view, he has provided the Israelites with every reason on earth to remember his laws and to honor his creation, yet they have turned their backs on him and their fellow man. Yet Amos remembers that he is of the lower class and has never had the luxuries any of these people he is meeting with enjoy on a daily basis. Finally understanding the disparity between his own lifestyle and the lifestyles of the rich and powerful, Amos finds it difficult to concentrate on much more than the sins of the rich against the poor. While God reminds the Israelites that they made the decision to take up a covenant with him: "Do two walk together, unless they have made an appointment?" (3:3): Amos again filters the words through his own rural understandings: "Does a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey?" (3:4). Through this series of rhetorical questions, God indicates the people of Israel should not be surprised that things have come to this point. While God is able to step back and see the logical progression of actions that have brought Israel to the point of destruction, this progression is placed in the terminology and context of the country shepherd rather than the vernacular of an urban elite class.

### **Time**

Through its introduction, the narrative is automatically associated as telling a story from the past. This is indicated in the first verse by the foreknowledge of the author of an earthquake that does not take place for another two years after Amos emerged as a

prophet. In addition, the date in which Amos begins his work is established in the naming of the kings then reigning in the southern and northern kingdoms. By establishing a timeframe, the idea is introduced that time has passed by, yet the indication of time in this story is subtle at best.

Despite the lack of a specific time frame, in which one can identify that the events reported were to take place within a month or a year for example, there is a great degree of reliance on past times and actions within the story. God enumerates several instances in which past times have seen the commission of crimes for which those who participated must now pay the price. Because of this cause and effect pattern, it is naturally assumed that some span of time has passed for all of these things to have happened. As one envisions the marching of armies, the taking of prisoners and the selling of slaves, the pages of a calendar or the passing of seasons seems to take place in one's imagination, providing a sense of time passing, however slowly. In addition, because none of these events are coming in to harm Israel at the moment and Israel was, at the time Amos was written, enjoying a time of great peace and prosperity, these events seem somewhat remote from the mind, as if they are happening elsewhere, in another time altogether.

This slight sense of time passing is again slowed when God begins talking about the actions of Israel. Since they are actions, they are obviously occurring during a specific space of time, but because of the way God speaks of them, "they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes – they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted" (2:6-7), these behaviors are also seen as ongoing and persistent – in other words, timeless. As God reminds his people "I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in

the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite” (2:10), he again invokes the past and the sense of a long-standing relationship and history. While the sense of time is present, the overwhelming period of time being discussed gives it a sluggish air, as if there will be no end to this association regardless of what is to happen in the future.

The notion of time is further confused by a refusal on the part of the author to allow the story to stay in a single tense. In fact, the notion of a logical progression of time is missing from the story as it continuously skips from past to present to future and back among the three again. The book begins by hinting at the future while discussing the past as it introduces the present. God rails against the past: “because they carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom” (2:6) while he plans for the future: “I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza, and it shall devour her strongholds. I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, and him that holds the scepter from Ash'kelon; I will turn my hand against Ekron; and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish” (2:7-8). In a repetitious pattern, God continues to point out the faults of Israel’s present before reminding them of the promises made in the past and warning them of the tragedies to be felt in the future up to the point of Amos’ reporting of his visions.

The visions bring order back into the passage of time in the story with a logical, sequential order that seems to occur in a more natural, close-feeling timeframe. Amos says, “Thus the Lord God showed me” (7:1), and then provides the description of his first vision, a description that occupies a mere few lines before a dialogue is opened between Amos and God. The concept of the dialogue brings the vision into real time, making it seem almost as if the incident took the same amount of time to occur as it does to read its description. This heightened sense of time helps illustrate the ticking time bomb of

God's patience as he waits for Israel to hear the words of his prophet and change their sinful ways. Where time had been slow to start with and then erratic as the panic of Israel's involvement sets in, it is now speeding away at an alarming rate. This sense is heightened further by Amos' immediate jump from his first vision into a description of his second vision, equally brief yet descriptive.

With the third vision shown to Amos, one expects Amos to again purchase more time for Israel with his pleas for mercy and forgiveness, but the pattern is shaken up by God's determination to set the nation on its straight path once again, regardless of how painful that adjustment might be. The passage is longer, including another description by God of how he intends to bring Israel back in line with the path he's set for it, indicating another short waiting period before the devastation begins. However, the passage remains much shorter than previous passages in which God has indicated what he plans to do with Israel, which further indicates that time continues to grow shorter.

With the reported dialogue that takes place between Amaziah and Amos in which it is made clear that Israel refuses to heed the words of the prophet, time seems to race forward headlong. Amaziah threatens Amos claiming Amos is starting a conspiracy against the king and Amos responds with a new message from God that pronounces an almost immediate doom upon the city. No longer is he talking about an unspecific 'you' of the people of Israel, he is now referring to specific people who will suffer directly as a result of the punishment God is intending: "Your wife shall be a harlot in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land" (7:14). God is no longer talking about destroying Israel in some

remote future almost as distant as the past he refers to, he is now discussing events that will happen in this lifetime, within a few years at best.

This perception that the passage of time has taken a sudden shift from an amorphous future to an immediate one is supported by the last two visions experienced by Amos. In the one following his encounter with Amaziah, Amos reports that God shows him a basket of ripe fruit, explaining that the fruit is symbolic of the people of Israel who are now ripe for their instruction: “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them” (8:2). Like summer fruit, the only thing left for the people of Israel to do is to rot and God describes the ways in which he plans to bring about their end in devastating detail. To be sure there is no hope that Amos will again be able to persuade God into giving Israel another chance to mend her ways, God sends him into his fifth and final vision immediately, with no discussion and no interaction before doing so. In this final vision, Amos is able to see God as he begins his work to destroy Israel, standing at the altar from which this destruction was foretold to begin. Yet, even at this point, when time seems to have run out for the people of Israel, God again provides a sliver of hope and a glimpse of a future when he reminds them of his own promise to them: “In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name” (9: 11-12). Although Israel is to fall to utter destruction, there will remain enough left that it will be rebuilt again. While the time frame is again stretched into the unknown, as God indicates they must wait until the day he chooses to again “plant them upon their land, and they

shall never again be plucked up out of the land which I have given them” (9:15), the fact that a future remains a viable possibility is enough.

### **Repetition**

As the story begins, God tells Amos about the crimes committed by Israel’s neighbors and the actions he plans to take against them. In each case, he tells first what the city or nation has done and then what he plans to do to punish them for these deeds. This cause and effect pattern is established early and maintained throughout the story as God first illustrates what was done wrong and what will be done to bring justice to those who deserve it. By presenting things in this way, he not only manages to gain the attention and approval of those listening, primarily the Israelites, but he also manages to set up a logical pattern that they will find it difficult to disagree with once it is applied to their own case. This pattern also serves to establish a sense of God acting out his role as the bringer of justice to the world and the giver of peace. If a nation chooses to act in accordance with God, it is presumed through these vignettes, then one has no need to fear his retribution. However, if one chooses to violate the rights and responsibilities of God’s people, then one can expect swift and devastating judgment.

There is also another type of repetition in this first portion of the book as God introduces each community to which he plans to bring justice: “For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment” (1:3). In repeating these statements over and over, God indicates not only that these tribes have continuously disappointed him in his expectations but also his exasperation at finding any other way of teaching them what they must learn. These nations have committed not just one sin, but

many. And they have not committed these sins just once, but many times. And each time up until now, God has overlooked them and allowed them to do as they would because they were not his people and they were left free to make their own choices. However, they have stretched his indulgence to the limit, not just once, but many times, and he will not endure it any more. While the people of Israel would have been cheering that God has finally seen it fit to punish these other peoples for their crimes, when the words are turned upon them, it is difficult for them to accept it.

As God moves on to catalog Israel's present oppression of the poor in chapter 2, he reminds them of their past reliance on him for their own survival as they wandered in the desert and warns them of their bleak future as a result of ignoring him. He again returns to a discussion of the past association between God and the people of Israel at the beginning of chapter 3. This time, he illustrates how the people of Israel sought out an association with God and should therefore be more willing to obey God's laws and concerned about keeping them in the manner in which they were intended. Again, God warns Israel of the future, this time in much more detailed description. And again, he returns to a description of the present and the various ways in which the people of Israel are not living up to their expectations. This pattern of condemning the present, reminding them of the past and promising future retribution continues throughout the book with increasingly shorter descriptions each time, heightening the feeling of impending doom even as the patience of God becomes increasingly stretched. This pattern can be seen as a last effort to save Israel as well as a useful literary tool in building to the climax of the book, which occurs as God makes his final preparations for destruction.

There is also a repetition throughout the book regarding the issue of housing. Shelter is one of the basic needs of the human race and was something the Israelites were forced to go without while wandering in the desert for forty years in exile. However, they are now comfortable in their homes, some of them owning three and four homes at a time, and are enjoying the profits of peace and free trade. This reference to shelter is started in the very first chapter as God enumerates the punishments he will bring upon those communities that surround Israel: “I will send a fire upon the house of Haz’ael, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-ha’dad” (1:4), “I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza, and it shall devour her strongholds” (1:7), “I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre, and it shall devour her strongholds” (1:10) and “I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem” (2:5). In each instance, the justification of destroying the strongholds and shelters of the enemy can be seen as the direct results of their transgressions. No further explanation is needed, no additional justification is provided.

However, in the case of Israel, God begins a new pattern out of the old that addresses not only the strongholds, but the individual homes as well. While repeating his words from earlier, “For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment” (2:6), he again goes on to list the transgressions that have been committed by his chosen people, but they are not the same kinds of transgressions listed before. Now, the people are accused of mistreating their own kind. Instead of enslaving the people of other races, the Israelites are guilty of enslaving their own citizens through the liberal application of taxes, poverty, oppression and legal manipulation. Because their crimes are so much more personal, the inflection suggests, the punishment must go much

more personal, into the individual homes and sanctuaries where the rich find their comfort. “They do not know how to do right ... those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds” (3:10). More than just attacking the strongholds, the invader that God will set upon Israel “will smite the winter house with the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end” (3:15). The greedy women of the powerful houses are told they will be taken away with fishhooks through the breaks in the walls (4:3), the men who have built their great stone houses on the backs of those they have oppressed are told they will never live in them or enjoy the vast vineyards they have planted (5:11). The safety of the house is called into question in chapter 5 as well when God uses it as a metaphor for the destruction that will accompany the Day of the Lord: “as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him” (5:19). Not even the houses of the poor are to be saved as is indicated in chapter six: “For behold, the Lord commands, and the great house shall be smitten into fragments, and the little house into bits” (6:11). Through this repetition of disaster upon the homes of the wicked, God intends to give them proper warning of the extent of their second exile should they not change their ways, but the people remain blind to the warnings and too comfortable within their homes, as is indicated by Amaziah when he tells Amos to return to his own home and prophesy there. This repetitious warning is finally brought to fruition in the final vision of Amos in which the prophet reports, “I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and he said: ‘Smite the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people; and what are left of them I will slay with the sword’” (9:1)

Like many books in the Bible, Amos employs a repetition within verses called chiasm that helps to reinforce the words and the message being presented. Chiasm is a mirror-like repetition that follows a particular scheme, such as A, B, C followed by C, B, A. A good example of this kind of repetition can be found in Amos 5:4-6: “Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beer-sheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nought. Seek the Lord and live.” This passage begins and ends with the concept “Seek me and live.” The second statement, do not seek Bethel, is echoed in the second to last statement that Bethel shall come to nought. The third statement, do not enter into Gilgal, is echoed immediately following the statement regarding Beer-sheba, Gilgal shall surely go into exile. This formulation not only helps the speaker remember where he is going, but helps to fix these words and concepts into the minds of the hearer, reinforcing the warnings being handed down.

## **Conclusion**

From this analysis, then, it can be seen that the book of Amos does tell a logical, sequential story complete with the elements that typically make up a story even while it delivers an important and necessary message to the people of Israel in Amos’ time and remains open-ended enough to be applied throughout the rest of time. The story progresses from the poor, remote sheep country of Amos’ homeland to the most prosperous and influential cities of Israel and from a general warning to change to a dire need to change to the final realization that change will not happen and destruction is inevitable. Through characterization, it can be seen that Amos himself had little to gain

on the physical plain for following God's instructions, but that the decision not to follow God's instructions would have brought down similar destruction on Amos' head that was brought up on the head of Israel. It can also be seen that while Amos is angry with the rich for their treatment of the poor and cannot separate himself from this anger, God is merciful and just, and must have reasons for punishing the entire nation rather than simply the rich of the nation. God is fleshed out with feelings of rage, endurance, patience, mercy, forgiveness and regretful resolution. Through point of view, the differences between Amos and God are more apparent, as God has the greater knowledge and understanding, yet the words that are uttered are uttered with the understanding of a sheep-herder and are therefore placed in terms of understanding to a more rural, rather than urban, constituency. God, on the other hand, has an infinite point of view and can see far into the future as well as remember perfectly what has happened in the past. He sees what has occurred in the courts as well as in the hearts of his people and condemns them for both. As time progresses, the patience of God can be seen to be waning, finally concluding in his determination that destruction will happen now, but that the future of Israel is guaranteed. Through various means of repetition, the warnings of God are given and rejected again and again until God's final action is shown to be as inevitable as he indicated it would be from the start.

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