

SLOW FOOD BIBLE STUDIES: THE BOOK OF AMOS (24 studies)

The generally denunciatory tone of this Old Testament author, unrelieved except in the last few verses, can discourage the Slow Food reader from studying his book – we may be critical of things that go on around us today, but how relevant are the failings of ancient Israel to our very different culture? J A Motyer warns against dismissing Amos' prophecies as addressed to peoples and situations that are nothing to do with us at the present time. Instead, he invites us to 'see all that he says in the light of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, a kingdom not of this world, nor promoted by the methods of this world.' This clash of two kingdoms is played out in every age of history, in every human institution and organisation. 'Amos might well have been walking through any of our great cities,' and, perhaps, through any of our schools, colleges and universities.

Having said that, the book of Amos springs out of, and is applied to, a very precise historical context, though some of its details are obscure to us. We are in the eighth-century BCE (or BC), in which the climactic event is the invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722-721 and their deportation from their homeland (see 2 Kings ch 17 for a masterly summary of this period). Amos was preaching in about 760, at which time Assyria presented no threat to Israel – in fact it had dealt with the Syrians who were Israel's big enemy in the north. Both Israel and Judah were experiencing a time of prosperity and stability, marred by corruption and religious syncretism. Amos isn't from the northern kingdom, he is from Judah in the south (Tekoa is a few miles south of Jerusalem); nor is he an official prophet, just a hard-working shepherd and fruit-farmer. Yet he turns up at the Israelite capital of Samaria and at the temple in Bethel, with the single aim of warning both Israel and his own Judah about what will happen to them imminently, if they do not return to their God. In the event, both kingdoms ignored the prophetic message and both in their turn met with disaster.

We may choose to read the book of Amos as God's personal word to us as individuals, putting his finger on our worldly attitudes and slack practices, and inviting us to turn to Christ for forgiveness and grace; or we may read it as God's critique of the organisation(s) we represent or even head up, leading us to intercession and repentance on their behalf. At the very least, Amos offers us a spiritual health check-up, and that can be no bad thing.

A few explanatory notes are included with most of the questions, but for background and interpretation see e.g. J A Motyer *The Message of Amos* (formerly *The Day of the Lion*) IVP (BST) 1974 (or Motyer's briefer entry in the IVP *New Bible Commentary* 4th ed 1994); Karl Möller *Reading Amos as a Book* (Grove Books 2014, www.grovebooks.co.uk), a masterly 28-page survey providing useful clues as the book unfolds. David Pawson *Unlocking the Bible* (2003) 471-486, 495-6 is typically punchy and illuminating. A map of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah is an essential piece of equipment (see e.g. the *Oxford Bible Atlas* or the internet).

1:1-2 Using any commentaries to hand, find out what you can about Amos and the historical background of this book. Is God using an unconventional messenger to speak to me today? *Am 7:14-15; Zech 14:5; 2 Pet 2:16.*

1:3-10 In 1:3-2:3 Amos catalogues the failings of pagan nations round about God's people. Of what sins were Damascus, Gaza and Tyre guilty in God's sight? What does this say about power and human relationships? *Eccl 4:1; Hos 1:7; Zech 4:6; 1 Cor 1:25.*

1:11-2:3 If God 'will not relent' from temporal judgments (as here in the cases of Edom, Ammon and Moab), what is their ultimate purpose? *Isa 19:22; Hos 2:13-15; Acts 17:30-31; 2 Pet 3:9.*

2:4-8 Amos now dramatically focuses God's judgment on his own people of Judah and Israel. How does spiritual unfaithfulness (2:4-5) go hand-in-hand with moral compromise (2:6-8)? Does it still happen where I am concerned? *Rom 1:28; Eph 4:17-19; 2 Tim 4:3-4.*

2:9-16 The Lord reminds his people of his rescue from Egypt (vv9-10) and his standards of holiness (vv11-12). Is there any point at which I am watering down the gospel in its application to my faith and daily life? *1 Cor 6:19-20; Eph 5:15-18; Tit 2:11-14.*

3:1-8 We can see how the law of cause and effect operates in the world, and God's will similarly has its outworking. If I believe that God works in my life and speaks to me in his word, do I take these privileges for granted? *1 Chr 29:14; Ps 66:16-20; Lk 12:47-48; 1 Cor 4:7.*

3:9-12 The people of Samaria were enjoying a secure and affluent lifestyle, but one which was maintained by greed and oppression. Would anything that is tolerated in my 'palace-fortress' infringe normal standards of morality and decency? *Ps 125; Eph 5:3-7; Col 1:9-14.*

3:13-4:3 Bethel was a main centre of worship for Israel, but Amos boldly declares its rituals to be worthless. I may have a comparatively affluent lifestyle, but how did I come by it, and has it dulled my moral sense? *Dt 6:10-15; Jer 17:9-11; 1 Tim 6:17-19.*

4:4-5 Here Amos sarcastically exposes the hollowness and self-centredness of Israel's current religion. Is my faith self-orientated? *Hos 9:15; Mt 6:1; Lk 18:11; 2 Tim 3:5.*

4:6-11 God has allowed his people to suffer catastrophes, which have failed to bring them back to repentance. Is the effect of disaster or frustration in my life to turn me back to God? *Hos 6:1-5; 11:1-7; 14:1-3.*

4:12-13 What does the prospect of 'meeting my God' mean for me? *Job 19:25-27; 1 Cor 13:12; Heb 12:18-24; 1 Jn 3:2-3.*

5:1-6 Amos tries to awaken his hearers to the superficiality of their relationship to God. Have complacency or a false sense of security replaced God's priorities in my life? *Dt 8:10-14; Lk 16:13-15; 1 Cor 10:12; Heb 6:12; Rev 3:15-18.*

5:7-15 God knows what is going on in every corner of his creation, and that includes the injustices of an affluent society. How principled am I in my dealings with disadvantaged members of my institution, community or family? *Prov 14:31, 31:8-9, 20; Lk 18:1-8.*

5:16-20 The 'day of the Lord' should bring blessing, but the future awaiting Israel is quite the opposite. Do I expect God to bless me whatever my lifestyle? *Ps 37:3-4, 27; Eccl 12:13-14; Jer 32:38-41.*

5:21-27 We now reach the heart of Amos' message: religion without heart-obedience is anathema to God. How important is it for me to 'go to church'? *Ps 73:2, 16-17; Hos 6:6; Mic 6:6-8; Heb 10:25.*

6:1-7 Amos addresses the self-indulgence of the leaders of both Israel and Judah. If I am in a position of leadership, how can I avoid the dangers of pride and self-satisfaction? *Isa 28:14-16; Mt 23:2-4; Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 2:1-4; 1 Pet 5:2-4.*

6:8-14 Vivid pictures of calamity remind the people that they depend upon God for victory. Am I allowing either misfortune or success to loosen my dependence on Christ? *Isa 30:15-16; Jer 2:13, 17:5; Jn 15:5.*

7:1-9 Since God loves his people and knows their weakness, he is prepared to hold back judgment – but not for ever. Does God change his mind? *Num 23:19; Jer 18:1-12; Jon 3:10; Lk 13:6-9; Jas 1:16-18.*

7:10-17 Amaziah, the priest-in-charge of Bethel, reacts to Amos' preaching by insinuating that it springs from financial motives. If I feel God is calling me to speak or act against something that is wrong, is my motivation self-generated? *Isa 6:5-10; Mk 13:9-11; Jn 2:13-17; Acts 5:27-29.*

8:1-6 Israel is 'ripe' for destruction because their heart is not in their relationship with God but in their economic security. Whatever my profession of faith, could my dealings with others during the working week amount to exploitation and dishonesty? *Ex 22:25-27; Job 22:21-30; Jas 5:1-5.*

8:7-14 Refusal to obey God's word leads to an inability to find it anywhere, because the time is too late. Does 'a famine of hearing the words of the Lord' (8:11) apply to our young people today? Is there anything we/I can do about it? *2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:1-2, 8-10; 3:14-17.*

9:1-6 Pictures of the overwhelming power of God. Is my God too domesticated? *1 Ki 19:11-13; Ps 139:7-8; Heb 12:25-29; Rev 1:12-18.*

9:7-10 The apparent privilege of being God's people will not protect them from ultimate disaster, even though a remnant may be saved. Does my acceptability with God depend on a past conversion experience, or an ongoing commitment to Christ, or what? *Eph 1:3-8a; 2 Tim 2:19; Heb 4:14-16; 2 Pet 1:5-11.*

9:11-15 The book ends on an unexpected note of hope for a glorious future. Does the Lord regard me as a failure? *Ps 126; Jer 29:10-14; Lk 8:15; Rom 14:4.*