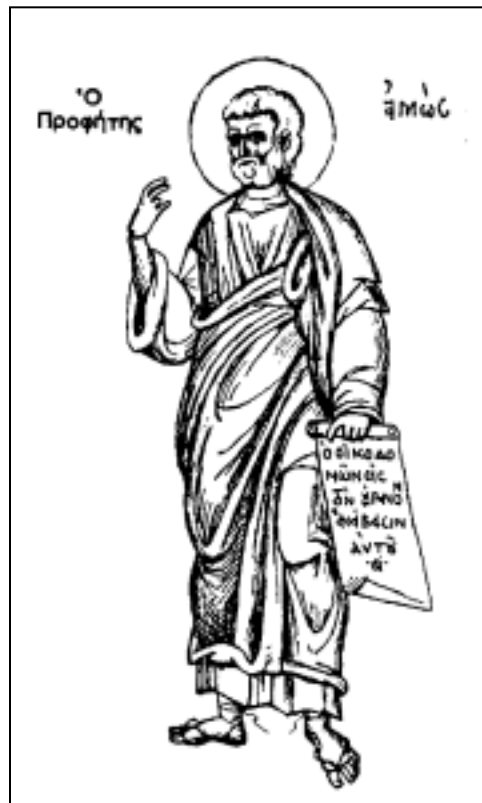


# Reflection on Moral Teaching

*Amos 2:6-16*



## Amos 2:6-16

*Thus says the Lord:  
For three transgressions of Israel, and for four,  
I will not revoke the punishment;  
Because they sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals--  
They who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,  
and push the afflicted out of the way;  
father and son go in to the same girl,  
so that my holy name is profaned;  
they lay themselves down beside every altar  
on garments taken in pledge;  
and in the house of their God they drink  
wine bought with fines they imposed.*

*Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them,  
whose height was like the height of cedars,  
and who was as strong as oaks;  
I destroyed his fruit above,  
and his roots beneath.  
Also 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.  
And I raised up some of your children to be prophets  
and some of your youths to be nazirites.  
Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?  
Says the Lord.*

*But you made the nazirites drink wine,  
and commanded the prophets,  
saying, "You shall not prophesy."*

*So, I will press you down in your place,  
just as a cart presses down when it is full of sheaves.  
Flight shall perish from the swift,  
and the strong shall not retain their strength.  
Nor shall the might save their lives;  
those who handle the bow shall not stand,  
and those who are swift of foot shall not save themselves,  
nor shall those who ride horses save their lives;  
and those who are stout of heart among the mighty  
shall flee away naked in that day,  
says the Lord.*

## Historical Situation

Amos lived during the period of the divided kingdom. After the death of Solomon, the kingdom of Israel split into two jurisdictions, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Judah is depicted by the Deuteronomic historians of the Bible as the true keepers of the Jewish faith. Amos comes from this true kingdom of the south into the Northern Kingdom to speak against the abuses of the north, but Judah does not entirely escape his condemnation either.

The oracles of Amos are generally dated to 750 BCE during the reign of Jeroboam II in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Jotham ruling in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. This places Amos 150 years after the split of the kingdom and about 30 years prior to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the Syro-Ephremite war. Amos' prophetic oracles can be seen as a prediction of this destruction of the North as just judgment for the transgressions listed by Amos.

Coming 150 years after the establishment of the split kingdom Amos encounters an entrenched political system supported by a flourishing cult. The southern kingdom has the one true shrine at Jerusalem within their territory. The Northern Kingdom was forced to revive the cult centers that had been closed in favor of Jerusalem during the United Kingdom, Bethel and Dan. Coming to the north 150 years after the re-establishment of these cult centers Amos is walking into a situation that is accepted by those around him, even normal for many generations. In addition, both of these shrines have an ancient claim as worship centers for the people of Israel that pre-date the claims of Jerusalem.

Recent years have provided prosperity for the Northern Kingdom, some even at the expense of the southern one. Amos finds the Northern Kingdom at the peak of their territorial expansion (naturally, no one is aware this situation will not continue to improve). The leading foreign power Assyria was weak. (Again, no one is aware that thirty years hence they will destroy and deport the Northern Kingdom.) In short, there is no visible reason to believe that God is not smiling on and blessing the Northern Kingdom. By all possible measures the Northern Kingdom is on the rise.

Amos is not a member of the ruling parties or a hereditary priest or prophet. He is an interloper from the southern kingdom speaking against the northern one in their sacred cult shrine. The prophetic call to come to the cult center of the foreign kingdom and speak out publicly against these successful rulers deliberately selects an outsider to deliver the word of the Lord.

Amos also marks a shift in the measure of success for the nation. The cult of the worship of the Lord would yield success to the nation. Amos brings to the fore the moral measures of success, rather than cultic ones. The treatment of the poor and the adherence to the moral obligations of the covenant becomes the focus with cultic needs taking the secondary role. This shift in focus restores the image seen in Psalm 50, where Solomon promises that his moral life will be made right before he offers bulls on the altar of the Lord. The prophetic movement preserved in the Biblical books embodies this focus on moral demands prior to cultic ones. Amos is a vivid spoke's person for the moral demands of the covenant.

## **Moral Situation**

The political situation in the Northern Kingdom is admirable, but the moral character of the nation is not. The gap between the rich and the poor is large and growing larger. The wealthy use the fragile position of the poor to defraud them and increase their own wealth. Greed is rampant and rewarded by the social systems in place. False trade and a corrupt justice system magnify this trend.

The reign of Solomon has begun the transformation from a tribal league to a feudal overlord system. By the time of Amos the transformation is not only complete, but entrenched in a full cast system. The system of power supports and rewards those who are willing to abuse the weak for personal gain. The settling of the land has transformed the social structure to that of the existing settled people. The flat structure of nomad tribes no longer applies in a settled land. And those in hereditary positions of ownership are not up to the challenge of the Lord's justice. The longer the land is settled the more the people drift. The absorption

of the existing population into the state further weakens the tribal point of view at the outset. With the passing of over 150 years the times are even weaker.

Perhaps Israelite society could have weathered this conversion to a settled culture and influx of foreigners, if their grounding in the Lord's covenant had been stronger. But the Northern Kingdom is weak here as well. The covenant relationship with the Lord should have been exclusive. The practice of other religious cults was to be abolished and their shrines destroyed. But over the years foreign marriages reintroduce the cults of Baal and Ashroth into the Northern Kingdom. Eventually, the Lord becomes just one more acceptable way to worship, instead of the only God of Israel. The way of worship becomes the central cultic shrine, not obedience to the covenant law. Worship of the Lord is just one more social obligation to the crown. An obligation that one carries out at the national shrine.

These two trends, social injustice and religious apostasy, are the rallying cry of Amos in this passage. Throughout the book and his ministry Amos will rail against both of these trends. In this passage from chapter two both are touched upon. Amos stands at the beginning of the prophetic call to return to the true nature of Israel's divine covenant. This will eventually lead to formal reinstating of the covenant under Josiah some 100 years after Amos. This prophetic framework also becomes the foundation upon which Judaism can survive the multiple national disasters to come. A focus on covenant relationship to the Lord rather than pride in national government place Judaism down the road to survival in the midst of national destruction.

## Application in Original Context

Our pericope stands at the end of a succession of geographical pronouncements in chapters 1 and 2 of Amos. Standing in the national shrine of Bethel, Amos begins by delivering a repudiation of Israel's neighbors in geographical order. He lists their sins against the Lord and his chosen people and proclaims their doom. This condemnation is expected and relished by the audience at hand. But Amos turns these expectations on their head when we enter this section. Instead of announcing the triumph of Israel on this special occasion, Amos continues by lumping Israel into the same class as all the rest. Even worse than the others, for Israel rates a triple portion of condemnation with much more detail than all the others. The contrast between the expectation of praise and triumph and the actual delivery of condemnation in the possible strongest terms maximizes the impact of the charges.

The formula delivers the four charges in the same fashion as all the previous kingdoms. The first pair of charges rail against the status of the social trend mentioned above. The selling of the righteous for money or goods rails against a corrupt judicial and government structure. The trampling of the poor into dust extends the condemnation to those acts that are not clearly corrupt and illegal but still cry out to the Lord for justice. In these charges Amos shines the light on the negative impact conversion from tribal league to feudal society has had on the people. While the outward prosperity of the country is evident this prosperity is built on the backs of the poor.

The second pair of charges relates to the religious apostasy related above. Father and son are indulging in cult prostitution together. They are taking the garments in pledge and ill-gotten gains to the house of the Lord. The covenant law requires the return of pledge garments. The gifts to the Lord's temple should be the first fruits of the land, the best of the country, not the wages of sinful conduct. Here the social ills pollute the cultic relationship to the Lord. Israel is not alone in these cult practices, nor are they alone in condemning them. The Babylonian "Councils of Wisdom" condemn the cult prostitution practice and advise men not to marry such women.

After condemning Israel with the same formulaic charges as the surrounding kingdoms the prophetic poem extends the section on Israel. Amos recounts the gifts the Lord has given to Israel in a brief hymn on the exodus to the land of the Amorite. This is followed by the blessings bestowed on the people in Israel, closing with the prophetic phrase “says the Lord”. This hymn fits well in the ancient liturgical structures of the Ancient Near East. Many liturgical celebrations begin with an invocation of the memory of past good deeds by the deity to his followers. Agamemnon uses this formula in his prayers to the Olympian Gods in the Iliad.

But Amos turns this formula around in a chiasmic structure that builds off this standard liturgical formula. He turns the blessings into condemnations by Israel’s responses to them. The earlier victories over the Amorites and the Egyptians are contrasted with the failure of military might in the days that are to come. Those that put their faith in the strength of their military-political power will see it crumble before the wrath of the Lord. These predictions are seen as foreshadowing the destruction and deportation of the Northern Kingdom that will come thirty years hence.

## Contemporary Application

This pericope of Amos rails against the social injustice and religious hypocrisy of his own time. Both of these general themes find manifold applications in the contemporary American scene. The capitalist economic system encourages the same wealth building through the exploitation of others that Amos finds objectionable in the Northern Kingdom. The prosperity of the faithful Christian today could be built on the backs of the less fortunate every bit as much as those contemporaries of Amos. Amos reminds us to look at the source of our prosperity while we are thanking God for this bounty.

Even when the Christian has not personally participated in the exploitation of the poor, we can facilitate this exploitation by our silence. By all accounts Amos was a just businessman in his own land. But God asked more than his own just actions. He demanded that Amos speak out against those who were not just. Amos stands before the nations powerful and condemns their actions. In the same way, we must stand up and be counted against the injustice of our own time. Likewise, we have to recognize the smaller injustices we encounter in our business lives and point them out to those who can affect a change in these policies.

Amos also condemns religious hypocrisy. While we no longer practice the specific cultic laws that Amos identifies as broken, we can fall into the same trap of not practicing right worship. We don’t go to pagan cult prostitutes, nor even seriously flirt with other Gods. But do we truly worship God in the Trinity? Are we keeping the liturgical life both inside and outside the Church. Do we attend and worship the heavenly liturgy on earth? Do we live that liturgy in the law of God in our daily lives? The religious hypocrisy of Israel is eminently possible for us today, only the exact form of the transgressions change. What would be the content of Amos’ poem against America?

Does the prosperity of America lull us into a false sense of security? Are we seeing the prosperity as a proof of our righteousness as the Northern Kingdom did? Do we silence the witnesses of injustice with the cry “America love it or leave it?” When we condemn terrorism do we ask what we do to grow such hatred in the hearts of others? When we rail against the death of innocents in terrorist acts do we ask in the same breath for America to use of the terror of war to destroy the terrorists? When we count the victims of terrorism and mourn their loss, do we use the same breath to justify the “collateral” damage in Afghanistan?

In the Northern Kingdom Amos warned against placing their faith in the military might of the nation. Israel had a successful army with the best weapons of the day. None of this will stand before the just judgement of the Lord, warns Amos. Does America place the same faith in military might today? Our strength is the justice of God and the performance of his will. When we fail in these commandments of justice, the best military on the planet will be to no avail. These are the warnings of Amos for America today.

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