

What do we say to a society on the skids?
What do we say to people who falsely believe all
is well with them and God?

Amos is a prophet for our age.
He saw that God's message wasn't getting through to
non-believers because of the gap between belief and
practice. So he attacked social injustice, the
exploitation of ordinary people and corrupt religion.
With eyes sharpened by the frugal life of the desert,
a burning faith and an intense consciousness of God's
justice, Amos examined Israel's urban life.
His conclusion? Israel was ripe for judgement.
This book has a strangely contemporary ring!



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The 'Bible Probes' are a set of pithy, non-technical commentaries on the minor prophets of the Old Testament. They give just enough background and explanation to the text to let these men of old speak afresh to us today - and confront us with the God who spoke through them.

These mini-commentaries are designed for both private and group study. They are especially useful for introducing new Christians to Bible study. The discussion questions at the end of each section make this series suitable for local Bible-study groups, youths conferences, church and I.S.C.F. camps, and leadership training.

d.d. R.C. Verle

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AMOS

the man who could not
be quiet about —

- social injustice
- the exploitation of people
- corrupt religion
- God's judgement on evil

A MINI-COMMENTARY
ON THE BOOK OF AMOS
by RON BUCKLAND



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ABRAHAM —
called by God to be
the father of a special
godly nation

ABRAHAM'S FAMILY

Now headed by Jacob, his grandson
whose name is changed to Israel —
moves to Egypt (where Joseph is) and
becomes a large tribe — the ISRAELITES

MOSES leads the Israelites out of EGYPT, back to CANAAN

1290
B.C.

Settled in Canaan, under
Joshua's leadership, the
Israelites are led by a series
of prophet-judges, the last of
whom is Samuel. The Israelites
ask Samuel to appoint a
king so that they will be
like the surrounding nations

1040 B.C.

KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

SAUL
↓
DAVID
Under him Israel
becomes a strong
nation

SOLOMON

Kingdom divides

925 B.C.

KINGDOM OF

JUDAH

(the Jews)
Capital —
Jerusalem

KINGDOM OF

ISRAEL

(Capital — Samaria)

AMOS PREACHES

Defeated by Assyria
Israel becomes an
Assyrian state

to

ASSYRIA

721
B.C.

Defeated by
Babylon, Judah
becomes a
Persian province

to BABYLON
as CAPTIVES (Some flee to
Egypt)

NEHEMIAH
supervises
rebuilding of
Jerusalem, &
many exiled
Jews return
home 445 B.C.

539-333 B.C.
Under Persian rule

333-63 B.C.
Under Greek influence

Under Roman rule

63 B.C.
Jerusalem
captured by
Romans

Birth of CHRIST

A.D.

Amos — the man

Amos came from a farming area about 10 miles south of Jerusalem* where he looked after sheep and the production of figs from sycamore trees. God called him to be a prophet.

Amos came from Judah* to speak God's message to the people of Israel. He spoke out strongly against the injustice and corruption with which the society of Israel was riddled. But he was more than a social reformer. He attacked the root of social evil — a wrong attitude to God.

That's all we know about him. Clearly the message was more important than the messenger. This is still true.

The nation

Israel was led by Jeroboam II, who was determined that Israel should be powerful. His stronger neighbours were weak at the time and Jeroboam seized his opportunity with genius. He arranged trade and military agreements which brought in wealth and ensured stability. He became a leader respected by the nations round about. Israel prospered.

Jeroboam II didn't neglect religion — in fact, he set a clear example by his patronage of religion (chapter 7, verse 13). He openly acknowledged the God of Israel, and encouraged worship of God at the official sanctuaries (chapter 5, verse 5).

The prosperity of the nation was taken to be evidence of God's pleasure and blessing.

The people

Living in their prosperous and affluent society and enjoying the prestige of their nation, it was hard for the Israelites to remember that their moment by moment existence depended totally on Almighty God. Their religion had become shallow, a matter of mere routine. They didn't deny God's existence,

but they *lived* as if He didn't exist. They just assumed that they were living in a way that pleased God. Blessing and prosperity had made them complacent – and in danger of judgement. It's the same today.

* In this commentary, the sign * means that more details about this topic are given in the glossary at the back of the book.

1 GETTING A HEARING

AMOS 1, VERSE 1 to AMOS 2, VERSE 5
Amos had a message from God for the people of Israel – but first he must get a hearing. How could he get these self-satisfied and complacent people to listen and take notice? He begins with the nations round about.

Syria is condemned (Capital, Damascus) (1, verses 3 to 5).

God is holy and just and sin must be punished or paid for.

The example of Syria's sin which leads to sure judgement is that 'they have threshed Gilead* with threshing sledges of iron', which probably refers to the *barbaric practice of riding over prisoners of war in iron chariots*.

The Syrians were hated by the Israelites. By the end of his announcement of God's attitude towards the Syrians, Amos had gained his audience.

Philistia is condemned (Capital, Gaza) (1, verses 6 to 8).

The particular sin of the Philistines is *slave-trading* on a monstrous scale – 'a whole people' (verse 6). Fire is the punishment. This almost certainly refers to war and probably to the Assyrian invasion which devastated the region not long after the time of Amos.

Tyre is condemned (1, verses 9 to 10).

Slave-trading again represents the wrong-doing that is to be punished. But Tyre's slave-trading included the capture and sale of Israelites, thus *violating the*

treaty of friendship between the nations. Apparently scraps of paper didn't count for much in the Eighth Century B.C. either!

Edom is condemned (Main Cities Teman and Bozrah) (1, verses 11 to 12).

Cruelty of an excessive kind is condemned. The Edomites had 'stifled compassion' (Phillips), and allowed their cruelty full play, without restraint. When men 'stifle compassion' they become dangerously intelligent animals. It was so in the Eighth Century B.C., it was so in Nazi Germany, it is so today. It is potentially so in all of us, apart from the grace of God.

Ammon is condemned (Main City, Rabbah) (1, verses 13 to 15).

Revolting cruelty is the sin of Ammon. To 'enlarge their border' they attacked Israel (Gilead*). To make sure of the area they occupied they wiped out the next generation of the area.

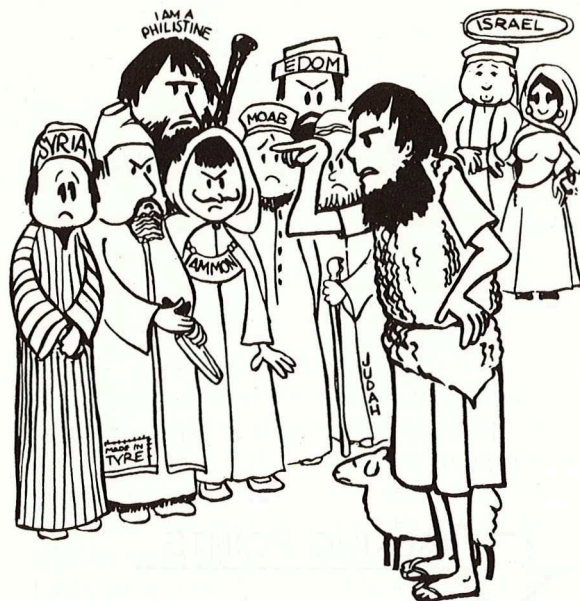
By a kind of horrible logic the slaughter was extended beyond children already born to children still unborn. 'They ripped up women with child.'

Moab is condemned (Main City, Kerioth) (2, verses 1 to 3).

The act of cruelty which Amos selects as representative of Moab's sin reads strangely to us, but can be understood in the context of that time. Many people of the ancient world believed that the spirit of a man needed an actual physical focus for its existence beyond death. So to destroy a man's bones was to pursue him even beyond death and condemn his spirit to an eternity of 'homeless' wandering.

Judah is condemned (Capital, Jerusalem) (2, verses 4 to 5)

At this time no love was lost between Judah* and Israel. Amos certainly would not lose the attention



of his Israelite audience here.

Although the pattern of judgement is similar, the reason for judgement is quite different for Judah. Judah knew the law of God — no other measure was required. *They had rejected God's law.*

Negatively, they had 'not kept his statutes'; they had disobeyed God.

Positively, they had adopted lies, that is, false gods. God had shown them the way of truth by which their deepest needs would be fulfilled. They had abandoned truth for lies and judgement would follow inevitably.

The privilege of knowing about God involves responsibility — the responsibility constantly to check our life and actions against God's truth. Worship and service based on error may be sincere, but they're not acceptable to God. Sincerity may be appealing, but it's truth that is pleasing to God.

2

HITTING THE REAL TARGET

AMOS 2, VERSES 6 TO 16

The complacent Israelites assumed that because they were 'the people of God' their safety and prosperity were guaranteed. They may have wondered what Amos might have in store for them now. He had dealt with the nations bordering Israel. Perhaps now he would aim at the bigger targets beyond, like Egypt or Assyria. Imagine their shock as it becomes clear that the real target is Israel!

God accuses the Israelites

They should have been different. The people of Israel lived and acted in the same way as their pagan neighbours did. Their lives should have been distinctive but they weren't (verses 6 to 8).

They were greedy: the rich swindled the poor and ignored their basic rights. The 'they' of verse 6 are the rich and powerful – the group against which Amos speaks throughout this book. This doesn't mean he's simply a champion of the poor. He's more than a social reformer. If the poor had been living in a way that displeased God, Amos would have attacked them too. He was first and only a spokesman for God, and the rich of the nation was the corrupt section at the time.

Their values were twisted: God intends that we should love people and use things. See, for example, Deuteronomy 24, verses 10 to 22. The Israelites perverted this order; they loved things and used people. We're under pressure to do the same today.

Their worship was corrupt: the religion of the

TALKING POINTS

1. What aspects of God's character are shown in Amos 1? Note how over and over again God says 'I will grant them no reprieve', 'I will send fire', 'I will destroy'. What does verse 2 add to the general picture?
2. Amos accused the states surrounding Israel of various crimes ranging from cruelty and the violation of treaties to rejection of God. What particular sins could Amos accuse our society of? What can we do about these sins?
3. The basis for judgement against Judah* is quite different from that used for the other nations. What makes the difference? See the notes on *Covenant** and *Judah** in the glossary and Psalm 106, especially verses 39 to 43. Is it the same kind of thing which makes a difference between Christians and non-Christians (in God's view) today? See Romans 1, verses 18 to 24, 28 to 32.

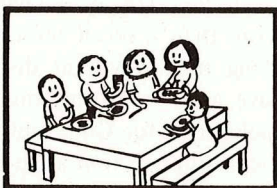
Canaanites, from whom the people of God had captured the Promised Land, was intimately connected with sex. Moses had warned them against religious activities which involved sex. See Deuteronomy 23, verses 17 to 19 for example. Not that God was against sex — but He was, and is, against the kind of sex that turns people into objects. Especially if it's done in the name of religion. God has revealed the way He's to be approached, we must be careful to approach Him only in that way. He has told us the one acceptable way in which we can achieve living contact with Him. Read John 14, verse 6.

Any 'religious' activity which contradicts what He has revealed does not honour Him — in fact it defiles His holy name. Does the way you approach God, and the way you live out your faith, honour Him or defile His name?

God acts on behalf of the Israelites

The focus shifts from the sordidness of the people's behaviour to the mighty acts of God — acts which had created the nation and provided for its continuance (verses 9 to 11).

He rescued them from Egypt (verse 10): in the Old Testament this is *the* great act of God. It was upon this historical event, the exodus from Egypt,



that Israel could base its certainty of itself as God's people.

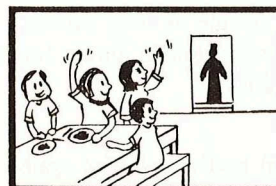
He raised up prophets to recall His people to the purity of their first trust in Him (verse 11). Amos is a good example — he speaks about the future, but it's in terms of the past.

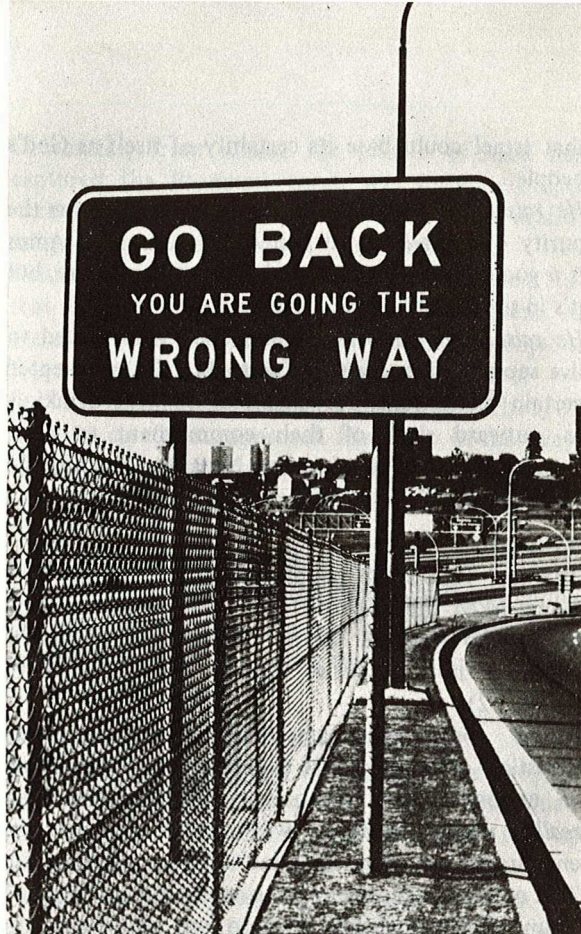
He raised up Nazarites, young men who vowed to live separate lives for God (verse 11). They accepted certain restrictions, for example, no wine drinking, as outward signs of their commitment to God. Samson is the best-known Nazarite in the Old Testament.

So what?

The fact that some people seriously lived for God alone, irked the majority. So they put pressure on those who irritated them. They tried to get the Nazarites not to be so serious about their faith (verse 12).

People today who are religious without being Christian often find real dedication to Jesus Christ an uncomfortable neighbour. The Christian who *really* means business will almost certainly be encouraged to 'drink the wine' of lesser discipleship. Talk of 'being a fanatic', 'going overboard on religion', 'rounded personalities', and so on, will be heard. Those who stand strong against the temptation to





lower the level of their commitment to Christ will be used by God to remind His people of their calling. If being a fanatic means being serious about Jesus Christ, let's all become fanatics!

The axe will fall

Although the actual physical battle might be against the Assyrians, the nation of Israel will fall and fail because God is against it (verses 13 to 16). God had been gracious, generous, and patient in His loving care of the Israelites; their persistent response has been arrogant complacency and a reluctance to acknowledge and trust Him. Because of this, they're condemned.

TALKING POINTS

1. 'If morality means anything at all, it must touch the practical details of the way we live and how we treat our neighbours, especially those less fortunate than ourselves. Failure here makes a scandal of our religious profession.'¹

In what ways should we change our attitudes and actions towards our neighbours, our work-mates and members of our family so that our religious profession is not a scandal? Make a list. Be honest. Be specific.

Now read James 1, verse 22 to James 2, verse 17.

2. The Israelites slipped into the habit of persistent disregard for God's laws. The straight-speaking of the prophets and the holy living of the Nazarites disturbed their apathy but instead of listening to God's warnings they resisted Him more actively.

Why is our initial response to God often one of resistance?

What is the remedy for spiritual apathy in ourselves and in others?

¹J.B. Taylor, *The Minor Prophets*, Scripture Union Bible Study, p. 29.

3

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF A PRIVILEGED POSITION

AMOS 3, VERSES 1 TO 15

With devastating detail Amos now unmask the true character of the nation.

The Israelites' privileged position

They claimed to be God's special people, and they were. It was their privilege to be saved from slavery and oppression in Egypt. This is the focal point. God had acted for His people (verses 1 and 2). He had cared for them. They were His because they had responded to something He had done for them. It's the same today. If you're a Christian, this is why you now belong to God.

Up to this point, the Israelites would have agreed with Amos. They were aware of their nation's covenant-agreement* with God made through Moses. But they drew the wrong conclusion from these facts and Amos unhesitatingly points this out. The Israelites assumed that because they were God's people, He would automatically see that they prospered; Amos declares God's message that because they were His people they would be judged more severely. Why?

Because the Israelites had knowledge about God that no other people had. They knew what pleased God and what displeased Him. They were expected to live in the light of that knowledge, to do the things that pleased Him and to avoid the things that didn't. Yet the Israelites didn't allow their knowledge of God to affect the way they lived. Their behaviour should have reflected God's character; it did nothing of the kind.

Knowledge brings responsibility. God always expects people in whatever age they live to adjust the way they live in the light of the knowledge of Him that they have. You had better stop reading now, if you're not prepared to do that.

Who do you think you are?

The Israelites apparently reacted as men always do when a message begins to trouble them — they questioned the authority of the messenger! Amos replies with what can only be called 'a prophet's logic' (verses 3 to 8).

Comment on events is necessary. Watch television with the sound turned off. You'll soon see that action without comment easily becomes meaningless and open to any kind of interpretation. God wanted people to understand the meaning of events in history, so He comments through the prophets. They interpret God's actions to us. In addition God moved men to write down the meanings He had revealed. We have this record in the Scriptures, including the meaning of His greatest action in Jesus Christ.

Amos wanted the people to understand that he was a man with authority because he was a man under authority. He wasn't God's spokesman by his own choice. If God gave a message to a prophet he must declare it: he couldn't refuse to speak out the message that God had given him.

The apostles of Christ later showed the same kind of logic. In Acts 4, verse 20 in reply to an order to stop preaching about Jesus, they said, 'we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard'. We know, therefore we must speak.

But there's more here — Amos, and the apostles, seem to have some kind of inner compulsion — something drove them to speak. They couldn't hold it in. Perhaps one reason we find it hard to speak for Christ is that we *can* hold it in — God is not sufficiently real to us or our discipleship has limits. Are you speaking out for God?

God's courtroom

God, through Amos, invites Assyria and Egypt to come to the trial of Israel. Samaria, Israel's capital, is in the dock and the nations are to gather as spectators around it (verse 9). This metaphor has bite. Israel should have been leading the nations to God. Now, those nations will accuse her. But the real accuser is God Himself.

The charges: oppression, dishonesty, crime and violence (verses 9 and 10). It sounds like a description of our society. Luxury and an abundance of *things* are useless if one isn't right with God. The Bible isn't against riches — in the Old Testament physical prosperity was seen as a sign of God's blessing. Jesus taught that it was hard, not impossible, for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. But Jesus constantly probed men's attitude towards possessions. His question in Mark 8, verse 36 sums up the thrust of this chapter in Amos, 'what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?'

The verdict: destruction (verses 11, 14 and 15). God punishes sin. Amos' whole case rests on this. Once accept the revealed truth that God is a Holy God and that sin is the opposite of holiness, then it is clear that God and sin cannot exist together.

The promise (verse 13). Israel has failed. Judgement will come. But Amos draws on personal experience to illustrate God's promise that, in the midst of destruction, some will be saved. Not much (a remnant) is left of a sheep when a lion is finished with it. Not much will be left of Israel when its adversary (Assyria) has been allowed to do its work. But something will be left. A remnant. This is God's promise.

TALKING POINTS

1. Was it wrong to have a beautiful home, or to own a city and a country house? In other words, was it wrong to be rich? See Genesis 24, verses 34 and 35 (Abraham); Genesis 26, verses 12 to 15 (Isaac); Genesis 30, verse 43 (Jacob); 1 Kings 3, verses 7 to 14 (Solomon); Job 1, verses 1 to 5, 8; and Daniel 6, verse 28. Read also Matthew 25, verses 14 to 30.

Why then verse 15? See Amos 3, verses 9 and 10; Amos 2, verses 6 to 8, and verses 11 and 12; and Amos 4, verse 1. The Apostle James writes about a similar situation (James 5, verses 1 to 6, noting verses 4 and 6) and tells us what our attitude should be (James 5, verses 7 to 11).

2. The Lord God has spoken; who will not prophesy (Amos 3, verse 8).

'To prophesy' means simply to speak by inspiration. It does not necessarily imply prediction of the future. The Apostle Paul rated highly the gift of prophecy among early Christians. See 1 Corinthians 12, verse 10 and 14, verse 1.

What is the purpose of prophecy? See 1 Corinthians 14, verses 4, 22, 24 and 25. What three aspects of a prophet's task are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14, verse 3?

GOD WILL JUDGE YOU

AMOS 4, VERSES 1 TO 13

Amos is now 'in full flight' against Israel. He continues his detailed analysis of Israel's spiritual pollution and sarcastically lampoons the wrong-headed religions of the people.

Do you exploit the poor?

Amos attacks the rich women of the capital by calling them fat cows who greedily urge their husbands to get more and more by oppressing the poor and destitute (verses 1 to 3). These women use people to get the things they covet so much. Again this is a perversion of God's style of doing things: He wants us to love people and use things.

The great leveller of mankind is Death. President or pensioner, banker, boilermaker or beauty queen, we all face that great crisis. It's the one sure thing about life. Amos brutally reminds these society ladies of Samaria that their end will be destruction.

How sincere is your religion?

Worship is the response of life to God. It's the acknowledgement of the worth of God. One must be God-centred to offer Him acceptable worship. And one cannot be God-centred and self-centred at the same time. Going through the motions of religious worship when one's will is self-centred is not only useless, it's sinful (verses 4 and 5). The frightening thing is that these self-centred people thought they were God-centred! Give yourself a thorough check over. What's the centre of your life?

I warned you!

Despite their prosperity, Israel had experienced some

setbacks. Famine, drought, diseased crops, plagues of locusts, epidemic sickness, war and earthquakes had come (verses 6 to 11). These were allowed to happen to remind the people of their constant need of God. The trouble was that their ideas of God had become so warped that they saw Him only in the good things — the wealth and prosperity. This was a shallow understanding of Him; one which went close to using God as a lucky charm. Their sin had blinded them, and their response to natural calamities had been to grit their teeth and endure — when they should have repented.

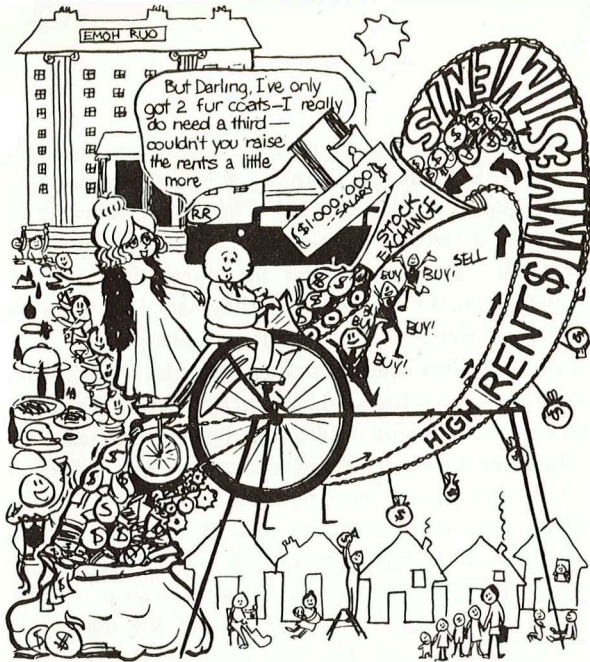
These desperate calamities sent as warnings to the Israelites were *not* meaningless acts of vengeance by God. They were warning acts of *love*. They aimed at showing Israel that its very life depended on God, and that He was displeased with their present attitude.

Judgement — ready or not (verses 12 and 13).

The Israelites would have to face God Himself. Amos knew the people were not ready for that encounter; the people thought they were (see 5, verse 18). They had watered down the truth about God's holiness so much that meeting Him held no terror for them. They assumed it could only result in bigger blessings.

Truth is the only answer to error, so Amos drives home the greatness and majesty of God. The One who created life and keeps it going is not to be approached lightly.

Because God is loving, He wouldn't leave His people alone with their false sense of security. He stirred them through Amos because He loved them. It's because God loves us that He continues to convict us of sin. If you're under a conviction of sin now, thank God for this sign of His love, repent of the sin, and move forward another step in your Christian life.



TALKING POINTS

1. 'For you alone have I cared among all the nations of the world; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' (Amos 3, verse 2)

- What do we need to know about God and about the Israelites before this verse makes sense? The following Bible references may be useful.

About God — Deuteronomy 8, verses 1 to 10, especially verse 5; Job 5, verses 17 and 18; and Hebrews 12, verses 5 to 12. Deuteronomy 32, verse 4; Nehemiah 9, verse 33; and Zephaniah 3, verse 5.

About the Israelites — Psalm 106 and Amos 2.

- How similar is this to God's message to a group of early Christian believers? See Revelation 3, verses 17 to 22. Note especially verse 19.

- What is the connection between love and punishment?

- What implications does this have for Christian parents and the upbringing of their children? See also Proverbs 19, verse 18; Ephesians 6, verses 1 to 4.

2. What responsibility do Christian people have to warn others of the consequences of ignoring God? Discuss the implications of Ezekial 33, verses 1 to 16 for you and me today. See Colossians 1, verse 28 and look at parts of sermons of Peter (Acts 10, verse 42) and Paul (Acts 17, verses 30 and 31).

3. What judgements does a Christian face after death?

- John 3, verses 17 to 19; 5, verses 24 to 29; Matthew 13, verses 36 to 43 and 2 Thessalonians 1, verses 5 to 12.
- 1 Corinthians 3, verses 11 to 15; 2 Corinthians 5, verse 10.

5

THE ANSWER TO PERSONAL AND GLOBAL PROBLEMS

AMOS 5, VERSES 1 TO 27

A lonely nation (verses 1 to 3). Israel had made many political alliances, but she would find her allies fickle 'when the chips were down'. Even if an ally did offer help, this couldn't restore Israel to to favour with God – the one thing that mattered.

R.S.V.P.

The invitation to life (verses 4 to 7). Here we come to the centre of the prophet's message. The judgements pronounced by Old Testament prophets were always conditional. God, in His mercy and grace, offered the alternative of repentance and obedience. Amos states the two alternatives. Turn to God and have life; refuse to turn to God and face judgement.

There's no salvation at their holy places. Those places will also go under in the flood of judgement. Again Amos emphasized that religion in itself is not acceptable to God – it must be according to truth. The Bible never offers three alternatives to men; only two. You have life in God or you don't. It's that simple.

It is God who invites (verses 8 and 9). Amos not only describes God in terms of Creator of the universe and Controller of nature. The people of Israel could accept that. He always includes the reminder that God is holy, and judges sin. That reminder hits hard.

Who does God invite (verses 10 to 15)? God invites people who are dishonest, unjust, untruthful, vindictive, greedy – to describe just a few.

Those with power or riches are singled out again because it's their corruption and greed which is bringing judgement on the nation.

Because of their selfishness and dishonesty (not because they were rich) they wouldn't enjoy the comfort that they spent their lives working and planning for. What's your aim in life – to reflect the character of God or to fulfil your own desires?

The day will come . . .

The people of Israel were looking forward to the day of the Lord (verses 16 to 20), the time when God would come. They assumed that then they would become leaders of the world. Amos made it sound like a funeral, not a coronation! He warned them that if God visited them in their present state the result would be judgement, not blessing. Sin crumples and dies in His presence. None of them who really understood the character of God as it was revealed at Mount Sinai (see Exodus chapter 19) would welcome a meeting with Him.

In a sense there have been many 'days of the Lord'. Every time God acted in history has been *a* day of the Lord. The coming of the Assyrians, the later return from exile, the birth of Christ, His death, His resurrection – these have all been 'days of the Lord'. But we know now that *the* day of the Lord is when Jesus returns in power and when 'every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father'. (Philippians 2, verse 11)

The knowledge that they would be visited by God should have had an effect on the lives of the people. That is, their doctrine should have had practical results.

Christians are people who have an appointment with Christ. One day we will 'see Him as He is' (1 John 3, verse 2). That fact means that we 'purify ourselves as He is pure' (1 John 3, verse 3). Our doctrine of God and of Christ should have a practical

outworking in our life now. Because we belong to Him, we try to live lives that are pure.

We're all right God!

The people were complacent (verses 21 to 27). The people thought they had proof that all was fine between themselves and God:

* *Their feasts:* they kept all the religious feasts. But these feasts were meant to remind them that they were God's people and that obligation flowed from this fact. God wasn't impressed by mere performance. He rejected their feasts.

* *Their sacrifices:* they offered all the sacrifices Moses had commanded. But these sacrifices were meant to remind the people of their need of God. Because of sin He wasn't to be lightly approached. Because their lives showed that the sacrifices were not matched by the inner attitude He commanded, God rejected their sacrifices.

* *Their songs:* they kept all the services of the holy places. If ever it was possible to earn one's way to God by religion, this people should have achieved it. But God rejected them, because they worshipped against knowledge, not according to it. The people were going through the motions of true worship, but it was all outward and empty. They were sick inside. God requires inner cleanness. It's out of a life right before Him that true worship is offered. Here's the priority of the Bible. First, the life cleansed by God, *then* the life lived for God.

TALKING POINTS

1. Our word 'worship' is a shortened form of the original word, 'worthship'. To worship, therefore, is to demonstrate something's or someone's worth.
 - (a) The religious practices of the Israelites in Amos's day were not acceptable to God. How do we estimate the value of our forms of worship? How important is it that we find our worship satisfying and that we are sincere?
 - (b) What is the relationship between inner attitude and outward religion? How can we best demonstrate God's worth, i.e. how can we best worship Him?

See 1 Samuel 15, verses 13 to 26, especially verse 22; Psalm 51, verses 15 to 17 and verse 6;
and John 4, verse 24; Philippians 3, verses 1 to 11; James 1, verse 27; Romans 12, verses 1 and 2.
 - (c) What aspects of outward religion today are unhelpful? Why?
2. Some people might argue that Christians ought to be 'good' because Christ might come back at any time. Is this a legitimate motive for Christian behaviour? If so, is it the only motive? If not, what are the legitimate motives for Christian behaviour? Romans 6, verse 13; 2 Corinthians 5, verses 14 and 15; 2 Corinthians 6, verses 3 and 4; Ephesians 4, verses 1 to 3; Philippians 2, verses 14 to 16; Colossians 3, verses 23 and 24.

6

FALSE SECURITY

AMOS 6, VERSES 1 TO 14

Amos now levels his guns on the leaders of Israel. They're satisfied and feel secure. They're surrounded by comfort. There's a rising Gross National Product. Trade and military alliances 'guarantee' continued protection and prosperity. Amos disagrees. Their sense of security is a false one he says.

Smug leadership

With external threats removed (as they thought) the leaders of Israel were content. They could relax and enjoy the fruits of prosperity (verses 1 to 3). But leadership is never all privilege. Responsibility is the key factor in it.

These men were abusing their position. External peace should have been a time to grapple with internal problems such as poverty and injustice. But the very men who should have been giving a moral lead to the people of God were most at fault. Too easily the attitude that one *deserves* the perks of leadership infiltrates Christian circles. This applies at all levels, e.g. organist, Sunday School teacher, youth leaders, pastor. No-one doubts the sacrifice and effort of those who fill positions of leadership in local congregations. But to think that length or intensity of service places us in a position of desert is to misunderstand Christian truth. One of the hardest parables of Jesus is Luke 17, verses 7 to 10. Until we can *really* echo the punchline of that parable, 'we are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty', we have not fully understood our position before God or the privilege of leadership.

False personal security

Leisured and luxurious living was enjoyed by the well-to-do Israelites (verses 4 to 7). They had plenty of time for relaxation and plenty of money to spend on lavish furnishings, gourmet food, music, excessive drinking and expensive cosmetics. God had blessed them with the good life, so why shouldn't they enjoy it to the full? They took all that they could get, and left the ordinary people to fend for themselves. They showed no concern for the many people in their society who were less fortunate and who were in real need.

It's a sad fact that many of us today are just like the Israelites. We believe in God, do all the right 'religious' things, but are almost completely indifferent to the needy people around us. Even if we give the occasional dollar to Winter Appeals or Freedom from Hunger, we certainly wouldn't want to get personally involved with helping needy people! That would be too inconvenient.

The balloon will burst!

God hates pride, self-indulgence and injustice. Therefore He will abandon the Israelites to their fate. Security and revelry will disappear (verse 7); death (verse 9), devastation (verse 11) and defeat (verse 14) will take their place. It will be due entirely to the stupidity of the Israelites in perverting justice and in boasting of their own deeds and power and neglecting God. It's a sombre warning to God's people for all time.



TALKING POINTS

1. What is Amos attacking in chapter 6? Why? In what ways is his attack relevant to our society?
2. Why are there special dangers for Christians who are wealthy? What are the dangers? How can they be overcome?

7 CONFRONTATION WITH THE LAW

AMOS 7, VERSES 1 TO 17

Locusts and fire

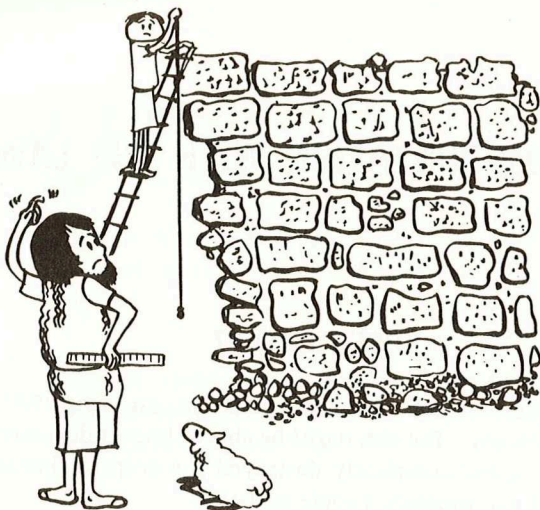
Locusts were dreaded pests in an agricultural economy. The rich might be able to import delicacies if locusts completely destroyed the crops at home, but the ordinary people suffered.

Amos' visions of locusts (verse 1) and fire (verse 4) are about possibilities, not about what has already happened. Thinking about them, he's moved to pray for the people of Israel. His preaching about the judgement of God hasn't made him hard towards the people. He has been preaching out of love.

Often a Christian may be harder than God towards those who stubbornly reject the message they preach or witness to. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 4 that people reject the Gospel because 'the god of this world (Satan) has blinded their minds, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel'. This knowledge should drive us to prayer, and should allow us to be more loving towards those who reject our message.

Does God repent (verses 3 and 6)? This idea is worrying because we rightly think of repentance in terms of change of mind. But God doesn't change, does He? His constancy is a fact that holds everything else together.

The answer lies in the fact that Amos was repentant and so 'stood in' for Israel; he stood where Israel would have stood if it had repented. His prayer for Israel meant that another side of God's character was shown. God hadn't changed, but Israel, in Amos, had.



Here we touch on the mystery of prayer. The fact that Amos prayed on behalf of Israel allowed God to withhold judgement. But, at a deeper level, God had prepared an Amos who *would* pray for Israel. Never underestimate the love of God!

The plumbline

A plumbline is a length of string with a weight at one end. It is used, usually during the construction of a building, to test whether or not a wall is standing upright (verses 7 and 8). God's plumbline is His law, which is based on His character.

Looking at this standard, Amos realized that God's judgement on the nation is inevitable, and he no longer intercedes. He announces God's condemnation of the people and their political leaders (verse 9).

The confrontation

How Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, must have squirmed and seethed as Amos attacked the official religion! But as Amos hadn't denied any of the basic truths about God on which the official religion was based, he couldn't do anything — not until Amos mentioned judgement on the king. This gave him his opportunity (verses 10 to 17).

Apparently Jeroboam shared Amaziah's feeling and

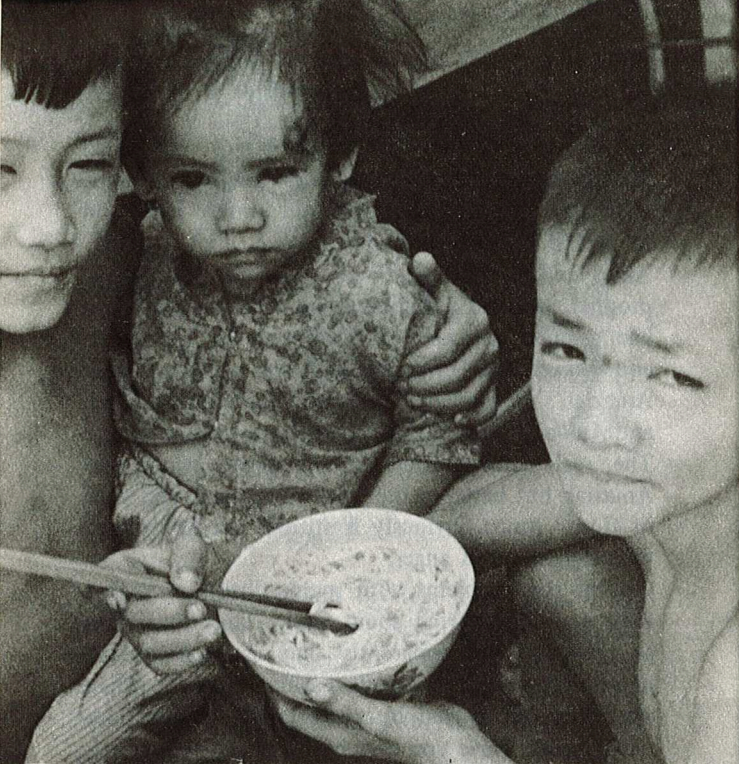
this emboldened him to confront Amos. He called him a 'seer', one of the names used to describe a 'professional' prophet. He told him to leave and to preach at home in Judah.

Amos reacted strongly. *He* was no professional prophet. He was a shepherd and a farmer. But *God* had gripped him and called him to be a prophet, and Amaziah, in opposing him, was opposing God. Amaziah's religion had hardened him towards God, and Amos very forcefully denounces his whole family. The real confrontation isn't between Amos and Amaziah but between the word of man and the word of God. Amos obviously is stirred, but he's stirred by a right kind of anger.

One of the problems with many Christians is that they *never* get stirred about God. They love Him, so they say, but apparently they can tolerate His name being muddled and His teaching mocked. When were you last moved by a right kind of anger for God's sake? Have you ever been excited about God, and shared that excitement?

TALKING POINTS

1. **Amos is stirred in his reaction to Amaziah.** How can a Christian be sure it isn't his wounded pride that stirs him, rather than a right kind of anger about the name of Christ? What guidelines do passages like Acts 17, verses 16 and 17 and Mark 11, verses 15 to 18 provide? Be very practical — this is a problem Christians continually face.
2. **What value has the plumbline for us today?** See Romans 3, verses 19 to 26; 7, verses 7 to 13; and 8, verses 1 to 4 and Galatians 3:21-29.



8

A FRIGHTENING FUTURE

AMOS 8, VERSE 1 TO AMOS 9, VERSE 4

The terrible picture of coming punishment reaches a climax here.

The fruit in the basket is apparently over-ripe — it is nearing its end (8, verses 1 to 3). Spiritual decay in the nation will also have its end. The awful physical suffering repels us; but the real horror is the spiritual rottenness which leads to judgement. Sin and disobedience in His people is something God views seriously.

No clear idea of an after-life existed in Israel at this time — so any judgement or any blessing of God must come in this life. The physical descriptions of suffering here are still the best way in which our human minds can in some way understand the deep spiritual truth being handled. Jesus taught in the same way. See Mark 9, verses 42 to 48.

The accused

The people in a position to exploit others found religion a nuisance (8, verses 4 to 6). Holy days and sabbaths weren't joyful times when God could be praised, but times to be impatiently endured. Every minute passing was money lost; religious ceremonies didn't fit in with their get-rich-quick policies. Nor did honesty and caring for others. Anxious to make more money, they cheated to get it, using faulty scales to weigh out their goods and selling shoddy products. Anything went in the business ethics of the day.

Do you, like Amos, attack corruption, greed, the exploitation of needy people and other things in our

society that deny the character of God? Or do you share in them? The motto of many people in our society seems to be 'grab what you can for yourself, and don't worry too much about who you trample on in the process'. How much of their philosophy have you absorbed?

Take the consequences . . .

What a picture of frantic desolation! Because of their ungodly yet culturally respectable behaviour, God will send savage earthquakes and dismaying darkness (8, verses 8 and 9). Suffering and grief will be experienced by all and their heartbreak and distress will be intensified by famine (8, verses 10 and 11). Their desperate searching for God at this time will be hopeless, and even the strongest people will die of exhaustion (8, verses 12 to 14). These are the terrible results which will follow the withdrawal of God in the face of unrepented sin.

The people will be aware of their need for a word from God, but will be unable to find it. It isn't that God is cruel and unrelenting, but that the people won't repent. If verse 14 describes the same people as verse 12, they still refuse to give God His unique place as One True God. They are willing to worship Him the way *they* choose; but He's not willing to be worshipped that way.

So we have the truly terrible situation of people who know they need God, but are still not willing to come to Him on His own terms. Always, it seems, there will be a conflict between need and truth. Many in our society acknowledge their need of God. But then they want to negotiate the conditions that they want fulfilled before they'll come to Him. They're hurt and disappointed when the uncompromising demands of Christ are spelt out to them.

The result? Hundreds, if not thousands, who have a deep spiritual hunger which is made more acute because they've glimpsed the source of satisfaction. They're not satisfied because they turn away.

No exit

It doesn't matter whether men try to hide by going to the highest place (top of Mt. Carmel) or the lowest place (bottom of the sea), God will find them. Escape is impossible; they will be punished (9, verses 1 to 4).

TALKING POINTS

1. Amos attacked the Israelites about the way they conducted their business deals.
 - Why would a Christian feel he has a particular responsibility towards the society around him? How would you outline that responsibility?
 - Do you think that responsibility extends to such things as business practices? On what basis may a Christian make statements about business practice?
 - If Amos had not been talking to people who claimed to follow God, would this have changed either his responsibility or his approach?
Would you approach a Christian at work about his business practices in exactly the same way as you would a non-Christian? If not, how would your approaches differ? Why?

GOD IS GRACIOUS

AMOS 9, VERSES 5 TO 15

Hope and promise emerge here, but there's no simple 'happy ending' theme. God's purposes are sure and will be worked out. Those who refuse to co-operate with Him will exclude themselves from His ultimate victory.

God is all powerful

God is well able to carry out the judgements He has threatened. He has complete worldwide authority (verses 5 to 10).

- *He is God of nature.* Amos again refers to earth-quakes. In a pre-atomic bomb society they provided the most powerful explosions around! The puniness of man is clearly seen beside such power. And God is far more powerful than any earthquake.

- *He is God of nations.* Israel may have been chosen by God, but not because they were special. God is sovereign over *all* nations. In this sense the Israelites and the Ethiopians were on a par. Even the Exodus from Egypt was on a par with the movements of other nations! This was heresy! But what Amos is teaching is that the exodus of Israel had special significance because *God* gave it. God may have as easily called the Syrians to Sinai. Why He called Israel and not Syria is something only He knows.

The Israelites obviously needed this 'cutting down'. Their relationship to God should have resulted in humble gratitude, not proud arrogance. It's good for us from time to time to think about the Bible's teaching on the divine election* of God. We'll never



satisfactorily answer the question, 'why me and not him?' But the reminder that what we are in Christ (John 1, verse 12) depends on God's initiative is a healthy check on our arrogance and sense of specialness.

- *He will not be thwarted.* God's purposes are too great to be thwarted by the disobedience of some. Israel will be captured, and God will shake the Israelites through the sieve of defeat and exile in order to sift out all the complacent sinners from the few truly faithful people. God's punishment is

never indiscriminate; He will preserve a purified remnant of people only faithful to God.

The picture of the majesty of God here is breathtaking. There's a vast difference between Amos' understanding of God and the warped ideas of the Israelites. The God they had concocted was a weak, 'pocket-sized' God compared with the majestic understanding of Amos.

God's target

Nothing Amos says in the closing statement of hope contradicts anything he has said before. Judgement will fall on disobedient people, but God's special promise to the Israelites will still be kept. The promise is linked to the house or family of David* (verses 11 and 12). 2 Samuel 7 is the important chapter here. Take time to read it. The promises pointed to a time in the future when God would act through David's descendants to set up a permanent kingdom that would go beyond the physical. It would, in fact, be the kingdom of God which Amos outlines here and which Jesus Christ, born of David's line, taught about and came to inaugurate. (Read Matthew 1, verses 17 to 25; 9, verse 35; and see Matthew 13 for a series of parables about the Kingdom of Heaven, i.e. the Kingdom of God.) God made a promise to David. Now, despite the Israelites' long years of persistent neglect and disobedience to Him, God graciously reaffirms that promise. God always keeps His word.

Hope for the future (verses 13 to 15). This description of super productivity and abundance contrasts strongly with the effects of sin. (See Amos 4, verses 7 and 8; 5, verse 11; 6, verses 11 and 14; 8, verses 11 and 12.) This hope of a secure and prosperous future rests entirely on the character of God. In the Bible, God's mind and character are revealed to us. Here we find the conditions, privileges and responsibilities of being His people. It is important that we regularly and thoughtfully read the Bible.

TALKING POINTS

1. Amos has been called a 'social reformer'. Looking back at the whole book, do you think this is a good description of him?
2. The challenge which Amos issued would certainly have had effects throughout different sections of Israelite society. Which sections? Is there any evidence that his challenge was accepted or rejected?
3. 'God Himself is the focus of Amos' attention; any social reforms flow out from this prior concern.' Do you agree?
4. What social questions today urgently need informed Christian comment? Do you think the Christian gospel has anything to do with social questions (like pollution, prostitution, pornography, poverty etc.) or is it only about personal salvation? Check Matthew 25:31-46 and Matthew 5:13-14.

A POSTSCRIPT

Often the greatest times of testing, for a nation, a church or an individual, are times of outward prosperity. God is forgotten and the deadening hand of complacency begins to choke the spiritual life of professing believers.

At such a time, Amos focuses on God Himself. He bursts on to the scene to announce that religious activity is worthless unless it begins with deep regret for ignoring or defying God, acknowledgement of dependence on Him, and a willingness to obey Him. His remedy for spiritual sickness is to direct the minds of God's people to a fuller grasp of the character of the God who had called them to Himself. This is still the corrective which today can save us from shallow and shaky faith.

Concentrate on . . .

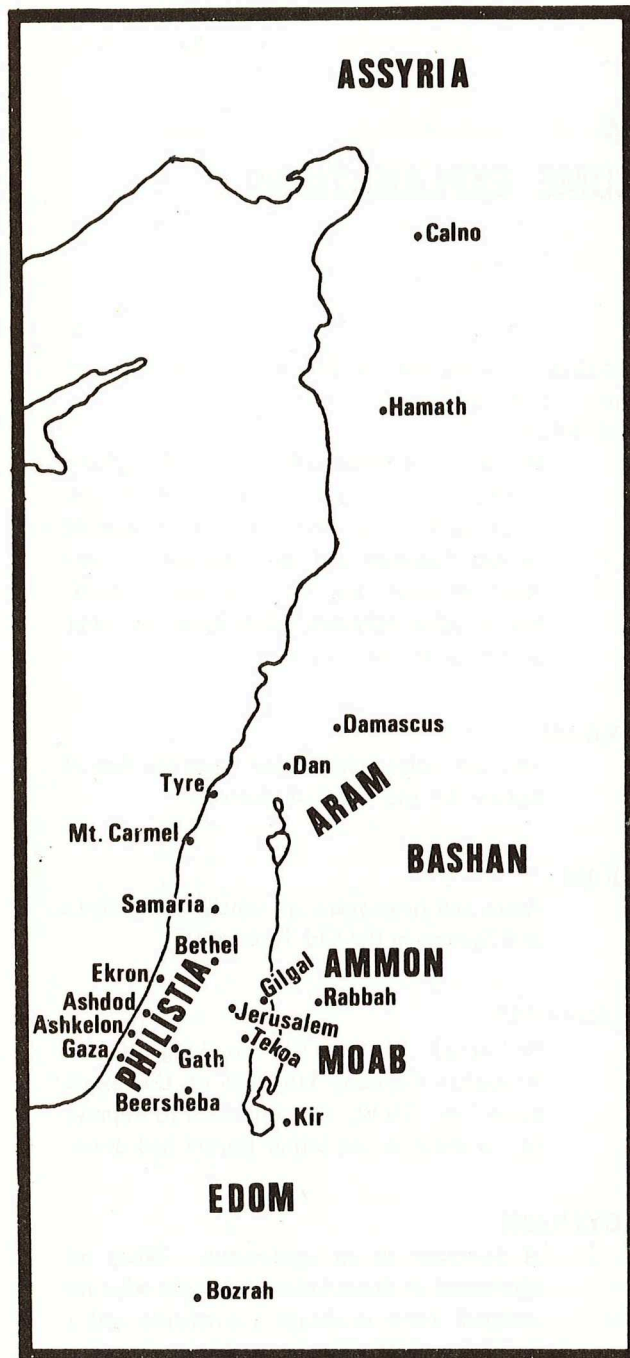
The majesty of God. Amos gives some breathtaking descriptions of God's might and power. See 4, verse 13.

The holiness of God. God's people were to reflect this in their lives. See 4, verse 2, and 5, verses 14, 15, and 24.

The mercy and love of God. The very fact that Amos was sent to warn about judgement was part of the love of God! Those who try to contrast the wrathful God of the Old Testament with the loving God of the New Testament are reading both with only one eye! See 9, verse 14.

Remember . . .

God wanted to bless the Israelites as He wants to bless us, but failure to repent means that God must punish rather than bless. Amos speaks as God's messenger to us, across the years.





SOME EXPLANATIONS

Glossary of terms used in the text of Amos and in this commentary:

AMORITES

People of Canaan who lived throughout the hill country on either side of the Jordan (Genesis 10, verse 16). They were enemies of the Israelites and the conquest of two Amorite kings was the first step towards the Israelite take-over of Canaan, the land promised to them by God.

ARABAH

The rift valley which runs from the Sea of Galilee to the Gulf of Aqabah.

ARAM

Aram and Aramaeans are usually called Syria and Syrians in the Old Testament.

BEN-HADAD

Ben-hadad III (or II) was king of the Aramaean (Syrian) kingdom of Damascus about 796-770 BC. He continued to oppress the Israelites as his father Hazael had done.

COVENANT

A covenant is an agreement. When an agreement is made between people who are unequal, there is always a condition and a promise . . . 'If you do . . . (the condition),

then I will . . . (the promise)'. This was the common form of treaty or covenant in Old Testament times. So when God made a covenant with Abraham, and later with all the people of Israel, He used a medium that was well-known to them.

(Genesis 12:1-3, 17:1-8, Exodus 19:3-9.) The condition was obedience to Him; the promise was 'I will make you a great nation, I will give you the land of Canaan, I will make you a blessing to all people'.

CUSHITES

The people who lived in the region south of Egypt. They included people from North Sudan and Ethiopia.

DAN

- One of the twelve sons of Jacob. See Genesis 30, verses 1 to 6.
- His name is now given to one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The Danites settled mainly in the north near the source of the Jordan River but some remained in southern areas bordering Philistine territory. See Judges 13.
- A city on the headwaters of the Jordan River.

DAVID

Second king of the Jewish nation, round about 1000 BC. He was a military general as well as a wise king. He wrote many of the Psalms in the Bible, some after terrible mistakes. David was an important ancestor of Christ, who was often called 'the son of David'. His story is found between I Samuel 16 and I Kings 2.

EDOM

A tribe who were descended from Esau. Edom is often used as another personal name for Esau himself. The Edomites intermarried with Canaanites and as a result the pure-blood Jews despised them. In New Testament times, the Herod family, who were Edomites, were vassal kings over the Jewish nation under rule from Rome. The Herod family was vehemently hated.

ELECTION

'The act of choice whereby God picks an individual or group out of a larger company for a purpose or destiny of His own appointment.' The New Bible Dictionary, I.V.F., p. 357

EXODUS

The miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt, when more than 600,000 Jews fled into the desert around 1290 BC, led by Moses. See the Book of Exodus.

GILEAD

Wooded hill country east of the Jordan River extending from the northern end of the Dead Sea, to the Sea of Galilee.

GOMORRAH

Sodom and Gomorrah were sinful cities on the plains of the Jordan River. They earned God's condemnation and were completely wiped out, probably by a violent earthquake. See Genesis 18 and 19.

HAZAEI

A powerful king of Syria (Aram) who was

one of Israel's main oppressors, defeating them many times in battle. See II Kings 8 to 13.

JACOB

Abraham's grandson and younger twin brother of Esau. He bargained with Esau and then tricked his father Isaac to get hold of the birthright and the blessing that should have gone to Esau. He became a respected patriarch.

JERUSALEM

A city captured by King David (see II Samuel 5, verses 6 to 8) and made capital, first of the combined nation of Israel and then, after 925 BC, of the kingdom of Judah. David's son, King Solomon, built the Temple there (see I Kings 6, 7 and 8) and it became the 'holy city', sometimes called Zion. The city and the Temple were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, in 587 BC and many Jews were exiled. When they were allowed to return after 536 BC a second temple was built which stood for over 500 years until besieged by Pompey in 63 BC.

Work began on a third temple, Herod's temple, in 19 BC and continued until AD 64. This Temple was destroyed by Roman soldiers in AD 70.

JOSEPH

The favourite son of Jacob. He was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers but became Chief Minister of Egypt and was used by God to save the Egyptians and the

Israelites from starvation during famine.
See Genesis 37, 39 to 50.

JUDAH

- Originally, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. He was a leader amongst his brothers.
- Later, the name was used for a whole tribe who received a portion of Canaan as their own.
- When the nation of Israel was divided into two, the name Judah was given to the southern part. The capital of Judah was Jerusalem. The inhabitants became known as Jews.

ORION

A constellation of stars figured as a hunter with a belt and a sword.

PLEIADES

A group of small stars in the Taurus constellation.

SACRIFICE

An offering to God of meat, flour or wine. Some were wholly consumed by fire, others were shared among priest and worshippers in a kind of fellowship meal. There is a relationship between sacrifice and the 'covering' or forgiveness of sins. The book of Leviticus contains details about priests, washings, the types of animals to be offered, and the prayers to be made.

SHEOL

A word used in the Old Testament for the place of the dead.

SODOM

See GOMORRAH.

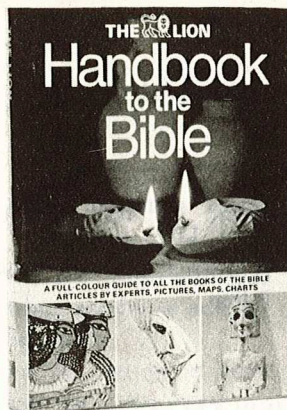
TEMAN

- (a) Esau's grandson. See Genesis 36, verse 11.
- (b) A district, town or tribe in northern Edom.

ZION

See JERUSALEM.

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