

# THE THEOLOGY OF AMOS<sup>1</sup>

Amos was inspired by God to prophesy against the northern kingdom of Israel around 760-755 B.C. In less than four decades the Assyrians would attack and defeat them, resulting in the scattering of those ten tribes across the face of the earth. However, at the time Amos preached and committed to writing his prophetic statements, the northern kingdom was at its zenith. Little wonder then that Amos' prophecies of impending judgment did not find an eager audience.

A number of literary themes are prominent in Amos. Foremost among the various motifs is a dominant emphasis on God Himself. God's special covenant name *Jehovah* (LORD/Yahweh) occurs around 60 times in the book, either singly (1:2,3,5,; 3:16,10; 7:6; etc.), or in tandem with other names for God (1:8; 3:7; 4:13; 5:16; 6:8; 8:1; etc.). The name *Adonai* (Lord) occurs 24 times, usually together with the name *Jehovah*, but occasionally alone (7:7, 8; 9:1). The name *Elohim* (God) is seen less often (14 times e.g. 3:13; 4:11-12; 5:27), three times referring generically to false gods. The combination name "*Adonai Yahweh*" is extremely prominent, occurring in that form 20 times in Amos (1:8; 3:7,8,11,13; 4:2,5; 5:3; 6:8; 7:1 [twice], 4 [twice], 5,6; 8:1,9,11; 9:8). The additional phrases "*Lord GOD of hosts*" (*Adonai Yahweh Tseba'ah* - 9:5), *LORD God of hosts* (*Yahweh Elohim tseba'ah* - 6:8) and the even fuller titles "*LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord*" (*Yahweh Elohim Tseba'ah Adonai* - 5:16) and "*Lord GOD, the God of hosts*" (*Adonai Yahweh Elohim Tseba'ah* - 3:13) call yet more attention to the person behind the prophetic warnings-i.e. the sovereign, transcendent, unfailingly faithful, covenant-keeping redeemer of Israel, creator of all and leader of the armies of heaven!

The Lord is also depicted as the lion that "*roars from Zion*" (1:2 cf. 3:4, 8,12; 5:19), and His awesome presence behind the prophetic utterances of Amos are painted in bold strokes for all to see (4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6). "*Prepare to meet your God, O Israel*" *Jehovah* declares, (4:12b) for He would surely accomplish His divine will!

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Following naturally on the dominant motif of God, is the theme of the certainty of His coming judgment! (1:2-2:8,13-16; 3:2-8,11-15; 4:1-3; 5:1-3,11-13,16-17,27; 6:7-11,14; 7:1-9; 8:1-3,7-9,11-14; 9:1-4,7-8a). In the first two chapters a whole string of nations are listed as being slated for impending judgment (1:2-2:8). The list begins with heathen nations (1:3-10), moves to peoples distantly related to the Jews (1:11-2:3), before finally addressing the two divisions of God's chosen people, Judah and, lastly, the northern kingdom of Israel, to whom Amos was called to deliver his prophetic message of future divine judgment (2:4-8).

In pronouncing God's judgment on the northern kingdom, Amos delineates a number of reasons why God's judgment is going to fall, and why it is deserved. The sins of the people, both ethical and religious, are twin motifs that appear throughout the book. Amos paints an indicting portrait of the ethical sins and transgressions of the people of Israel (2:6b-8; 4:1; 5:7,10-11a,12; 6:4-6,12b-13). The specific term "*transgression(s)*" occurring eleven times (1:3,6,9,11,13; 2:1,4,6; 3:14; 4:4; 5:12), "*sin(s)*" twice (5:12; 8:14) and "*iniquity*" once (3:2).

Similarly, false worship and external religious activities (including evil ones - 2:7b-8) are a recurrent theme (3:14; 4:4-5; 5:18-27; 8:5,10). The people are shown to be trusting in the religious formalities they continue to practice, which have had virtually no impact on their ethical behavior towards others, especially the poor and those less fortunate (2:7; 4:1; 5:11-12). On the contrary, God desired true, practical righteousness and justice (5:14-15, 24) in contrast to their farcical justice & righteousness (5:7; 6:12).

Running concurrent with the judgment motif, is the theme that the only possible solution to avert God's righteous judgment is genuine repentance and a returning to Jehovah (4:6, 8, 10, 11; 5:4,6,14). Unfortunately, the people are unwilling to turn and heed the warnings of the prophet (4:6b, 8b,9b,10b,11b). Consequently the people will soon face the judgments mentioned in the book.

There is one highly visible pattern of phraseology that occurs repeatedly throughout the first two chapters of Amos: "*For three transgressions ...and for four.*" The phrase itself is not to be taken as an exact number, but points to the fact that judgment would definitely come, not because of one sin, but due to a large number of sins i.e. a full number, and that such judgment was more than fully deserved. Ascending numerical counting, with such an attendant meaning, occurs in a number of places in the Old Testament (Job 33:14; Ps. 62:11; Pr. 30:15,18,21; Ho. 6:2; Mi. 5:5), in addition to the references in Amos (1:3,6,9,11,13; 2:1,4,6). "*Throughout, the idea behind the ascending numeral is that a complete count has been taken, and the result may be accepted with confidence*" (Motyer, p. 30).<sup>1</sup>

A superficial reading of Amos could easily cause the reader to assume that the "*three transgressions and for four*" phraseology is a "jingle" that disappears by the middle of chapter two. However a closer examination of Amos demonstrates that its pattern and imagery continues throughout the book, and serves as a literary motif that unifies the book of Amos in a very subtle way. One initially is puzzled by the fact that the prophecy regarding Israel (2:6-ff), is the only one that doesn't seem to repeat the literary pattern of the others (with the exception of the first sentence, "*I will not revoke its punishment*" - 1:3,6,9,11,13; 2:1,4 cf. 2:6) All of the other key words & phrases that are part and parcel of the "three transgressions and for four" pattern seem to disappear (e.g. I will send "*fire*" (1:4,7,10,12,14; 2:2,5) ...it will consume her (the) "*citadels*," (1:7,10,12,14; 2:2,5), "*cut off*," [1:5,8; 2:3] "*scepter*," [1:5,8] & "*exile*" [1:15]). One wonders, why Amos, when writing the last prophecy regarding Israel, didn't use the same words and patterns as he did with the other prophecies at the beginning of the book? It's almost as if in writing the prophecy of judgment on Israel, Amos didn't have the time to "wordsmith" his final prophecy to match the others.

A closer examination however reveals that in reality, the rest of the book (chapters 3-9) is really one long extension of the "*For three transgressions...and for four*" theme that dominates the early chapters. Within the latter chapters (which deal solely with the northern kingdom), we find the very same words, phrases and concepts (I will not revoke their "*punishment*," judgment by "*fire*," "*consume*," "*cut off*," "*scepter*," "*citadels*," "*exile*," etc.). It becomes obvious that the same judgments and imagery are used in

relation to Israel. *The difference is simply that the key words and phrases are spread out* (e.g. "punish" (3:2,14), "fire" (5:6; 7:4 cf. 9:5 "melts"), "consume" (5:6; 7:4), "exile(s)" (5:27; 6:7; 7:11,17), "citadels" (3:10,11; 6:8), and "cut off" 3:14). Though scattered, the pattern is there, and the phrase "*three transgressions and for four*" gives the book a literary unity not immediately apparent.

There are other, more subtle words/motifs in Amos that similarly demonstrate the unity of the book. One such word is "house." It begins with the repeated and varied references to the northern kingdom as the "house of Israel" (5:1,3,4,25; 6:1,14; 7:10; 9:9); "house of Joseph" (5:6 cf. 6:6); "house of Jacob" (3:13; 9:8; cf. 6:8); "house of Isaac" (7:16); & "booth (house) of David" (9:11). Note also other general statements about Israel's well built houses (5:11). They were proud of their position and stature before God as the "house of Israel." Amos however, boldly declared that their "house" would be found completely wanting in the day of judgment when Jehovah would stretch out his divine "plumb line" and compare their house with His standard (7:7-8 cf. 3:15; 5:11; 6:11), i.e. His righteousness (5:24, righteousness = *conformity to a standard*). How much better if Israel had sought Jehovah, whose house is truly exquisite, exalted and beyond compare (9:6).

Nevertheless, their house (position) would not be completely or irrevocably lost, because of Jehovah's covenant promises to David (9:8-12,14). That eschatological theme (the restoration of Israel, based on the Davidic covenant), while not as dominant as some of the earlier motifs, is clearly imbedded in Amos (9:8-15). Some in the north even misguidedly longed for "*the day of the LORD*" (5:18-20), which they didn't realize would simply bring judgment upon their heads. However after hearing Amos speak of those judgments of God that were soon to be visited on them, a Jew might wonder what had become of Yahweh's covenant promises to David and the Patriarchs. The answer was that those promises indeed would not fail! While much time might pass before the Davidic promises would see their ultimate fulfillment, they would come to fruition (9:8, 11-15).

Other subtle themes in Amos include the contrast between the northern kingdom as the "sons of Israel" and their real condition as the "sons of Ethiopia" (9:7); and Israel's gardens and vineyards, which

either were being destroyed by "natural catastrophes" (4:9; 7:1-6) or, if bountiful, would not be enjoyed by them (5:11b) compared with their future gardens in the millennium, which would overflow (9:13-15).

In summary, Amos demonstrates the divine right of Jehovah to judge nations for their sins, often reserving His severest judgment for His own people, who often excuse gross moral and ethical failure with outward religious exercises. God instead desires repentance, and where it is manifested, future deliverance and blessing is still possible!

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1 . For helpful comments on this phrase, see Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on The Minor Prophets*, p.92; Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on The Old Testament*, Vol. 10, p. 242; J.A. Motyer, *The Day of The Lion-The Message of Amos*, p. 30; & George Adam Smith, *The Book of The Twelve Prophets*, p. 124.