

Robert Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 21b

Amos

Amos

5. The Political and Social Conditions at the Time

Let's return to our discussion on Amos. Number 5 is, "The political and social conditions at the time." Both Israel and Judah were prospering. Israel was relieved from the pressure of both Syria and Assyria. Nowhere does Amos speak explicitly of Syria, and there is no indication of his being in trouble for that. Look at 5:27, "Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus," says the Lord whose name is God Almighty." In 6:7, "Therefore you will be among us the first to go into exile and your feasting and lounging will end." In 6:14, interesting wording here, "The Lord God Almighty declares, 'I will stir up the nations against you, O house of Israel, that will oppress you all the way from Lebo Hamath to the Valley of the Arabah.'" Does that ring a bell? Especially, "from Lebo Hamath to the Valley of the Arabah." Look at the reference with respect to Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25. It says there that Jeroboam was "the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher." So you see Jonah had prophesied that Israel would extend its boundaries from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah. Here Amos comes along and says, "I will oppress you from Lebo Hamath to the valley of the Arabah." So Amos comes close to making an identification of the oppressor nation as being Syria, although he doesn't explicitly use the word.

Internal – Prosperity

Internally there was prosperity. You have references to the extravagant houses of the rich in 3:15, "I will tear down the winter house, along with the summer house; the house adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished." There

are now excavations of Samaria where there were hundreds of inlaid ivories found. The feasting on luxuries are described in 6:4-6, “You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore, you will be among the first to go into exile, your feasting and lounging will end.” So, there’s a lot of luxury and wealth. But as Ellison points out, that is one side of the picture. We look at the rich but we must turn to the houses of the poor to see how they live. That side of the picture comes out if you look at 2:6 where you read. “For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.” So there was a lot of injustice. Amos 8:4-6 continues this theme, “Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?’ Skimping the measure and boosting the prices and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.” So as Ellison points out, writers are fond of describing prosperity but for the most part they seemingly fail to focus on justice. So those are comments about the author and the background to the book.

B. The Book of Amos and Its Content

1. General Outline

B. is, “The book of Amos and its content.” One is the “General Outline.” I think the book divides into four sections. First, “Judgment pronounced on the surrounding nations” and we’ll look at that briefly. Amos warns surrounding nations, ultimately Judah, and focuses on Israel. That’s the first two chapters. Then what he does in the second section is to give more specific judgments on Israel and the reasons for it. That’s chapters 3 to 6. And then thirdly, a section of five visions in chapters 7, 8 and 9. The last

section a promise of future blessing, Amos 9:11-15. So that's the way the contents fall. The major theme is "Judgment on Israel for social injustice." There is an emphasis on social justice but also on religious formalism. So Amos ends the section with the justice of God at the end of the book with the great hope of promise of the future restoration under the law.

2. Amos 1-2

Chapters 1 and 2 are that first section, "Judgment on the surrounding nations." You have judgments there on six surrounding nations followed by a climaxing judgment. Amos follows the regular pattern of introducing each section with the phrase, "For three sins" and then he names a certain city or nation, "and for four I will not turn back my wrath." So you notice in verse 3, "For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath." Then verse 6, "For three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath," and verse 9, "For three sins of Tyre, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath." And that follows on through the chapter and on into the second chapter, "For three sins," and then a certain city or nation, "and for four I will not turn back my wrath." The expression is best understood as indicating the fullness of their sinfulness—for three sins and for four.

Amos also follows a pattern in the order of the nations of whom he speaks. He speaks of foreign peoples all by the name of their capital city. He speaks of Syria and references them by the capital city Damascus. He speaks of Philistia by using the capital city of Gaza in Amos 1:6. And he speaks of Phoenicia using the capital city of Tyre in verse 9.

So he first addresses the foreign nations, then he moves to the cousin nations, Edom, in verse 11. Edom comes from Esau. Ammon in verse 13; Ammon is related to Israel and the Ammonites come from Lot's older daughter. Moab in chapter 2 verse 1; Moab descended from Lot's younger daughter. So he first looks at three foreign nations then moves on to three cousin nations.

Then he comes closer to home. He speaks of the brother nation, you might say,

Judah in 2:4, before focusing in on Israel itself, the Northern Kingdom, in 2:6. So I think the progression is an effective way of hearing, particularly from those who could see the evil of Israel. It bolsters Amos' message and focuses on the issue, even about Judah—that's where he makes comments. The sins in them are not confined to the abuses that are present in Israel. Generally, he recognizes the evil in itself by all nations and these nations will face reparations but not without moral responsibility. Judgment is pronounced for sins that are recognized. The means of the judgment is not specified, but if you look at the history of these peoples and nations, it seems that judgment was carried out.

Amos' Focus on Judah

Amos begins to focus his attention internally on Judah. You notice in 2:4 and 5 he says, "For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because they have rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestors followed, I will send fire upon Judah that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem." He gets to Judah and there is a significant transition. Remember he's speaking to the Northern Kingdom although he himself is from the south. If he had turned directly to Israel he may have been accused of partiality. The north was stronger economically and politically but the south had the presence of the temple. Amos describes the law of the Lord and not keeping his statutes and following other gods. This was fulfilled in 2 Kings 24-25 at the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. So judgment is coming on Judah.

Amos on Israel

In Amos 2:6-16, "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair sandals." I won't read all of it. But jump down to "I also raised up prophets from among your sons and Nazirites from among your young men." Then verse 13 and following, "Now then, I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain. The swift will not escape, the strong will not

muster their strength, and the warrior will not save his life. The archer will not stand his ground...” Verse 16, “Even the bravest warriors will flee naked on that day.” This is the climax of these first two chapters. He has pronounced judgment on Israel’s enemies one after another, and now it comes on Israel. Now he directs his message at Israel who will receive the chief judgment. They warned the people before by the surrounding nations. A day of darkness rather than light, a day of judgment.

Covenant Lawsuit

a. Accusation and Indictment

To bring this message, Amos uses what some have termed the “covenant lawsuit.” The features of this legal form are observable here. Notice how this works out. First you have an accusation or an indictment, that is in verse 6-8. I read part of that, “They sell the righteous for silver.... They trample on the heads of the poor.” Verse 7, “Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines.” That indictment involves social, moral and religious violations—oppression of the poor in verses 6 and 7 and moral and religious apostasy in verse 8. These involved sacred prostitution, which they thought magically produced fertility of the land. Israel was warned not to be involved in it. Here the Lord is being worshipped as ordinary Baals would be. This practice was a gross violation of the covenant. What made it worse, it was done with things obtained through the oppression of poor. “They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge.” They were doing religion at the expense of the poor. So that’s the indictment of the covenant lawsuit.

b. Gracious Acts of the Sovereign in Vss. 9-11

Second is the recital of the gracious acts of the sovereign in verses 9-11. Verses 9-11 say, “The Lord says, ‘I destroyed the Amorite before them, though he was tall as the cedars and strong as the oaks. I destroyed his fruit above and his roots below. I brought you up out of Egypt, and I led you forty years in the desert to give you the land of the

Amorites. I also raised up prophets from among your sons.’” Is this not true? I’ve done all these things. I’ve been faithful. I’ve been gracious. So a recital of the gracious acts of the Lord. God had consistently kept the covenant.

c. Rejection of the Prophetic Covenant Warning

The third element of the covenant lawsuit is rejection of the prophetic covenant warning. This is found in verse 12. “But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.” The prophet calls the people to return to the covenant faithfulness and repentance, but both were rejected.

That leads to number four, the sentence in verse 13-16. I’ve read that already. It’s given in general terms. There is no specific prediction but the judgment is listed. So that is that climax of the first section of the book where Amos turns from foreign nations, to cousin nations, to a brother nation Judah, and ultimately to Israel.

3. Amos 3-6 Pronouncements of Judgment

Let’s go to the second section chapter 3-6 where there are more specific pronouncements of judgment. This section consists of three discourses each beginning with this phrase, “Hear this word the Lord has spoken.” You notice that in 3:1, “Hear this word the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel.” In 4:1, “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy.” And 5:1, “Hear this word, O house of Israel, this lament I take up concerning you.” These are three formulaic introductions of these sections.

a. Amos 3

I want to look particularly at chapter 3. Chapter 3:1-2 says, “Hear this word the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel—against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: ‘You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.’” I think that verse summarizes the essence of the message. The covenant idea is central here, even though the term, *berit* [covenant] is not found. In

chapter 6, “Therefore I will punish you,” which is taken from a long-time traditional approach of the covenant ideas, where you locate all the prophets who used the word *berit* [covenant], and you assess the result on that basis. Because the word *berit* [covenant] is not used extensively by the prophets D. Hillers concludes inappropriately that the covenant did not occupy a very important place in the conceptual world of the prophets. But what Hillers suggests, and he calls attention to the fact that in recent times, there are a lot of attempts in three areas of work in relation to the covenant and the prophets. One, covenant terminology. In other words, yes the prophets may not always use the word *berit*, covenant, but they do use covenantal language. So you get a more indirect approach to the functioning of the covenant by using covenantal terminology. Secondly, the literary pattern of the covenant we just saw that at the end of chapter 3 with the covenant lawsuit. And then thirdly, there is the use of covenant curses.

Covenant Terminology

The first on the covenant terminology analysis, I have here in your notes a quote using *yada*’ [to know] in chapter 3:2. The NIV says, “You only have I chosen.” Look at the Hebrew text. It doesn’t say that. It says, “You only have I known.” It’s *yada*’ [know]. “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you.” What does that mean? What possibly could it mean? “You only have I known.” Did the Lord not know that there were any other peoples on the earth other than Israel? And why the conclusion “you only have I known, therefore I will punish you”? What does knowing have to do with punishing? So a few comments on *yada*’. The term has a wide range of meaning from “to understand” to “sexual intercourse.” What does it mean in regard to the demands of God or when Yahweh says, “he knows Israel”? Knowing can go both directions. But that’s what it says in Amos 3:2, “You only have I known... therefore I will punish you.” In what sense is it true that Yahweh has known only Israel and why does it occur in Amos 3:2? Thus there’s a logical connection between God’s knowledge of Israel and their doom. It has become clear that we have here a usage of "know" borrowed from the terminology of international relations. Huffmon has an

article on *yada'*. He says that Near Eastern kings use *yada'*, to know, in both Hittite and Akkadian texts to recognize a legitimate vassal. Look at page 49 of your citations under Herbert Huffmon. He says, "The most obvious technical usage of "know" is that with reference to mutual legal recognition on the part of suzerain and vassal." In Asia Minor vassals would promise to know only the great king. Moreover, "another Lord you may not know." And in the treaties the Hittite suzerain assures the vassals that in the case of rebellion against the vassal, "the Sun will know only you." So "know" there recognizes one as legitimate suzerain or vassal. The context is a treaty or covenant.

But Huffmon goes on to say, "'Know' is also used as a technical term for recognition of the treaty stipulations as binding." They would list the regulations and say, "You know these." Now with that background the words of Amos are no longer mysterious. The vocabulary is familiar to international relations. Yahweh had recognized only Israel as his legitimate servant, his vassal. Since this sort of covenant involved obligations and the vassal had not fulfilled them, "Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." Some of you in your papers noticed that this term "know" between the Lord and Israel comes through in a number of places. Look at Hosea 13:4-6. You get it from the other direction. "But I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. You shall," the NIV says, "acknowledge," but that is *yada'*, "no God but me, no Savior except me. I cared," that's *yada'* too, "for you in the desert, in the land of burning heat. When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me. So I will come upon them like a lion."

Jeremiah speaks in a similar way in Jeremiah 24:7, "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am Yahweh. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart." That this kind of knowledge is closely related to the people's conduct is evident in another passage, in Jeremiah 22:15, where you read, and this is of Shallum, son of Josiah, "He says, 'I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.' ... Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not

what it means to know me? declares the Lord.” We also see a connection between prophetic terminology associated with treaty relationships. Even though *berit* is not frequently used, the complex of ideas associated with the covenant is present. From a lengthy excerpt from J. A. Thompson, the vocabulary of covenant is pulling out some of the language that is covenantal language that you might not realize by looking at the words. He says, “In general, both in the Old Testament and in the Near Eastern treaties the parties were described as ‘king’ or ‘lord’ on the one hand, and ‘servant’ on the other. The covenant stipulations were known as ‘words’ or ‘commandments’. All treaties and covenants had ‘witnesses’ to the ‘oath’ that was taken. The verbs ‘rule,’ ‘love,’ ‘serve,’ ‘bless,’ ‘curse,’ ‘obey,’ ‘swear,’ ‘cause to swear,’ ‘call as witness,’ and others besides, all belong to the same general *Sitz im Leben*, namely to the suzerain-vassal society which gave rise to the Near Eastern treaties, and which provided a pregnant metaphor for the expression of the covenant,” and *yada*’ is included there.

Literary Pattern: Covenant Curses

Second is the literary pattern of the covenant that we already looked at. A third category is the use of covenant curses. Hillers points out, “For again and again we find that the prophets frame their oracles of woe in terms echoing the curses associated with treaties,” similar to Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, known “for it is a long list of curses associated with a covenant with Yahweh—it tells what will happen, ‘If you reject my statutes, and loathe my laws so that you do not perform all my commandments and thus break my covenant.’” It’s the treaty curses. That becomes important in Amos 3:10 where this becomes important to the assessment of the prophets. Much modern scholarship of the prophets has been devoted to prophetic psychology trying to capture their states of mind. They were concerned about monotheism and righteous living. But the perspective we’ve been considering has the prophets to be figures who used key phrases from Israel’s history and covenant rather than from their own consciousness. Their oracles are simply covenant curses. They are simply going back to their foundations back in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26.

b. Amos 4

Now let's move on to chapter 4. This is an example of that very thing. You see in 4:6-12 Amos says, "I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me." That refrain "yet you have not returned to me" is repeated five times. It's in 6b, 8b, "People staggered from town to town for water, but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me." 9b and 10b, "I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt, I killed your young men with the sword...yet you have not returned to me." It's in 11b, "yet you have not returned to me." And then in 12, "Therefore this is what I will do to you." God had sent many warnings in the form of covenant curses, but these had fallen on deaf ears.

Go to Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26 and note the list of verses on your outline. You will find that in verse 6 of Amos 4 is famine. Go back to Deuteronomy 28:17 and 18 where we read, "Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks." Go back to Amos 4:7, 8—you have drought. "I have sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up." Deuteronomy 28:23, "The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron. The Lord will turn the rain of your country into dust." Amos 4:9a, mildew, "I struck your gardens and vineyards with blight and mildew." Deuteronomy 28:22, "The Lord will strike you with a wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew." Amos 4:9b, locusts, "Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees." Deuteronomy 28:38 and 42, "You will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little, because locusts will devour it." I have sent these but it hasn't caused you to repent. At the end of that in verse 11, "yet you have not returned to me."

Then verse 12, "Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel." What's he going to do? It doesn't say. "And because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel." It is an incomplete expression. Some suggest the verbs were lost and it is found in 3:14b, "I will destroy the altars of Bethel, the horns of the altar will be cut off." So

you would have, “Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel,” and then insert, “I will destroy the altars....” But that is totally arbitrary—it could have been pulled in from anywhere. It is understood. You go through all these sins and “yet you have not returned to me.” The implication is it will be worse than what had already happened. It seems to me what Israel can expect in this climax is the covenant curses. I think that’s what’s implied here and what is understood without saying it. Go back to Leviticus 26:27 and following, “If in spite of this,” that is, these covenant curses come on you because of your disobedience, “you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over.” Verse 31, “I will turn your cities into ruins.” Verse 32, “I will lay waste the land.” Verse 33, “I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins.” So that is what comes at the end of the prophetic message if you still do not return to God. So it seems to me that that would be understood. This is what I will do executing the covenant curses on those who refuse to repent and those who would not “return to me.”

Next time we will look in detail at the conclusion of Amos 9:11-15 and its citation in Acts 15.

Transcribed by Ted Hildebrandt
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Final edit by Katie Ells
Re-narrated by Ted Hildebrandt