Bone Burning: An Exegetical Examination of Amos 2:1-3

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In October 2007, destructive wildfires erupted in southern California, resulting in loss of property, injury, and even death. The fires forced the evacuation of more than a hundred thousand persons as it threatened homes from Malibu to San Diego. Witnesses to the event were virtually united in their shock over the nature of the destruction, even describing it in biblical terminology. One witness, a San Diego firefighter, was reported as saying, “It was like Armageddon. It looked like the end of the world” (Carter, Marquez, Adelman, and Spagat, 2007, ¶ 15).

While the comments of the firefighter might be somewhat overstated, they reflect a certain concern that is understandable. The fearful aspects of destruction by fire are certainly nothing new. In the opening chapters of the Old Testament book of the prophet Amos, a series of oracles appear, many of which feature the common element of fiery judgment. Destruction by fire is promised for Damascus (Amos 1:4), Gaza (1:7), Tyre (1:10), Edom (1:12), Ammon (1:14), Moab (2:2), and Judah (2:5). Among the oracles that appear in these first two chapters of Amos, the only exception to the promise of destruction by fire is the nation of Israel (the focus of Amos’ prophecy), but even in this case there is a warning that occurs: “Seek the LORD that you may live, or He will break forth like a fire, o house of Joseph, and it will consume with none to quench it for Bethel” (Amos 5:6, New American Standard Version). While critical scholarship has struggled to find a unity between the eight oracles (and has thus sought to attribute some of these to a later redactor), the oracles themselves are actually a testimony to the integrity of the book of Amos, particular chapters 1-2. Steinmann (1992) noted that the order of the oracles (three city-states, followed by three nations, followed by two nations in special relationship with Yahweh) coupled with alternating geographical boundaries (the subject nations of the oracles
alternate between being a neighbor of Israel and Judah) reveal a literary pattern that seems to indicate the authenticity and coherence of the material. To these conclusions, the common element of judgment by fire should not be overlooked.

While all of the oracles display unique features, one in particular has some peculiarities, especially with reference to fire. The oracle against Moab (Amos 2:1-3) not only promises a fiery judgment, but the punishment itself is ironically fitting, since the specific sin of Moab mentioned in the text is the burning of the bones of the king of Edom (2:1). Likewise, Moab is the final non-Jewish oracle uttered by the prophet (Judah and Israel are to follow), so if there is the possibility of a dramatic build in the oracles, focusing upon this particular nation might bear some theological insights. Finally, Moab shares a common royal link with the two nations in special relationship with Yahweh (Ruth, an ancestor of the Israelite King David, was a refuge from Moab). These factors draw the attention of the reader to this specific oracle, demanding that the text receive careful study. In addition, a study of Amos 2:1-2 reveals, in part, the nature of God’s covenant and the consequences of breaking His covenant.

**Interpretation of the Passage**

**Verse 1**

_Thus says Yahweh, “For three transgressions of Moab and for four, I will not reverse it; for he burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime.”_  

The opening of the oracle of the prophet Amos against the nation of Moab begins as all the others in the surrounding context: the announcement that God is the One who is speaking, followed by the pattern “for three transgressions of X and for four.” Christensen (1974), while opting for a critical approach to the text, has indicated that a literary device might be at work

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1 Author’s translation
here, with a series of three oracles followed by a series of four, culminating with an oracle against Israel, the primary focus of Amos’ prophecy. Dillard and Longman (1994, p. 380) have noted that the 3|4 pattern is common in wisdom literature. According to Niehaus (1992), this pattern was not meant to be taken literally (i.e., in terms of specific numbers); rather, it points to the growing number of sins of the nation, effectively becoming a phrase with the meaning “sin upon sins, many sins” (p. 358). Linville (2000, p. 285) has likewise considered this pattern as referring to continuing sins. Stuart (p. 285) described the introductory phrase (“Thus says Yahweh”) as characteristic of the “messenger formulae”, used to identify the oracles with Yahweh’s authorship. Even though the casual reader might pass over the repetition of these words in the oracles, their significance cannot be overlooked. They help to identify the divine source of Amos’ proclamation, and they point to the overall importance of giving careful attention to the utterance.

A brief background of the nation of Moab is probably helpful in understanding Amos’ prophecy against the nation. Geographically, Moab was located in Palestine east of the Dead Sea, between the nations of Ammon to the north and Edom to the south (McComiskey, 1985). Historically, the Moabites were the descendants of the incestuous relationship of Lot and one of his daughters (Genesis 19:36-37). As such, they were distantly related to the Edomites (the descendants of Esau, a grandson of Abraham; Lot was the nephew of Abraham) as well as the Ammonites (Ammon was the half-brother of Moab, the product of an incestuous relationship of Lot and his other daughter), and the Jewish people. Nevertheless, Moab harassed the nation of Israel throughout its history (Numbers 22:4-6, 25:1-3; Deuteronomy 23:3-4; Judges 3:13-14). It should be noted that counter to this testy history, Israel’s greatest king, David, was the descendant of a Moabite (Ruth 4:13ff).
Despite the fact that Moab and Edom are related, Moab was guilty of a heinous act: the Moabites had burned the bones of the king of Edom. This is probably a reference to an event that occurred in 2 Kings 3, where the kings of Israel, Judah, and Edom attempted to suppress a rebellion by Moab (McComiskey, 1985; Keil & Delitzsch, 1984). Yahweh rightly calls this act a transgression. The Hebrew noun (עבָד), used 136 times in the Old Testament, carries the meaning of “an open and brazen defiance of God by humans” (VanGemeren, 1997, p. 706). This most likely is not a reference to a sin that was done to the king while he was alive, but after the king had died and the body was buried (Keil & Delitzsch). Since the text mentions that the bones (rather than body) were burned, this would seem to have happened long after death had occurred. According to Niehaus (1992), “proper burial and the remains of the dead were considered sacred in the ancient Near East” and burning the bones “indicated a desire for complete destruction of the peace and even the soul of Edom’s king for eternity…” (p. 358). Stuart (1987) has concurred, noting that burning someone’s bones was almost certainly an attempt to prevent a bodily resurrection, since there was a general belief that the remains of the body would be “fleshed out and enlivened at the time of a general resurrection of the dead” (p. 315). What makes this transgression especially cruel is the fact that it was done to an Edomite – someone related to the Moabites. The comments of Calvin (2003) are insightful here:

To dig up the bones of an enemy, and to burn their bones, this is an inhuman deed., and wholly barbarous. But it was more detestable in the Moabites, who had some connection with the people of Edom; for they descended from the same family…. Had there been a drop of humanity in them, they would have more kindly treated their brethren…. (p. 172) Moab’s sin, as detestable as it is, is compounded by the fact that this was done “in the family.”
To further compound the sin of Moab, there is the mention of the extent to which the bones of the king of Edom were burned: they were burned to lime. The word for “lime” (דִּכְמָא) refers to the powdery ash that results from the burning process (Stuart, 1987). This indicates that the destruction of the bones was complete to the point “that the bones turned into powder like lime” (Keil & Delitzsch, 1984, p. 240). B. K. Smith (1995) has interestingly noted that the Jewish Targum interprets this reference to mean the Moabites then took the ashes of the king’s bones and used the substance to whitewash houses. Moab was content neither with the death of the king, nor the plunder of his burial site, nor even the desecration and burning of his body. So utter was its contempt that the body was destroyed as much as was humanly possible, and the remains were most likely used in a less than honorable manner. The depths of hatred and depravity seem to know no bounds in the crime of Moab.

**Verse 2**

“So I will send fire on Moab, and it will devour the strongholds of Kerioth; Moab will die in a roar, to the shouts of war and the sound of horns.”

If verse 1 of this passage is the indictment against Moab, verse 2 (along with v. 3) is the pronouncement of the judgment on the nation. The message is simple: Moab will be punished (i.e., die) as a nation because of national sin (Niehaus, 1992). Here, the promise of judgment is ironic, since the transgression of Moab involved the burning of bones, and fire will be sent to devour (בהלך, to eat) Moab. As previously noted, punishment by fire is mentioned in conjunction with the other nations in Amos’ prophecy. In a sense, fire may be used figuratively here, since it is clear from the military language in the text that God is bringing an enemy nation against Moab.
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(B. K. Smith, 1995). At the very least, enemy nations used fire in warfare, so even if the prophet is speaking in figurative language, the consequences are not an exaggeration.

Stuart (1987) describes the punishment as three-fold: consuming fire, warfare, and the exile of leaders (the last of these occurs in verse 3). The fire is destined to consume the strongholds of Kerioth. Although the Hebrew word (תורקה) can be translated as the generic phrase “the cities,” Kerioth is cited as one of the major cities of Moab in Jeremiah 48:24, and it apparently functioned as Moab’s capital city (Niehaus, 1992). Stuart mentioned that Kerioth was probably a cultic center for the pagan god Chemosh. Moab would have the strongholds of its chief city destroyed, and the nation itself will fall in a less than quiet fashion. The harsh reality of warfare will consume the nation, inflicting a vicious retribution as a judgment against the transgression of the nation.

Verse 3

“And I will cut off her judge from the middle of her, and I will slay her rulers together with her,” says Yahweh.  

The third verse of this chapter concludes the proclamation of judgment against Moab. The punishment does not end with the destruction of the chief city of the nation, but with a crushing blow being dealt to the civil rulers of Moab. The verb translated “cut off” (דשה) can be interpreted as meaning “exile,” and Keil and Delitzsch (1984) have concluded this indeed means that the ruler will be put out of the land of Moab (cf. Stuart, 1987).  

McComiskey (1992), however, noted that when דשה occurs in the hiphil form (as it does here; the hiphil is the causative form of the verb), the action often refers to complete annihilation (e.g., see Joshua

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3 Author’s translation
4 A mild pun may be at work here as well: the name of the Moabite capital city (Kerioth) and the Hebrew verb “to cut (off)” (קרת) sound vaguely similar. This may be a way of emphasizing that Moab (symbolized by its principle city) will be “cut down.”
23:4). This would seem to fit well with the parallelism of the verse. Calvin (2003) has also observed that these pronouncements on Moab indicate that the nation will be utterly destroyed, for a nation cannot exist without some form of civil government. To use a crude metaphor, if the head is cut off the beast, the body cannot survive.

Complicating this verse is an unusual noun appearing in the first half of the verse (translated “judge”). The noun (שופט) is not the ordinary one for “king” (being derived from the Hebrew verb שמש, meaning “to judge” or “to govern”). G. Smith (1928) saw this as an indication that a vassal king ruled over Moab. Others, such as B.K. Smith (1995), have interpreted this as meaning the king is simply functioning in his role as a lawgiver (i.e., the one who brings justice). This would seem to be a good observation; since a lack of justice was shown to the king of Edom, justice will be dealt to the king of Moab (and by Yahweh, who is the true Judge and Lawgiver). Also, McComiskey (1992) has observed that the same noun is used to describe King Jotham in 2 Kings 15:5 and God (as King of the earth) in Genesis 18:25. The message is simple: the ruling officials of Moab (including the king) will be destroyed for their national sin. As B.K. Smith has succinctly put it, “Indeed Moab would die” (p. 58).

One further observation needs to be made about this passage. Stuart (1987) has noted that there is a striking similarity between the judgment pronounced on Moab and the judgment on Ammon in the verses preceding this passage (Amos 1:13-15). For example, there is the mention of a fire that will consume the fortresses of a major city in the nation (1:14, 2:1), the threat of terrible warfare (1:14, 2:2), and rulers being sent into exile (1:15, 2:3). When one considers that Moab and Ammon are “brother nations,” the similarities are even more remarkable. The major difference between the two passages, of course, is the transgression mentioned in the text is different for each nation (the sin of Ammon, according to Amos 1:13, is “because they ripped
open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to enlarge their borders”). Even here, however, a parallel can be found, which helps to clarify the entire section of oracles. G. Smith (1924) has observed that these are examples of “vengeance that wreaks itself alike on the embryo and the corpse” (pp. 132-133). Both atrocities are examples of grave social injustices. All the nations in Amos 1-2 are guilty of various transgressions, but these all find a common root in the utter disregard of a nation for individual human beings. This sort of oppression (often seen in a social context) is thematically at the heart of the message of Amos.

**Theological Implications**

*Meaning to Original Audience*

There is an element of drama in the eight oracles of Amos that should not be overlooked. Beginning with six pagan nations, Amos gradually builds in intensity in his prophecy, until he begins to comment on Judah and then finally (and shockingly!) Israel. According to Matthews (2001), the crowd hearing Amos would have probably cheered as Amos condemned the surrounding nations. That cheering would have quickly subsided once the prophet reached his final goal, Israel.

Yet, for all the differences among the nations in these eight oracles, there is a common element of social injustice that gives rise to the condemnations. An understanding of the nature of the God who operates through the covenant is vital here. The temptation is to look at the covenants of the Old Testament and to think they only apply to the Jewish people. Berthoud (2005), however, has done an excellent job of explaining how the covenants of God (which he has summarized under the headings of the covenant of creation and the covenant of redemption) apply to all of humanity. For instance, he has pointed to the Noahic covenant as one that is “universal, including in its scope not only Noah, but also his descendants, all other creatures, and
even the whole earth (Gen. 9:9-13)” (p. 101). Berthoud has also seen the Abrahamic covenant in an equally universal scope, since “God’s original blessings on all mankind (Gen. 1:28) would be restored through Abraham and his descendants, reaching fulfillment in the person and work of the Messiah” (p. 102). This understanding is confirmed if one examines Paul’s observations concerning these covenant promises (e.g., Galatians 3:6-9, 26-29).

The covenants of God show that He is concerned not only with the nation of Israel, but all of mankind. Commenting on the actions of Moab against the king of Edom, McComiskey has observed that it is highly significant that “Amos pronounced the punishment of Yahweh on a social crime involving a non-Israelite” (p. 291). God’s concerns for His creation do not end at the borders of Israel. Integral to this understanding is the fact that God made man in His image (Genesis 1:26-27), and man, as image-bearer, possesses a certain dignity. Berthoud has described it in this way:

Amos, in short, attacks those who do not respect a key fact of Genesis 1: Man is made “in the image of God.” To hate the image bearer is to hate the image, so Amos attacks the “stifling of all compassion” (Amos 1:11) and the violent anger that seeks to obliterate the very last traces of one’s enemies. … God condemns that contempt for those made after His image, whether they are from Israel or from other nations. (p. 104)

Berthoud also noted that these are principles that are “couched in a worldview that corresponds basically to the Noahic covenant: Man is unique, he lives in a moral universe; he is accountable to God, the ultimate absolute” (p. 104). In his hatred for His Creator, man elevates himself to a position of authority (which he does not truly possess) and seeks to subjugate those beneath him.

In the oppression and violence that man displays against his fellow man (and fellow image-bearer), he is boldly stating that he wants nothing to do with the things of God. As such,
all of humanity stands guilty of being covenant-breakers. This attitude of hatred for the things of God (and God Himself) is at the root of all social injustice. Amos’ message to the citizens of Israel (and Judah) is that they are no less guilty than the pagan nations that surround them. Even though they enjoy a special covenant status as the people of God, they have also broken God’s covenant, and likewise stand guilty before Him.

In the end, the people of Israel are really no better than those around them. As offensive as it may be for the people of Moab to burn the bones of an Edomite king, the people of Israel have done worse. They have oppressed their own people for their own selfish purposes. They stand guilty before God. The great Day of the LORD is coming, but the judgment will not be only for the pagan nations. God will justly bring His vengeance against all who stand guilty as covenant-breakers.

**Meaning to the Modern Reader**

There are many practical implications to the study of Amos 2:1-3. Certainly, the modern reader of the book of Amos must carefully consider the necessity of social justice. This is not to say that Christianity should be defined in terms of a so-called “social gospel,” but it does mean that Christians should pursue social concerns. Part of the creation mandate was to subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28). This is to be done as God’s “representatives,” showing His concern for humanity in the process. Also, this is a way of reclaiming the culture. Jesus told his followers that they were to be like salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13-16), so such a command to take dominion is still true today. This may be likened, in some respects, to the Israelites conquest of Canaan. The danger for them (as well as modern Christians) is that if the land was not

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5 Social concern (manifested in a desire to defend the dignity of man as image-bearer of God) may perhaps be an effective apologetic tool in attempt to converse with non-Christians. Many non-Christians have an interest in social causes; a rationale for pursuing such causes can only be found in bowing the knee to the covenant God.
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completely conquered, and if the Israelites tolerated the transgressions of the wicked nations, it would eventually begin corrupting the people of Israel. That had certainly happened in the days of Amos, where the crimes of Israel were as foul as those of the heathen nations. It happens to Christians today when they allow themselves to become influenced and corrupted by the surrounding culture rather than working to transform the culture for the glory of God.

This command to conquer cannot be separated from social justice. Christians are not to tolerate oppression wherever they see it. McComiskey has stated that just as Moab was held responsible for failing to respect human dignity, “Christians must not limit their sphere of concern only to those within the church” (p. 291). Our Lord reminds us that the command to love our neighbor extends to all those created in the image of God (Luke 10:25-37). Social and cultural concerns are not the domain of liberal Christianity, but they are an area of concern for all who would bear the name “Christian.”

Of course, Christianity cannot be separated from the name of Christ. While Christians are to be concerned about their fellow man, the world will not be transformed simply through a policy of “niceness” to humanity. This is where liberal Christianity, as well intentioned as it might be, falls short. Human beings can only be transformed through the grace of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Are the crimes of the nations, including Moab, offensive in the ears of the hearer? They should be. But we should not expect anything less from people who reject the authority of God and who wish to live apart from His covenants of creation and redemption. Such individuals are merely living consistently within their rebellious worldview.

There are some practical implications that may specifically be considered from the early chapters of Amos. It is interesting that as much as the modern world has advanced past the days of Amos, some of the same atrocities occur in our day. For instance, the crime of Ammon
(ripping open pregnant women) occurs today in the killing of the unborn through abortion. Just as the Ammonites were guilty of a national sin, it is not a stretch to say the same about America. Another consideration is the crime of Moab. The burning of bones is looked upon unkindly since it shows a lack of basic human dignity. Might this have something to say about current burial rituals of the modern day, especially the practice of cremation?

Cremation has grown in popularity over the past few decades. An article from *Christianity Today* noted that the first cremation in this country was not performed until 1876 (the ceremony for the cremation included, interestingly enough, readings from Charles Darwin and Hindu texts) and only 5% of deaths in 1962 resulted in cremation; by 2000, that percentage had grown to over 25% (George, 2002, ¶ 5).6 Certainly there are many factors involved in the decision to be cremated (or having a loved one cremated). The question is whether this is an appropriate means of honoring the dead. In examining this passage from Amos, Decker (2005) has noted that God’s judgment on Moab is not because of any military action or oppression against the living, but specifically because of the burning of the bones of the Edomite king; in his words, he states, “This is as close as the Bible gets to condemning the act of cremation” (p. 5). In addition, it should be noted that fire, as seen through the first two chapters of Amos, is symbolic of God’s judgment. Decker has demonstrated that this can also be seen in other places in the Old Testament, where fire is used in judgment against individuals, such as in the deaths of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1ff), the rebellion of Korah (Numbers 16), and the sin of Achan (Joshua 7); none of these instances, of course, provide any sort of a positive incentive for the practice of

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6 The article by Decker also stated (contra George) that the 1876 cremation was the second to take place in America; the first took place in 1792, when Colonel Henry Laurens, President of the Continental Congress, requested in his will that his body be burned since he was afraid of being buried alive.
cremation. Burial was the standard Biblical practice for disposing of the dead, while burning bodies seems to have been the general practice of pagan cultures (such as the Greeks and Romans, though the Egyptians did embalm their dead).

In keeping with the theological symbolism of the present passage from Amos, it must be observed that judgment by fire is something that is being reserved for covenant-breakers. Such a strong biblical symbol should have not have a prominent place in a Christian burial service. Belief in a bodily resurrection is an explicitly Christian belief, and it is difficult to see how such a doctrine can be reconciled with the practice of cremation. One wonders if the practice of burning the body in modern times is the product of neo-Gnostic beliefs, where the body is considered unimportant (or worse) and all the focus is on the spirit; such a general apathy toward the body might explain such a rise in cremations. As is the case in all of ethics, the motivation for the burning of the body must be taken into consideration. If the body is being burned because of Gnostic, naturalistic, or pagan mystical beliefs, then the answer is obvious. If it is not being done with deliberate malice (quite the opposite of Moab), then the issue is a bit grayer. The words of Decker are prudent when he concludes:

So, is cremation a Christian option? Is it a wise or legitimate decision for Christians in regard to their own funeral preferences or those of their loved ones? I would not go so far as to flatly declare that cremation is a sin. In some cases it might be acceptable without embarrassment, but it would appear that the wisest decision compatible with Christian theology and the most effective in terms of Christian witness is inhumation [human burial] (p. 24).

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7 See also 2 Kings 23:15-16, where Josiah burns the bones of false prophets of Judah (in fulfillment of a prophecy in 1 Kings 13:1-2). Of course, this is another example of fire as symbolic of judgment.
All of this, of course, must be viewed in terms of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. While all of humanity stands guilty as covenant-breakers, Christ is the great covenant-keeper. It is because of His perfect righteousness that the people of God can stand “not guilty” before Him. However, we can no longer be content to treat one another inhumanely and unjustly. Nor can we use religious ritual as an excuse to delve into sin. We cannot disrespect the creation, and we certainly cannot disrespect the Creator. Even when considering the moral implications of cremation, we must remember that God is sovereign, even over our sins and mistakes. We must still seek to honor Him in every way possible.

Soli Deo Gloria.
Appendix I: Background Information

Author

The book of Amos bears the name of its author. Amos is different from the other prophets of his time in that he is not a “professional prophet” (Amos 7:10ff). Stuart (1987) has interpreted Amos’ comments to mean that “he did not train to be a prophet but was called specially by God from his usual employment” (p. 284). Amos’ background was agrarian, since he describes himself as a tender of sheep and a dresser of fig trees (1:1; 7:14-15). However, VanGemeren (1990) considered Amos to be “a businessman by profession” (p. 128). A major reason for this conclusion is the fact that the Hebrew word usually translated as “shepherd” in 1:1 (דָּמָן) may carry the meaning “sheep-raiser.” Nevertheless, Dillard and Longman (1994) have concluded that this conjecture is far from clear, affirming the traditional understanding of prophet: a sheepherder and fig tree dresser of humble origins.

These origins of the prophet are given in Amos 1:1. Even though his message is delivered to the northern kingdom of Israel, Amos was actually from the southern kingdom of Judah, from the village of Tekoa. Tekoa was located near Bethlehem and was a very small community, probably consisting of no more than 150 people (Matthews, 2001). Amos would leave this rural community and travel north to Israel to deliver his prophecy.

Date

The text of the book of Amos supplies the reader with a great deal of information. The prophet’s ministry occurred during the reigns of King Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 B.C.) and King Uzziah of Judah (791-740 B.C.). This would indicate that Amos, as an 8th century prophet,
would have been a contemporary of another prophet of the northern kingdom of Israel, Hosea. Dillard and Longman have estimated the time of Amos’ ministry to be the first half of the 8th century, while VanGemeren has stated the period very precisely as “several weeks in 760 B.C.” (p. 127). Amos 1:1 mentions an earthquake that occurred two years after the time of the prophecy, and archeological evidence supports the occurrence of a massive earthquake between 765 B.C. and 760 B.C. (B.K. Smith, 1995). While the precise date suggested by VanGemeren may be a little too precise, a date somewhere the early part of the decade of the 760’s B.C. seems reasonable.

**Historical and Political Conditions**

From a man-centered perspective, things could not have been much better in Israel and Judah at the time of Amos’ ministry. Both nations were enjoying an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity (Matthews, 2001). This was primarily due to the fact that Israel’s main military and economic rivals were no longer a threat, and territorial expansion had resulted in important trades routes being acquired (Matthews; Berthoud, 2005). Things were good for Israel, and this was probably interpreted as an indication that the favor of the LORD was shining on the nation.

Despite the appearance of Israel’s good fortune, two major threats loomed ahead of the nation. The first of these would be the earthquake that would occur two years later (Amos 1:1). The second threat, even more ominous and devastating than the first, would be the resurgence of the Assyrian Empire. Before the end of the 8th century (722 B.C.), Israel would fall to the Assyrians, its capital city would be destroyed, and its people would be carried off into captivity. According to Matthews (2001), Amos’ mission would be “to warn the Israelites of this coming disaster.”

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8 Two other prophets of the 8th century B.C., Isaiah and Micah, ministered in the southern kingdom of Judah.
disaster and to show them how to prevent their own culture extinction before it is too late” (p. 67).

**Social Conditions**

Even though Israel was quite prosperous at the time of Amos’ ministry, the country suffered from several social problems, and these formed the reason for the impending downfall. Social injustice and religious hypocrisy were among the most notorious of the sins of the people (Matthews, 2001). The prosperity in Israel resulted in the development of an upper class that reveled in decadent living at the expense of the poorer class being exploited (Stuart, 1987). Noting that at times the people of Israel could be outwardly orthodox in their religious practices, Stuart has commented that “fidelity to the covenant was a sham” and “Israel was a people often orthodox in style of worship but disobedient in personal and social behavior” (p. 284). As so often happens, a weak and diluted religious devotion carried with it the practical ramifications of a degradation of social and cultural values.

**Literary Genre**

Amos is a prophetic book, and the structure of the book reflects the typical poetic style of the Hebrew prophetic works. More specifically (with regard to structure), Amos can be divided into two major portions: the words of Amos in chapters 1-6 and the visions of Amos in chapter 7-9 (B.K. Smith, p. 28). This division is derived from Amos 1:1, which speaks of the prophet’s words and visions. In addition, four hymns are sprinkled throughout the book (VanGemeren, p. 131). These four hymns, in turn, help to summarize the central thesis of the book: Yahweh is the supremely powerful and sovereign God who comes to bring judgment upon the wicked.

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9 These four hymns are found in Amos 1:2, 4:13, 5:8-9, and 9:5-6.
VanGemen has summarized this very well by noting that “Amos impresses the reader with the name of Yahweh as he sets forth the power of God over creation” (p. 131). Amos makes reference to this coming of Yahweh in judgment as the “Day of the LORD” (Amos 5:18, 20; cf. Amos 6:3). Similar to the other prophets of Israel and Judah, the message of Amos serves as a warning to repent and return to Yahweh before it is too late.
Appendix II: Outline

I. The Words of Amos (chapters 1-6)
   A. The oracles against the nations (chapters 1-2)
      1. Damascus (Aram/Syria)
      2. Gaza (Philistia)
      3. Tyre (Phonecia)
      4. Edom
      5. Ammon
      6. Moab
         a. The indictment against Moab
            1) The pronouncement of the judgment
            2) The reason for the judgment
         b. The punishment against Moab
            1) Consuming fire
            2) Warfare
            3) Exile/death of rulers
   7. Judah
   8. Israel

B. Five oracles against Israel (chapters 3-6)
   1. The first oracle
   2. The second oracle
   3. The third oracle
   4. The fourth oracle
   5. The fifth oracle

II. The Visions of Amos (chapters 7-9)
   A. The visions of judgment (7:1-9:10)
      1. Locusts
      2. Fire
      3. Plumb Line
      4. Fruit basket
      5. The LORD and the altar
   B. The vision of restoration (9:10-9:15)

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10 Cf. VanGemeren, pp. 130-131; B.K. Smith, pp. 33-34.
References


