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# The Covenant and the Social Message of Amos<sup>1</sup>

*Pierre Berthoud*

*Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée, Aix-en-Provence, France*

## SUMMARY

In order to understand the social message of the prophet Amos, it is crucial to consider it within the framework of the covenant both of creation and of redemption. The former is presented in the first chapters of Genesis, the latter finds its first expressions in the promises God made to Abraham and in the treaty he concluded with Moses. This means that all nations are accountable to the Creator, but espe-

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Um die soziale Botschaft des Amos zu verstehen, ist es entscheidend, sie innerhalb des Rahmens des Bundes der Schöpfung und der Erlösung zu betrachten. Der erstere wird in den ersten Kapiteln der Genesis präsentiert, der letztere findet seinen ersten Ausdruck in den Verheißungen Gottes an Abraham und in dem Vertrag mit Moses. Dies bedeutet, dass alle Nationen dem

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## RÉSUMÉ

Il faut tenir compte de la notion de l'alliance pour avoir une juste compréhension du message social du prophète Amos : – l'alliance que Dieu a conclue lors de la création est évoquée dans les premiers chapitres de la Genèse ; – l'alliance de rédemption dont les premières étapes sont formulées dans les promesses que Dieu a faites à Abraham et dans le traité qu'il a conclu avec Moïse. Cela signifie que

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One of the most quoted books of the Bible in regard to social issues is the book of Amos. Amos vigorously pleads for the poor and criticizes those who "lie on beds inlaid with ivory" and "dine on choice lambs" (Amos 6:4). But we have to be careful to read these comments not through twenty-first century eyes heavily influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by contemporary materialist perspectives.

cially Judah and Israel who have been given God's special revelation and specific requirements. As a consequence many forms of social ills, whether they be injustice in the courts, political oppression or economic exploitation, have religious roots; They are not only an offense to the dignity of man, but are the expression of a deep disdain towards the Lord and a disregard for His honor and holiness.

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Schöpfer verantwortlich sind, besonders aber Juda und Israel, denen Gottes spezielle Offenbarung und spezielle Anforderungen gegeben wurden. Als Konsequenz haben viele Formen sozialer Missstände wie Ungerechtigkeit vor Gericht, politische Unterdrückung oder ökonomische Ausbeutung religiöse Wurzeln. Sie sind nicht nur ein Verstoß gegen die Würde des Menschen, sondern Ausdruck einer tiefen Verachtung Gottes und einer Geringschätzung seiner Ehre und Heiligkeit.

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toutes les nations sont responsables devant Dieu et plus particulièrement Juda et Israël car ils ont reçu Sa révélation spéciale et connaissent les exigences qu'elle contient. Il en résulte que bien des maux sociaux ont des racines religieuses, qu'ils relèvent de l'injustice des tribunaux, de l'oppression politique ou de l'exploitation économique. Ils foulent au pied la dignité de l'homme et sont l'expression d'un profond mépris envers Dieu. Ils portent ainsi atteinte à l'honneur et à la sainteté du Seigneur.

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In order to apply properly the prophetic insights of Amos, it is essential to understand his message in light of the historical situation of Amos, and of the central theological theme of the Old Testament – namely, God's eternal covenant with man. With this understanding clearly in mind, we can then apply the insights of Amos to the situation of the poor and the oppressed.

Biblically, the covenant is a treaty that God,

the ruler, has concluded with man, the subject. It establishes that man is not autonomous and implies that the creature is responsible before the Creator who has given “all men life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:25). Although Amos does not use the word “covenant,” the concept nevertheless underlies and permeates his message and his vision of reality. In the oracles of the shepherd of Tekoa, the covenant has a double dimension: It is both creational and redemptional. This essay shows how an understanding of both aspects is essential to developing a Biblical view of social justice.

### The Covenant of Creation

First, we should discuss Amos’ praise of the Creator God, “He who forms the mountains, creates the wind, and reveals his thoughts to man, he who turns dawn to darkness, and treads the high places of the earth” (4:13).<sup>2</sup> The covenant of creation (also known as the covenant of works or of life), one of the pillars of the Biblical perspective, is presented in the first three chapters of Genesis<sup>3</sup> and renewed within a fallen world in the treaty that God established with Noah and his sons (Gen. 9:8-17). Here are some of the characteristics of the covenant, as set forth early in Genesis:

- The Lord Himself is the initiator of His covenant of life. He is the God of heaven and earth, the ultimate reality. Though infinite, God is also a personal being: He thinks and communicates, shows love and compassion, decides and acts.
- All things are dependent upon God. By establishing the fundamental Creator-creature motif, God specifies the nature of the relation man is to have with God and with the universe.
- Precise stipulations are given, the respect or rejection of which are sanctioned by God’s blessing or curse. Man has God-given liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth (Gen. 2:8, 15, 16) and to exercise dominion over the creatures (Gen. 1:28). God ordains marriage, with the promise of families (Gen. 2:18).
- Most importantly, God offers man communion with Himself (Gen. 1:26-29; 3:8) and thus introduces the Sabbath which recalls God’s lordship over mankind and creation (Gen. 2:3).
- God, in summary, enters into a covenant of life with man, upon condition of personal and perpetual obedience (Gal. 3:12; Rom. 10:5). The tree of life was token of the covenant (Gen. 2:9);

eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, however, would lead to the pain of death (Gen.2:17).<sup>4</sup>

It is vital to remember that the Lord, not man, initiates this covenant; its scope is universal. The covenant requires obedience of not just some men but all men, because Adam, the head of the human race, is representative of mankind as a whole (Rom. 5:12-21).

When the Bible tells us that man is created<sup>5</sup> in the “image of God” (Gen. 1:26, 27), we are given two pieces of information vital to understanding how we are to act in the midst of the world. We are told about the nature of man – all men and women – and about the position or function of man in creation.

We are told about the nature of man in that the word “*image* of God” means effigy or representation (1 Sam. 6:5; 2 Kings 11:18; Ezek. 23:14). For the ancients, an image had worth in relation to the object or person that it resembles. This means that man is to define himself with reference to God, and that his primary calling is to be in fellowship with God. This expression also conveys the idea of sonship, an idea found in Luke’s genealogy of Jesus when Adam is declared “son of God” (Luke 3:38). The Apostle Paul conveys the same thought when he says: “We are his offspring” (Acts 7:28).<sup>6</sup>

Emphasizing the vertical dimension does not mean embracing a soul/body dualism.<sup>7</sup> The Bible emphasizes the unity of man: Man does not have a body, he is a body. Supposedly feeding the soul while starving the body leaves us with a corpse. But it is important to avoid the common tendency today to reduce man to a purely horizontal dimension. The expression “image of God” underscores the uniqueness of man. Yes, he is “of the earth,” and is one among many creatures, yet he is a being who like God thinks, loves and acts; man is qualitatively different from the rest of creation.<sup>8</sup> He is a spiritual being called to live a conscious relationship with his ultimate partner, a relationship which transcends his body without reducing its value. As H. Blocher says it concisely, “the spirit of man is of the earth” and “the body of man is the expression of his spirit”.<sup>9</sup>

The expression “image of God” also suggests man’s calling: God created the world, and man can exercise dominion over it. Psalm 8, while using the vocabulary of enthronement to stress the greatness and dignity of man, reiterates the cultural mandate found in Genesis: “Subdue [the earth]. Rule over

the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:28). The same idea is emphasized in a different way in the narrative dealing with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15).

The first chapter of Genesis emphasizes the *subjection*<sup>10</sup> of creation (Gen. 1:26-28). Man, the unique creature, the climax of God’s creative activity, is given authority, under God. But the second chapter adds a nuance as if to anticipate the possible misuse of power. Rather than tyrannizing creation, man is “to serve it”<sup>11</sup> (Gen. 2:16). When man exploits the earth, he must look after that with which God has entrusted him. When man works “for the king” (Ps. 45:1), work can become a “form of worship.” Though man is unique in dignity, he is not autonomous. He is responsible for his stewardship before the Creator. He is to “take care of”<sup>12</sup> the creation with the same solicitude the Father shows toward His handiwork (Prov. 8:30, 31; Rom. 8:18-22).

That position of authority under a God who sets specific limits contrasts with the pattern of ancient oriental despotism; where in practice the tyrant’s power was unlimited. The Biblical view contrasts with ancient pagan mentalities in another way also: The Babylonians saw work as negative, something thrust upon men by lazy gods, but the early chapters of Genesis portray work and labor in a positive light. The statement, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28) implies both numeric and economic growth. Though all things belong to God, ownership and the right to property are clearly implied.<sup>13</sup>

### **Man’s Cultural Mandate within a Broken World**

Chapters 4 through 6 of Genesis deal specifically with the development of the human race rather than with the history of redemption, and thus show us how man began to fill the earth and subdue it. Abel and Cain were involved in agriculture, and Cain later built a permanent settlement (4:1, 17).<sup>14</sup> Jabal was the father of the semi nomadic herders of livestock (4:20); Jubal was the father of musicians and therefore of culture as a whole (4:21); Tubal Cain, half-brother of Jabal and Jubal, was the father of technology and industry (4:22). These names and chronologies, so often skipped over in Bible reading, show a crucial distinctive of the Biblical

worldview: Israel neighbors ascribed the organization of civilization to the gods,<sup>15</sup> but Genesis shows that civilization and culture were constructed by mortal men created after the image of God. Genesis continually stresses the dignity and worth of man who is capable of creative imagination.

Again, just as the earlier chapters of Genesis anticipate the misuse of power, so we should remember here that it is the line of Cain that is doing all these things. That lineage is not an outright condemnation of man’s civilizing action, but post Fall activities always have a note of ambiguity. What is the meaning of civilization and culture for the creature who has become his own finality? Will not stewardship be transformed into a drive for autonomy? The heart of the dilemma is not the creative ingenuity of man nor his labor and industry, but the folly of his arrogance. The rebellion of the first couple<sup>16</sup> led to an alienation that spread to every area of life both on a vertical and horizontal level: alienation from God, self, fellowman, all the other creatures. The murders committed by Cain and Lamech, along with the advent of tyranny and polygamy (Gen. 4:19), illustrate in a striking fashion the dynamic and the expansion of sin.

And yet, after all of this abuse of power, and after God’s judgment of that abuse by means of the great flood, He graciously renews His covenant. The treaty He concludes with Noah introduces a time of patience, with a view to the realization of God’s plan of redemption (Rom. 3:25; 8:18-25). The covenant, given despite the wickedness of man’s heart – thoughts, emotions and actions – is established by God alone. It 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). It is not conditioned by obedience to specific stipulations, and it is for “as long as the earth endures” (Gen 8:22). The rainbow, as the sign of the covenant, guarantees cosmic stability (Gen. 9:12-17) and testifies to the faithfulness and patience of God.<sup>17</sup> It is within this framework that man’s cultural mandate is renewed (Gen. 9:1-8). In the midst of a reality that suffers the consequences of evil, things are not quite the same. Dominion over the other creatures arouses “fear and dread” (Gen. 9:2). In addition to “green plants,” men may now eat “everything that lives and moves” as long as the blood has been removed (Gen. 9:3, 4).<sup>18</sup> God Himself introduces capital punishment: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man” (Gen. 9:6). Indeed, the very nature of the Lord

is the ultimate foundation of right. To recognize that nature and abide by it is a safeguard against all forms of arbitrary action. God gives man liberty under Himself, and establishes justice for all.

### The Covenant of Redemption

That is what God does for everyone. But he also does particular things for a particular people. As M. H. Segal notes, “The real theme of the Pentateuch is the selection of Israel from the nations and its consecration to the service of God and his laws in a divinely appointed land.”<sup>19</sup> God promises to make the descendants of Abraham into the people of God and to give them Canaan as an everlasting inheritance (Gen. 15; 17:7, 8). God also makes a third promise, stated explicitly in His call to Abram: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3). That promise clearly emphasizes both the redemptional and universal scope of God’s purpose: God’s original blessing on all mankind (Gen. 1:28) would be restored through Abraham and his descendants, reaching fulfillment in the person and work of the Messiah.

Israel’s task is to glorify God by demonstrating His holiness in the midst of a lost world. By the means of a particular people, divine beauty, truth, and redemption will shine forth among men as they lie in the shadow of death. As the Lord, who has delivered His people out of Egyptian bondage, declares to Moses just before the revelation on Sinai, “Out of all nations ... you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:4-6). Israel, “the kingdom of priests,” is to be to the nations of the world what the priests are to a nation: leaders of worship, teachers of truth.

God makes known to His “treasured possession” (v. 5) the law by which they must live. Rather than exalting man’s discretion, that law carefully limits arrogant power. It proclaims, among other things, that human life is sacred, that all men are equal before God, and that the weaker members of the community must be protected and defended.

Those distinctives need emphasis, because the Biblical view of law is very different from that found in other ancient codes. In Mesopotamia the law was above the gods; they functioned as its witnesses, defenders and guardians. In Israel, with the law incorporated into the covenant, God is the author, source and fountain of law. The Psalmist expressed this understanding well by writing, “He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they

do not know his laws” (Ps. 147:19, 20). The law, far from impersonal, was a statement of God’s will, and was to govern the whole of life.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, in Mesopotamia the king alone was chosen by the gods to receive the perception of truth. In Israel, however, the law was given and proclaimed to the community as a whole (Exod. 21:1). It was not the prerogative of a class of professionals (jurist, lawyer, judge); the law was read publicly to the people every seven years. Both individual and social responsibility were emphasized. Everyone could know the rule that he who destroys human life is accountable for the crime committed (Exod. 21:12). A murderer was not supposed to be able to buy his way out or use his power to escape justice, for religious values precede economic or political considerations. The corollary also was true: the death penalty was suppressed in the case of crimes committed against property, regardless of whose property was taken (Exod. 22:1ff.).

Similarly, the principle that all men are equal before God was of fundamental importance. In principle, there was no class justice in Israel as there is in the Code of Hammurabi.<sup>21</sup> Those in power were not to suspend the rules for their own benefit. The famous “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” verse, so often misunderstood, limited the punishment to the person committing the offense, and specified that the penalty must correspond to the crime perpetrated.<sup>22</sup> Significantly, the Bible provided not for survival of the fittest, but for protection of the weaker members of the community: the blind and the deaf (Deut. 27:18), widows and orphans (Deut. 27:17-22), the foreigner (Deut. 27:17; Exod. 23:6), the poor (Deut. 15:7-11; Exod. 23:6), the debtor who sells himself into slavery (Deut. 15:12-18), and those born slaves (Exod. 23:12). The law requires that they be protected from oppression and exploitation. Even their specific prerogatives are indicated (Deut. 14:29).

In summary, the five books of Moses show concern for justice for all mankind, with the idea of justice always couched within the covenant and resting upon theocentric thought.<sup>23</sup> Israel has the task of being a light unto the Gentiles, showing God’s way of ministering to both body and soul. Now, with these aspects of the covenant established, we may approach within Biblical thought-patterns the message that Amos delivered to Judah and Israel.

## Amos in Context

To begin with, we will touch on the historical background. Living during the eighth century B.C., Amos prophesied during the reigns of Jeroboam II (786-746), king of Israel, and Azariah (also named Uzziah, 783-742), king of Judah. He probably began his public ministry towards the middle of the century. For both kingdoms, it was a time of security, peace and political growth. Previously, Aram (Syria) had continually made inroads upon Israel and had even invaded its territory on a number of occasions. But with the rise of Assyria, the Syrian power had been broken; Adadnirari III's conquest of Damascus precipitated Aram into a period of weakness which was to benefit both the Northern and the Southern kingdoms.

Assyria would eventually conquer Israel, but during this period the Assyrian armies were occupied with various internal and external dangers. It is therefore not surprising that Israel and Judah, though divided, gained back the territory lost after the death of Solomon. Jeroboam II included in his sphere of influence Aram and Hamath to the north and Ammon and Moab to the east. Uzziah extended the boundaries of Judah to include Edom, the tribes of Arabia, the Negev and the Philistine cities (Gath, Jabnet and Ashdod). Key trade routes – one following the coastline, another going through Transjordan – once again passed through both kingdoms. The Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon offered an opening onto the Mediterranean, while the port of Elath, on the Red Sea, became an important channel for trade with partners in the south.<sup>24</sup> As Neher wrote, “Palestine, crossroads of the sea and the land routes, becomes the center of international economic exchanges.”<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the renewal of trade, industrial activities flourished,<sup>26</sup> herds grew, and agriculture was encouraged.<sup>27</sup> The era of peace and prosperity was not limited to the royal house, but extended to a wealthy class of society mainly made up of the nobility, officers and merchants. Those individuals built magnificent houses and invested in costly furniture (probably made in Damascus<sup>28</sup>) and ivory ornaments (often inlaid with precious stones such as lapis lazuli). The well being of this upper class, described by Amos, has been confirmed by archaeological finds made in Samaria.<sup>29</sup>

Amos does not condemn prosperity that results from honest, hard work, or from wise investment of wealth. He attacks shameless business practices such as “skimping the measure, boosting the price

and cheating with dishonest scales” (Amos 8:5). He attacks those who ignore the misery around them and instead practice a superficial optimism, particularly in international relations (Amos 6:1-7). Freed from the immediate threat of powerful Aram, Israel and Judah did not see, or pretended not to see, the danger that was rising in the north. Having made new gods for themselves alongside the God of the covenant, enjoying the comfort that wealth and well being bring, they did not recognize the fatal consequences of sin.

Israel and Judah also did not understand the cause of their prosperity. Instead of ascribing economic success to the mercy of God and their forefathers' development of a biblical worldview concerning economics, they often gave thanks to Baal, god of storms and controller of fertility within the Canaanite and Phoenician cults.<sup>30</sup> Such idol worship obviously was a direct affront to God. In Baal worship, as in other pagan myths, evil is part of the ultimate make-up of reality – that is, God – and absolute right and wrong do not exist. In paganism, with its naturalistic emphasis, history is replaced by an endless repetition of the cycles of cosmic life, and man is only a part of them; therefore, the significance and meaning of history and of man is greatly reduced. If there is ultimately no personal absolute in the universe, what is evil and why fight it? In the light of these considerations, one can understand why the prophets denounced with such vigor all forms of idolatry. Baalism presented powerless gods (with the limitations and sins common to man) and demanded that they be adored. Baalism thus explained the world in a way totally contradicting the biblical perspective (I Kings 18:16-45).

Despite the syncretism, God did not turn his back on His people. He did not even ignore those who were not His people, because other nations were also accountable before God. As Paul would later write, “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18ff).

## The General Requirements

On the basis of the covenant of creation established with Adam and renewed with Noah and his descendants, Amos criticizes Syria, Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Ammon and Moab. For example, Amos speaks out against the *brutal inhumanity* that Syria shows in warfare: “Damascus has threshed Gilead

with sledges having iron teeth” (Amos 1:3). He attacks the Philistine *deportation of civilians*, innocent refugees destined to become merchandise in the international marketplace (Amos 1:6; see also Joel 3:8; Obad. 20). He protests the self-interested Phoenician betrayal of the “*treaty of brotherhood*” with Israel (Amos 1:9; 1 Kings 5:26; 9:14). He denounces the savage *acts of cruelty* perpetuated in order to expand territory. Thus, “Ammon... ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders” (Amos 1:13).

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 trace of one’s enemies. For example, God sends fire on Moab “because he burned, as if to lime, the bones of Edom’s king” (Amos 2:1).<sup>31</sup> Neher’s translation of that verse – “because Moab has burned the bones left by the king of Edom in order to extract lime” – brings up another point: Was Edom using corpses abandoned on the battlefield for industrial purposes, thus placing economic considerations above the honor due to a man’s memory?<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to decide which is the better interpretation, but both are an expression of an utter contempt for man. God condemns that contempt for those made after His image, whether they are from Israel or from other nations.

In his commentary on Amos, A. Motyer draws, from the passage we have been dealing with, principles of conduct which are valid for both individuals and communities: Man is not an object that can be manipulated as one sees fit; truth and loyalty in human relationships and affairs are crucial; seeking for power and money must be checked by ethical standards; all humans deserve respect.<sup>33</sup> It is important to note that these principles 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. That is why Amos argues with such vigor against arbitrary power of all kinds: he sees man’s dictatorship and violence as the very negation of the meaningfulness of God’s universe, and an attack on God Himself

It is not difficult to see the relevance of such a message to questions of social justice. First, man is a responsible creature. According to a rabbinic exegesis of the famous recurring verse in Amos, God is saying, “Because of the three sins of Damascus,

of Gaza..., because of four, I will not bring back Damascus, Gaza . . . from the destiny it has brought upon itself by its sins and which I had forgiven on many occasions” (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1).<sup>34</sup> Though it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a holy God, choice is a decisive factor in the disaster and ruin that came upon these nations. Man can operate within the covenant given to Noah and take dominion, or man can arrogantly bring about tyranny, social unrest, poverty and destruction. There is no place here for a deterministic view of history and culture.

Secondly, Amos also reminds us that God’s judgment is both a call to repentance and a vindication and protection of the humble. The justice and the solicitude of the Father are for those who have been “threshed” (Amos 1:3), led into captivity (1:6), or betrayed (1:9); it is for those who are the object of sinful anger (1:11), sickening violence (1:13), and unjust commercial transactions (1:6, 9; 2:1). God is the uncompromising advocate of those who are victims of the violations of the law He has given for the well being of His creatures. Nevertheless, within the Biblical perspective, poverty, misery and suffering have no value in themselves. They are also related to man’s decision making significance, and can be the consequence of irresponsible and often unwise choices.

A third aspect relates to the role of God’s chosen people – chosen for special grace but also special work, to be a nation of priests in service to the world. Amos’ first six oracles deal with nations under the Noahic Covenant but not the Mosaic; the final two deal specifically with Judah and Israel, and we should now examine them.

### The Particular Requirements

The prophet begins by placing the spotlight upon Judah. It is found guilty, even more so than the surrounding nations, for it has been the object of God’s solicitude and special revelation. Indeed, the kingdom has rejected the teaching of God in nature and history; it has broken away from the religious and moral precepts of the covenant. Judah has abandoned the wisdom of God in order to follow the deviations of the false and deceitful gods (Amos 2:4). In practice, to turn to the idols and to seek their help is the equivalent of pushing God out of one’s mental horizon. Exaltation of self is at the heart of rebellion against God and inevitably leads to despising His will.<sup>35</sup>

The northern kingdom is in even worse shape.

At the time of the schism, Jeroboam I established two new sanctuaries, Dan in the north and Bethel in the south, so that the people would not have to go to Jerusalem and thus fall under the influence of the kingdom of Judah. Jeroboam I introduced into his new state church the calf symbol of power and fertility; he said it was to represent the Lord, but he was introducing a pagan symbol into the worship of God.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the king assumed the function of high priest and appointed non-levitical priests to preside over the new religion and worship (1 Kings 12:28-33). Apparently he forgot history and the dramatic consequences of wanting to identify the Lord with the golden calf (Exod. 32).

Amos couches his attack upon both Judah and Israel in a framework of covenant. In his oracle against the inhabitants of Judah, Amos recalled that they had been given the law (Amos 2:4); in his statement against Israel he evoked God's past blessings. The two oracles taken together refer to elements that constitute a covenant: the deliverance from Egypt (Amos 2:10), the bestowing of a constitution (2:4), and the giving of a land (2:9). Though divided, the two nations belong to the same body: They have both benefited from God's solicitude, and they are both responsible before Him for deliberately disregarding His will and following vain idols created out of their supposedly autonomous imagination.

Both Judah and Israel, in short, were playing down the requirements of God and pretending that moral life and economic success could be gained by reliance on gods embodied in the fluctuating forces of nature and in the capricious will of man. This meant, whatever the quality of the religious makeup, that man became the measure of all things on both the individual and institutional level. Proclaiming freedom from all checks and balances, autonomy led the people of the covenant to discover the reverse side of significance. Their selfish desires, interests, and utopias became the norms of their judicial, economic, political, diplomatic and military activities. They sought new security in the self-sufficient virtues of royal authority, diplomacy, and military power.

Such a perversion yielded only bitterness, violence, and death. Egoism, arbitrary force and ruthless exploitation blunted moral judgment and undermined social justice and peace. It is precisely at this moment in history that one finds a deep fissure in the social tissue of Judah/Israel. As guardian of the covenant, Amos identified specific evils, including the corruption of the law courts so that

they did not defend the cause of the innocent and of the defenseless (Amos 2:6; 8:6), but merely responded to personal power.<sup>37</sup> Not only were the innocent and the defenseless despised, but in the case of a misdeed, the penalty did not correspond to the crime committed. Two of the specific tenets of Biblical law – equal justice for all, and consideration for the weak – were set aside.

Those who had power forced ruthless economic practices that respected neither the person made in the image of God nor the property of the powerless (Amos 2:7; 8:4). The "poor" are considered righteous not because of their economic position as such, but because they are both innocent and defenseless.<sup>38</sup> Peasants were compelled to surrender their crops at their own expense (Amos 5:11a). Prosperity based on wrongful gain flourished, with those newly-rich through use of power eager to invest in land and real estate (Amos 3:15; 5:11b). Amos does not champion poverty against prosperity – such an opposition is foreign to the Biblical mentality – but he questions the acquisition of wealth at the expense of the respect for God's law and therefore of justice. He attacks the way that Judah and Israel threw off the just requirements of the covenant and based their conduct on the desires and inclinations of their fickle hearts (Amos 3:9b; 8:5, 6).

The oppression is such that weaker members of the community are disregarded or simply brushed aside (Amos 2:7a; 8:4a), while the Nazarite and the prophets, guardians of the covenant, are encouraged to betray their calling and deny their ministry (Amos 2:12). The words of Paul describing the godless generation in the last days are quite fitting for the contemporaries of Amos: they are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Tim. 3:4). This is true both of the inhabitants of Samaria – including some of the wealthy women (Amos 4:1) – and of Judah who seem to be totally unaware that calamity is at hand (Amos 6:1-6; 5:18). They have opted for a shortsighted philosophy of life. Since life and death have no ultimate meaning, "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32).<sup>39</sup> Man has no ultimate purpose; he is alone in a universe which is amoral and arbitrary!

It is therefore not surprising that the Israelites showed disdain for God, for His will, for His servants, and for true worship. God's special people were as insensitive as all the other nations – even more so, because they were insensitive to God's working among them. They considered the day of the coming of the Lord as a day of light and not of darkness (Amos 5:18). They did not



grieve over the imminent ruin of their country (Amos 6:6). They refused to hear the oracles of the prophet (7:16). They would not reflect on the disastrous consequences of their acts as God sought to bring them back from their evil ways (4:6-11). They acted so horribly because they had become ungodly, profaning God Himself by despising His covenant. Amos eloquently linked religious infidelity and social injustice by noting that “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 gods they drink wine taken as fines” (Amos 2:7b, 8).

In this passage, the shepherd of Tekoa exposed immorality, probably the sacred prostitution that was at the heart of the fertility cult (v. 7b) and the ill-gotten gains used to promote religious idolatry (v. 8).<sup>40</sup> It is clear here, as elsewhere in the prophecy, that government backed creeds had become a means to an end, that of justifying the wickedness of man’s heart. Amos attacks religious formalism and hypocrisy that deny justice and righteousness (Amos 5:21-24; 8:4), Canaanite idolatry (Amos 2:7b, 8; 5:26), and also the propensity to adapt the ritual and its meaning to the circumstances at hand.<sup>41</sup> That is why Amos mentions a number of religious centers that were the shrines of pilgrimages as they had been associated with important moments of Israel’s past history:

- Bethel (3:14; 4:5; 5:5; 7:13) was the place where Jacob experienced the presence of the Lord in a dream that gave to give a new direction to his life (Gen. 28:10-22). It was also there that God gave him the new name of Israel as he returned from Paddam Aram (Gen. 35:1-15). At the time of Amos, Bethel was probably the most important shrine of the Northern Kingdom. In fact, it is called “the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.” Jeroboam had combined political and religious leadership. So, when the prophet denounced the rebellion and sin of the high place, it was considered an act of treason and conspiracy (7:7-13).
- Gilgal (4:4; 5:5)<sup>42</sup> I was to take on historical importance at the time of Joshua. It was there that Joshua set up the twelve stones that commemorated the crossing of the Jordan (4:20) and it was there that the people of the covenant were, once again, consecrated by the act of circumcision and the celebrating of the Passover (5:2-12).
- Beersheba (5:5; 8:14) is associated with all

three patriarchs. It was there that they received the assurance of the presence of the Lord (Gen. 21:22-33; Gen. 26:23-33; Gen. 46:1-4).

Apparently, these three centers, in addition to Dan and Samaria (8:14) were important shrines of pilgrimage. To consider the past is of crucial importance as long as it does not become an end in itself, but a means to face up to the present and to look upon the future with God given serenity. Such was not the perspective of Israel. Not only Israel was quick to disregard the law of Moses (Am. 4:5, 6), but also introduced foreign gods (5:25; 8:14).

Israel, in short, thought it could worship the gods as well as the Lord. Such confusion could lead only to the denial of the one true God and the advent of a man-made religion (Amos 4:5; 6:8; 7:9). This arrogant pride blinded Israelites and led to a change in their whole outlook and system of values. It made them despise truth and run after lies, hate good and love evil (Amos 5:15). And yet, what weight could the creature god carry in comparison with the Creator-Judge, the moral absolute and fountain of life, the God who holds the universe in His power?

## Conclusion

Amos announced imminent disaster, the result of responsible choice, but through words of judgment he sought to awaken the consciences of his listeners and thus open the way of redemption. Clouds were thick on the horizon, but there was still time to repent. That is why the prophet appealed untiringly to the responsibility of the covenant people (Amos 4:4; 5:5, 6, 14, 15), confronting them with a choice between God and idols, between God and man, between God and nothingness, between truth and falsehood, between good and evil, between life and death. Sadly, Israel did not heed the warnings of Amos. It brought upon itself invasion and exile, the consequences of its decisions. Judah, after a reprieve, suffered the same calamities. In the midst of turmoil, however, God was watching over his wide and gracious design. His promise of salvation is couched in Amos’ last oracle (Amos 9:8-15), which begins by identifying the imminent judgment with an act of purification (vv. 9,10). Although destruction was to overcome the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, God would establish His kingdom of peace and prosperity by means of a remnant. The Lord would undertake the restoration of the house of David, the messianic kingdom

(2 Sam. 7) that would extend to all the nations, to all those who would be the objects of divine grace. This promise began to be fulfilled with the return from exile, but more significantly with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 15:17).<sup>43</sup>

That is the grand message of Amos, a book that should not be turned into a narrow tract. To read Amos as an attack on the wealthy or a call for class warfare is not only superficial, but wrong and perverse: It is turning God's message of justice and compassion into a sermon of hatred. The emphasis in Amos is on a refusal to abide by God's covenant, and a consequent tendency of the powerful to lord it over the weak. The covenant of creation and the cultural mandate gives man the opportunity to take dominion over the earth – but sinful man abuses freedom whether he be religious or not. Thus all men are accountable before the Creator, the God of Jesus-Christ.

The lesson of Amos for Christians today is sobering: God's covenant gives us the opportunity to become His people – in reality His "priests" bearing witness to His eternal covenant of truth, justice and righteousness. But too often we simply think and act according to the spirit of the age. If we follow our own inclinations we are likely to create oppression, sometimes in the name of fighting oppression. Only by understanding God's requirements and covenantal mercy as fully revealed in Jesus-Christ, can we look at evil squarely and thus see the need for a change of mind and direction. As justice and peace come about, they will stand as a token of the coming kingdom.<sup>44</sup>

## Notes

- 1 This article is a slightly modified version of an essay entitled "Prophet and Covenant," published in M. Olasky ed., *Freedom, Justice and Hope* (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1988) 19-39.
- 2 Along with such doxologies (5:8 and 9:5, 6) Amos repeatedly sets his oracles within the wider covenant of creation, and does not restrict his prophecy to Israel and Judah (1; 2:3). It should be noted that the Lord, in bringing action against Israel, summons the fortresses of Philistia and Egypt as witnesses to the evil in Samaria (3:9). Amos also announces the universal dimension of the restoration to be introduced by the Messiah (9:11, 12).
- 3 If one considers the overall Old Testament picture, a number of passages correctly translated seem to refer to the covenant concluded with Adam:
  - speaking of unrepentant Israel, Hosea says: "Like Adam, they have broken the covenant" (6:7).
- 4 The Westminster Catechism goes into this very well; many editions are available, including one published by W. Blackwood, Edinburgh and London, 1963, p. 55.
- 5 The verb "bara," to create, is used only with God as subject. It is used forty-nine times in the Old Testament (mainly in Genesis, Isaiah and the Psalms). In Genesis 1, it occurs at three crucial points of God's creative activity: the creation of all things (1:1), of the animal world (1: 20ff.), and of man (1:26ff.). This concept reminds us that God is the ultimate being. He has made all things out of nothing by the power of His word.
- 6 Paul is quoting from the Sicilian poet Aratus (Phenomena) and from Cleanthes ("Hymn to Zeus").
- 7 Looking at Biblical use of some key words is important here. "Body" stresses the historical and external associations that influence the life of man; "flesh" calls to mind man's relationship to nature and mankind as a whole – it is never used of God; "spirit" denotes man endowed with power who has a relationship with the Spirit of God; "soul" stresses the individuality and the vitality of man, and draws attention to the inner life and feelings as well as to personal consciousness; "heart" is associated with the intellectual, volitional and emotional activities of man. This term is only used of God and man.
- 8 To stress the unique identity of man as he stands before the Creator, the Bible uses the following terms: soul (nefesh, neshma); spirit (ruah); heart (leb). This, of course, does not deny the great variety of usages these words can have in other contexts. For further discussion and bibliography, see my article "L'homme, la mort et la vie: perspectives bibliques," in *La Revue Reformée*, No. 149, 1987, pp. 12-23.
- 9 H. Blocher. *Révélation des Origines* (Lausanne: P.B.U., 1998), 82. English title: *In the Beginning: the Opening chapters of Genesis*. Tr. of the first edition by D. G. Preston, Leicester, England, 1984.
- 10 Two Hebrew words are used: radah means to tread (in the wine press, Joel 4:13) and by extension, to rule, govern (Ps. 72:8). *Kabash* means to subject someone, to make subservient (Jer. 34:16; Num. 32:22) and to violate or rape (Esth. 7:8). Because

- of the reality of evil in the midst of our world one can notice an ambivalence in the way these terms may be used, both for good or evil.
- 11 *ʾabad* means to work, to cultivate, to serve, but also to serve in the Temple and thus to adore.
  - 12 Shamar means to guard, to watch over, to protect, to save (Gen. 41:35; Ps. 121:7).
  - 13 Atrahasis, Tablet I, has man created in order to relieve the gods from the heavy and arduous work that was their lot. See W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, eds., *The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 42ff. The Fall, of course, had drastic effects on work, procreation, and other aspects of the creation. Alienation resulting from the Fall will continue to have an effect until the return of Christ, but until that time we have God's mandate to glorify Him in our work.
  - 14 The NIV translates "city." In Josh. 13:23, this word is used in conjunction with another word meaning a "permanent settlement without wall; farm; village." It is therefore preferable to speak of a "permanent settlement."
  - 15 For example, at Ugarit, the skill and art of the blacksmith were attributed to the divinity Ktrwhss.
  - 16 In Genesis 2 and 3, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents man's autonomous knowledge that rejects the sovereignty of God. By choosing autonomy, man seeks to become his own end. He seeks to establish knowledge, values and happiness on a purely horizontal level. It is the beginning of idolatry: the creature becoming the reference point. In fact, man is placed before two different attitudes towards life, two different world and life views. The contrast, it should be noted, is not between faith and knowledge, but between two different forms of knowledge, one whose foundation is God and the other man. The former brings wisdom, integrity and life; the latter brings folly, ruin and death. Which one will man choose?
  - 17 Consider within such a perspective Isa. 54:10 and Matt. 5:45.
  - 18 The reason for this restriction lies in the fact that the blood is associated with the life of the animal and that it has an important place in the ritual of atonement (Gen. 3:21; 4:4), as the book of Leviticus reveals (Lev. 1:5; 3:17; 7:26; 17:12; 19:26).
  - 19 M. H. Segal: *The Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1976), p. 23.
  - 20 The Biblical legislation is often given within an historical setting (Lev. 10; 24:10-16; Num. 15:32-36) and can have a prophetic dimension (Deut. 17:14-20). The historical as well as the ethical and religious justifications appeal to conscience and have an educational character to motivate obedience (Exod. 6:7-9, 20-25).
  - 21 The one exception to the principle of equal justice for all was the case of the slave. But it must be noted that the relevant legislation seeks to protect and to preserve the dignity of the slave: his condition is temporary; he must not become the object of abusive physical violence; he must be treated as a human being (Deut. 23:15).
  - 22 With one notable exception: Deuteronomy 25:11, 12.
  - 23 For further discussion, see Sh. M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), pp. 27-42, and A. van Selms, "Law" in *New Bible Dictionary* (London: Intervarsity Press, 1962), p. 720.
  - 24 Orphir especially, which roughly corresponds with present-day Somalia (2 Kings 14:22; 2 Chron. 26:2; 1 Kings 9:26).
  - 25 A. Neher, *Amos* (Paris: Vrin, 1981), p. 207.
  - 26 Including copper-mining in the Arabah. J. Bright mentions weaving and dyeing at Debir; see his *History of Israel* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1974), p. 256.
  - 27 2 Chronicles 26:10.
  - 28 Amos 3:12. The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain.
  - 29 N. Avigad, "Samaria," in *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, Vol. 4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 1046.
  - 30 The difference between the two cults was that the former was agrarian and the latter Dionysiac.
  - 31 The burning deprived Edom's king of the proper burial due even to one's enemies (1 Kings 2:31; 2 Kings 9:34). In the Old Testament, the burning of a corpse is extremely rare (1 Sam. 31:12) and is probably a sign of God's judgment. In the case of Saul and his sons (1 Sam. 31:12), it has been suggested that cremation was performed to prevent any further abuse of the bodies. In Leviticus 21:9, burning is the legal penalty for prostitution (cf. also Gen. 38:24).
  - 32 A. Neher, op. cit., pp. 52, 53.
  - 33 A. Motyer, *The Day of the Lion: The Message of Amos* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1974).
  - 34 A. Neher, op. cit., p. 50.
  - 35 This inclination to turn away from the law is well illustrated by the king himself. Uzziah sought to claim for himself a privilege that was reserved for the high priest. We are told in the book of Chronicles that "after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God, and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense" (2 Chron. 26:16). Those words "his pride" mean literally, "his heart was exalted"; he had high aims. "He was unfaithful to God" means "he acted counter to his duty towards God." This incident kindled the conflict which seemed to exist in Jerusalem between the king and the clergy (the priest-Levites had saved the Davidic dynasty from the hands of Athaliah – 2 Chron. 22:10-12, and the influence they exercised probably weighed on the king.)
  - 36 There was a difference: Pagan gods stood on the calves or bulls, while in Jeroboam's religion there

- was no representation of God standing on the statues. The syncretism and confusion were all the more subtle!
- 37 Mosaic law allowed servitude; it was a means of paying one's debt by labor. However, the term of bondage was limited and the slaves were to be treated as hired workers (Exod. 21:1, 2; Lev. 25:39-43; Deut. 15:1-11). Amos and others testified that the practice was abused (2 Kings 4:1; Neh. 5:5).
- 38 In Amos 2:6, the "righteous" are the innocent party in a trial, while the "needy" are the weak, the defenseless. In Amos 8:6, a parallel passage, the word "poor" is used in the place of "righteous." A possible translation of Amos 2:7 (a difficult passage) is: "The Israelite trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and redirect the way of the humble."
- 39 Paul is quoting from Isaiah 22:13. As the people of Jerusalem faced the coming judgment announced by Isaiah, rather than recognizing their unfaithfulness, repenting of their sins, and returning to the Lord, they preferred to make the best of the present joys of life, thinking that is all it has to offer!
- 40 These gains were obtained by the breaking of the laws protecting the powerless (Exod. 22:26, 27; Deut. 24:12, 13, 17) or by exorbitant claims or false charges of damage.
- 41 It should be noted that Baal itself is not mentioned once in Amos. The cult that Jeroboam introduced in Israel after Solomon's reign, and that Jehu restored, was not overtly idolatrous. Rather, it was an appeal to tradition, a breaking away from the law, and an integration of idolatry.
- 42 Gilgal is also mentioned by Hosea as an important religious shrine (Hos. 4:15; 9:15; 12:11).
- 43 The Greek translation of the Old Testament, and the New Testament, offer a different reading of verse 12, one that gives it a messianic dimension: "So that the remnant of men and all the nations that bear my name may seek the Lord" (Amos 9:12). James considers this passage as a proof that Jesus is the Messiah!
- 44 For further reading: H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia; Fortress Press, 1977), German edition 1969. L. Epsztein, *La justice sociale dans le Proche-Orient ancien et le peuple de la Bible* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1983); R. Martin-Achard, *Amos, l'homme, le message, l'influence* (Genève: Labor et Fidès, 1984); Sh. M. Paul, *A Commentary of the book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress and Augsburg Press, 1991); J. N. Niehaus, *Amos* in T. E. McComiskey ed. *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); P. Bovati, R. Meynet, *Le Livre du Prophète Amos* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1994); P. Bovati, R. Meynet, *La fin d'Israël, paroles d'Amos* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1994). Shorter version of the rhetorical approach exemplified in the Commentary; J. Jeremias, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), German Edition 1995; I. Jaruzelska, *Amos and the Officialdom in the Kingdom of Israel: The sociological evidence*. *Sociologia* 25 (Posnan: Adan Mickiewicz University Press, 1998), C. Hahling, Pauvreté, injustice et éloignement de Dieu: importance et pertinence du message social d'Amos. *Mémoire de Maîtrise, Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée, Aix-en-Provence, 2005.*

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**Petrus J. Gräbe** is Director of the PhD Program in Renewal Studies at Regent University, Virginia.

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