

INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

*with a comprehensive review of
Old Testament studies
and a special supplement on the Apocrypha*

by

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III. THE BOOK OF AMOS

A. NAME AND OUTLINE

The book of Amos, which was named after the prophet עָמוֹס, was placed third in the order of the Twelve in the Hebrew Bible. The LXX, however, placed it second before Joel, but this tradition was not adopted by the Peshitta nor the Vulgate, which followed the order of the Hebrew. The attributive author of the prophecy lived in Tekoa, an uplands village in the wilderness of Judah some five miles southeast of Bethlehem. Apart from his writings, nothing is known of Amos, who appears to have eked out a meager livelihood as a sheep raiser (Am. 1:1; 7:14f.). The region in which he lived was particularly suited to the rearing of sheep and goats (cf. 1 Sam. 25:2ff.), although small amounts of grain, grapes, and figs were coaxed from the land (cf. 1 Sam. 25:18). Perhaps for at least part of the year Amos went to the western area of Judah where sycamores grew (cf. 1 Kgs. 10:27), and where he worked as a dresser of these trees.¹

The reference in Amos 7:14 has been incorrectly translated by both the AV and the Douay version, the former describing the prophet as a "gatherer of sycamore fruit" and the latter as "a herdsman plucking wild figs." "Herdsman" should be translated "shepherd," with the LXX and targums. Goodspeed and Moffatt furnished translations that were more accurate botanically, speaking of the prophet as "dressing" or "tending" sycamore trees. Cultivators of this fig found it necessary to perform an incision on the fruit when it was about an inch in length, some three or four days before it was harvested. Accordingly, a small area at the center

¹ The tree referred to is the familiar *Ficus sycomorus* L., sometimes called the "fig-mulberry" and referred to by some writers under the designations *Ficus sycomora*, *Ficus sycomorus*, and *Sycomorus antiquorum*. The tree was a robust evergreen that reached a maximum height of forty feet (H. N. and A. L. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible*, 1952, p. 107; W. Walker, *All the Plants of the Bible*, 1958, p. 206; E. W. Heaton, *Everyday Life in OT Times*, 1956, p. 111; WBA, p. 183) and produced fruit abundantly in clusters on all parts of the tree. The *Ficus sycomorus* is very similar to the common fig, *Ficus carica* L., but is smaller in size and inferior in quality. Because of its sweet taste it proved an attractive item of food to the inhabitants of ancient Palestine and Egypt, and was used extensively by the poorer classes.

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point was pared or pierced with a sharp-pointed instrument, so that the fruit could ripen quickly. If this procedure was not followed the fig would not mature properly, and on being plucked would contain a quantity of watery juice. Apparently the task of Amos was to make such incisions in each fig just prior to the time of harvest. Although this occupation may have been tedious, it was certainly a most responsible one. So great was the value of the sycamore-fig in antiquity that King David appointed a special overseer for it, as for the olive (1 Chron. 27:28). When the sycamores of Egypt were destroyed by frost (Ps. 78:47), it was regarded as one of the most serious calamities ever to befall the nation.

From the fact that the sycamore-fig did not actually grow in Tekoa itself, Budde and a few other scholars inferred that Amos was not a native Tekoan, but rather a northern Israelite who had gone into exile in Judah.² Against this view it need only be said that in Amos 7:12 Amaziah clearly regarded Amos as a native Judaeon, and bade him return home with all speed. The significance of the information concerning his occupation appears to lie in the fact that Amos had not been brought up in the social class from which prophets such as Isaiah or Hosea had come, nor had he been trained for office in any way by the prophetic schools or guilds, with which Amos expressly denied any connection (Am. 7:14f.)³

The book of Amos can be analyzed as follows:

- I. Utterances Against the Nations, ch. 1-2
 - A. Prophecies against neighboring peoples, 1:3-2:3
 - B. Prophecies against Judah and Israel, 2:4-16
- II. Judgment Against Israel, ch. 3-6
- III. Five Visions of Judgment, ch. 7:1-9:10
- IV. Promise of Restoration and Blessing, ch. 9:11-15

B. BACKGROUND OF THE PROPHECY

From the superscription to the prophecy (Am. 1:1) it is evident that Amos lived during the reigns of Uzziah, king of Judah (767-740/39 B.C.), and Jeroboam II of Israel (782/81-753 B.C.). Since the leprosy which afflicted Uzziah necessitated a co-regency towards the end of his reign (2 Kgs. 15:1ff.), the ministry of Amos should perhaps be placed about 750 B.C. Morgenstern dated the Bethel address in chapter seven

² K. Budde, *JBL*, XLIV (1925), p. 81.

³ On Amos as *nābhī'* see H. H. Rowley in *Festschrift Otto Eissfeldt* (1947), pp. 191ff.; I. Engnell, *Svenskt Bibliskt Uppslagsverk*, I, cols. 59ff.; M. Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (1949), p. 110; E. Würthwein, *ZAW*, LXII (1950), pp. 10ff.; W. S. McCullough, *JBL*, LXXII (1953), p. 251; G. R. Driver, *ET*, LXVII (1955-56), pp. 91f.; P. R. Ackroyd, *ET*, LXVIII (1956-57), p. 94; K. Roubos, *Profetie en Cultus in Israel* (1956), pp. 116, 121; J. D. W. Watts, *Vision and Prophecy in Amos* (1958), pp. 5ff.; A. S. Kapelrud, *Central Ideas in Amos* (1956), pp. 5ff.

