



Reading Amos: Is It an Advantage to Be God's Special People?

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It is certainly common for believers to think that God is on their side in times of peril or hostile encounters. That was true in Amos's day and is in our own time. One of the frequently stated reasons to believe in God is to gain some special treatment because of one's faith in the "one true God." Believers are promised everything from good health and prosperity to eternal rewards after death. Nations as well as individuals claim their various interests are supported by divine sanction. The God that you claim as your own is always on your side and against your enemies.

Such beliefs can obviously lead to complacency, even a sense of immunity from the consequences of foolish or immoral behavior. You may claim a certain entitlement because God has "chosen" you (and, perhaps, your nation). Amos warns that overconfidence in God's unconditional love may be wrongheaded and lead to trouble. This message is counterintuitive to believers who have put their trust in God's promises of unbroken faithfulness, both temporal and lasting into eternity. There must have been surprise, shock, offense, and anger in response to Amos's harsh words against God's own people. That becomes obvious when Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, conveyed the king's displeasure with the prophet's

Amos speaks a difficult word to those who believe they have a special claim on God because God has a unique, covenantal relationship with them. To be chosen by God is no reason for self-satisfaction or self-righteousness. God has called us for mission, not privilege.

message (7:10–13). Though concerned primarily with the northern kingdom of Israel, Amos’s condemnations were later also applied to his own land of Judah.

We can imagine the outrage if someone like Amos were to interrupt a sedate worship service and utter words of denunciation, condemning liturgies, music, and lack of concern for the poor and vulnerable. Like Amaziah, we would be tempted to tell the prophet to go back where he came from and do his preaching there, as he is rudely ushered out of the assembly. I have sometimes had the fantasy of seeing Amos show up at a session of Congress, interrupting some solemn discussion of procedural matters, and insisting that they stop playing games and get on with the task of taking care of the real problems of power and justice.

AMOS TURNS THE TABLES ON GOD’S CHOSEN

Judah and Israel join the list of other nations (chapters 1–2)

Amos begins with condemnations that would arouse little disagreement among his listeners. He lists several nations that have had their hostile encounters with Israel and Judah over the years—Damascus (Syria), cities of the Philistines, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab. In each case, they are condemned for specific transgressions and promised that just retribution will come. So far, so good. But then there is a sudden reversal in Amos’s rhetoric. The God who is concerned about the misbehavior of other nations is also concerned for the sins of Judah and Israel. God has not given them a free pass. They may have a special relationship with God, but they are just as accountable for their actions as every other nation.

Perhaps Amos actually delivered a sermon that listed these nations in the same order as the biblical text does. If so, he would have had his listeners in the palm of his hand, cheering him on until he came to the decisive turn. They would be out on the end of a limb, gleefully anticipating God’s act of retribution against their enemies. Then suddenly they are horrified to find that their special status does not give them immunity from God’s judgment. One is reminded of Nathan’s entrapment of David, who had become angered at what he assumed was another’s act of injustice, only to find that he was the man (2 Sam 12:5–7).

“You only have I known” (3:2)

God speaks to the unique relationship that God has with the people of Israel. “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.” The word “know” in Hebrew (יָדָע) implies much more than intellectual knowledge. It indicates an intimacy that involves one’s whole being. When God “knows” you, God knows your appearance, your voice, the way you think and feel, all that comprises your being as a person. You can keep no secrets from God, who searches the heart. Further, God has a special affection for those whom God “knows.” The sexual intimacy between a husband and wife is expressed by the same word (see Gen 4:1). This statement by God makes clear the unique relationship between God and Israel that is different from every other nation’s connection with God.

So, does this unique status bring any special treatment for God's chosen people? The reader of v. 2 is surprised by what follows the "therefore." One might expect to read promises of great prosperity, much land, and victory over enemies for the one who is so unique in God's eyes. Rather, God says, "Therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities." The one whom God loves so well, the one with whom God has chosen to share insights and commandments, may be more vulnerable to punishment than others who can claim ignorance about such matters. As a parent will punish her own children, not another's, God may be more likely to punish those from whom much is expected. God does not call us to special privilege but, rather, to a unique responsibility.

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"Woe to those who seek the Day of the Lord" (5:18–20)

Since the world does not operate as well as we would like, we long for a day when God will make all things right. Sometimes the "bad guys" win, other armies triumph over our noble soldiers, sickness and death come to the wrong people at the wrong time, drought hits one part of the land and floods devastate another. It ought not to be that way. At some point in the future, maybe not till the end of time, God will act. God is a God of justice and compassion, so the present situation cannot last forever. When God finally acts, it will be a "Day of the Lord."

When that decisive day of judgment comes to correct all wrong, some people will be surprised, says Amos. Even believers in the one true God may find that they are part of the problem of why the world does not work as well as God intended. Rather than finding relief, they may be horrified to find that they are liable to a negative judgment. So Amos suggests that they not be so eager to have the Day of the Lord come soon. It will be like jumping from the proverbial frying pan into the fire. Better to endure the difficulties of the present than to long for an unknown future that may be more terrifying than they can imagine. Jesus once said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 7:21a).

God hates your festivals (5:21–24)

Amos, unlike Hosea, does not criticize Israel for wandering after other gods. The people to whom Amos is speaking worship the God of Israel, who brought them safely through the Red Sea, gave them the commandments to guide their life, and led them to a new land. Their problem is that they have disconnected their worship from the way they live. This is a common theme among the prophets (see especially Jer 7). The most glorious liturgies and magnificent hymn festivals are meaningless if not accompanied by lives dedicated to justice and righteousness

(5:24). In fact, they are worse than meaningless. They are actually an affront to God. It may be that God enjoys being worshiped, but not if there is no relationship between what people profess in a formal ritual and what actually takes place in the marketplace and the halls of power. We are not told that we should abandon our hymn festivals, praise services, and historical liturgies. But they become hollow exercises of futility if not accompanied by lives dedicated to the pursuit of justice. Probably the best-known verse in the book of Amos is 5:24: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Only then do ritual and festivals constitute true worship.

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“Are you better than other kingdoms?” (6:1–3)

God did not choose Israel for unique status because of their moral superiority. Nor were they selected as God’s agents of mission because they were the most powerful and influential nation in the ancient Near East. On the contrary, they were a humble, ragtag group of refugees from Egypt, nomads searching for a land to call their own. All they have to do is to look around at other nations to know that they are not superior to them in any way. Whenever they begin to be seduced into prideful boasting that they are God’s special people with a list of corresponding entitlements, they need to look around to see just how small and pitiful they really are. Their only claim to fame is simply that God has chosen them. God should be glorified for expecting so much from a puny nation. That is the wonder of their unique status. God can do great things, even with the small and insignificant.

God also moved other nations from place to place (9:7–9)

God compares Israel with the Ethiopians: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me?” (9:7). That must have been a tough word for the Israelites to hear. Amos seems to say that God cares as much for the Ethiopians as for Israel. In our day, it would be equivalent to a statement that God is as concerned for the Muslims and Buddhists as for the Christians. There is still something unique about Israel, but they are only one of all the nations under God’s authority and compassion. Even God’s participation in the great saving event of the exodus from Egypt is listed alongside the migration of other nations that were led from place to place by God. God had something to do with the movement of the Philistines and the Arameans, whether they recognize it or not. Again, Amos points out the tension between Israel’s claims for special status and God’s activity in the life of all nations.

God is creator of the world and judge of all nations (4:13; 5:8–9; 9:5–6)

The text of the book of Amos is interrupted three times with hymns that glo-

rify the creative activity of God and declare that God will be the judge of all nations. The God of Israel is not some tribal or national deity with limited influence, power, and judgment. All nations must answer to God because God created them and set them in their place. God has given them enough knowledge of right and wrong that they are subject to retribution if they fall away from God's expectations. Amos probably did not compose these poems, but at some point they were inserted in the book to reinforce the contention that Israel is just one of many nations—including those outside any special covenant with God—over which God has jurisdiction. Both Israel and other nations will be accountable for their behavior.

You cannot hide from God's judgment (9:1–3)

Assurance of God's constant presence in times of trouble has often been comforting to people in their personal struggles. Pastoral visits to the sick or the grieving have sometimes included the reading of Ps 139. The psalmist says that it is impossible to flee from God's Spirit, whether to highest heaven or deepest Sheol. God will be there to bring light out of darkness (Ps 139:7–12). No matter how difficult the experience, God will be present to bring consolation. Amos reflects on the words of this psalm and turns the positive meaning into a negative one. Rather than a comforting word, in Amos's mind it becomes a dire word of warning. For sinners, when the judgment comes, there will be no place to hide. God will find them. Even if they dig into Sheol, climb up to heaven, scramble to the top of Mt. Carmel, or descend to the bottom of the sea, God will hunt them down and bring the punishment they deserve (Amos 9:1–3). Amos again turns things upside down. Hopes for protection as a special people are invalid. God has his eye on them and will not let them escape judgment.

HEARING AMOS

Resistance to Amos's message

Is there a place in the church for the self-critical message of Amos? That is a difficult question to consider. In practice, Amos's message of confrontation is certainly not dominant in most churches. Passages from Amos are not frequently read in worship and are seldom the source for sermons. We are so concerned to spread the gospel of acceptance, the assurance that God loves even sinners, that we are wary of confusing the matter by being critical. Perhaps words of criticism will drive people away from the church. They have come on Sunday morning to be comforted and to "feel good about themselves." They do not want to be told that merely being part of a religious community is not enough to gain satisfaction from God. God wants more from us than pious declarations of faith, enthusiastic songs of praise, and cheerful smiles while we do nothing to alleviate the suffering of the world.

Preachers have struggled mightily over the years to figure out how to integrate the self-critical words of Amos (and other prophets and Jesus) with the mes-

sage that God has called us to be God's people, not because of our deeds, but simply out of love and grace. It is not sufficient to ignore the prophetic words of judgment on our political, commercial, and religious activities. But how and when to speak of such things when many are already broken and need words of encouragement and hope, not more reasons to feel guilty? There are no easy answers here, but Amos reminds us not to abandon the tension between God's grace and God's demands.

Is God's love conditional or unconditional?

God loves us as we are. We do not have to do anything to prove ourselves to God, to stir up a response of love from the Almighty. It is unconditional, just as a parent loves her child without condition. It is wrong, however, to assume that God does not care how we behave, how we act toward other people, how we follow the commandments that God so helpfully laid out for us. Our response to God's love has conditions. Sinful behavior has consequences. Amos makes it clear that the merchant who cheats, the king who disregards the well-being of his people, the religious practitioner who lives as if there is no connection between ritual and real life will have to answer for what they do. Just because we are not saved by our works does not negate the importance of doing good works. In some way, Amos is a necessary antidote to an excessive reliance on God's grace to tolerate any human misbehavior.

The Hebrew God is the God of all nations

Often, nations or individuals become possessive of God, as if God belongs to them and is concerned primarily about their behavior. It is easy to forget all those other billions of people in the world who claim no allegiance to the God whom we worship. Amos probably caused some eyes to roll when he talked about God's part in the movement of ancient peoples (like the Philistines and Arameans) or compared the Ethiopians favorably with the Israelites. All the people of the world are part of God's concern, whether they are aware of it or not.

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Further, God can demand moral behavior from all nations (as in Amos 1–2), because God made them and they are accountable to God's expectations for how humans are supposed to act toward others. They cannot claim ignorance because they never had a Sinai experience and God never made a treaty with them or gave them a list of commandments. But God, the creator and judge of the whole world (as proclaimed in the three hymns in Amos's book), has given them some knowledge of right and wrong. They should know that it is wrong to kill pregnant women, sell people into slavery, or hate and kill members of one's own family.

Every living person should know these things and will be held accountable accordingly.

In times of war, Amos reminds us that God is the God of both our armies and the enemy's. It is hazardous to claim that God is on our side and to demonize the enemy. We may be surprised, as were Amos's listeners, when our nation shows up at the end of a list of states traditionally regarded as notorious. That is as hard a message for us to hear as it was for ancient Israel.

The danger of religious complacency

When human beings speak confidently about God as if they know something that no one else knows, they are in danger of self-righteousness and complacency about their situation before God. This could lead to arrogance and a sense of superiority over all those who think differently. Such attitudes may even lead to a false assurance that their God cares only about people who look like them, believe as they do, and say all the right words when they recite their creeds. When Amos speaks of people who lie comfortably on their beds of ivory, sing songs like David, enjoy the luxury of sumptuous food and the best wine, but "are not grieved over the ruin of Jacob" (6:4–7), he could well be talking about many in our day who are so comfortable and satisfied with their situation that the plight of the poor and needy never enters their mind. Many of us are probably more like the citizens of Bethel or the Pharisees with whom Jesus argued than we would like to admit. "Leave us alone. We know what we believe. Don't upset people who are already settled in their beliefs."

The connection between worship and morality

Perhaps the favorite pejorative that non-churchgoers use to describe those who worship regularly is "hypocrites." It is easy to point out the obvious dichotomy between what people proclaim in religious services and the way they live their lives. Amos, along with other prophets who follow him, will make similar accusations about the disconnection between faith and practice, between ritual devotion and real life. This is such a common criticism of believers that it becomes almost a cliché or a "cheap shot." Amos is very good at it and we should listen closely. There is the father-son combo who lie beside the altar on illegally confiscated garments (2:8), the popping of the balloon of those who eagerly look for the Day of the Lord (5:18–20), and the expression of disgust from God, who wants nothing to do with sacrifices, songs, and liturgies unless justice rolls down like waters (5:21–24). The point is clear. We have all heard it. In fact, we have heard it so often that we have almost become immune to the full impact of what Amos says about the utter futility of our worship if it occurs in a vacuum, without the ethical behavior that confirms that we actually believe what we are saying.

What is gained by a special relationship with God?

When evangelists invite others to join their community of believers, part of the enticement to do so may be the promise of rewards—a more meaningful life,

less anxiety, good health, perhaps even financial prosperity, protection from danger, loving families, and the grand reward, eternal life. Israel believed they were in a unique relationship with God. Even Amos granted that, when he quotes God saying, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth” (3:2). But then Amos follows with “therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities.”

In a similar way, Jesus tells his followers to pick up their cross if they are to follow him. They should not be surprised if the world hates them. It will not be an easy task to be one of Jesus’ disciples and go out into the world to preach a message that people do not want to hear.

Those of us who, like Israel, claim to be chosen, to be possessors of knowledge that not everyone has, are called to tell others what we know. We are not given special privilege, immunity from hurt, and freedom to act without fear of consequences. We are called to mission, to be a model of the kind of society that God desires for all nations. God loves and cares for the whole world, but has given a special responsibility to those who claim a unique relationship with the one true God. ⊕

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