



# Amos and Hosea: Sociohistorical Background and Prophetic Critique

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**T**he prophecies of Amos and Hosea illustrate how divergent prophetic articulations can be even if the subject matter remains the same. The common geographical focus of Amos and Hosea is eighth-century B.C.E. Israel. But the perspectives are different in that Amos is from the south while Hosea is of northern origin. Hosea's northern roots are evident in the book through the frequent use of specific place-names from the north—more references to “Ephraim” than “Judah,” coupled with the absence of references to Jerusalem and the Davidic line (with the exception of Hos 3:5, often seen as a later addition).<sup>1</sup> Further, both prophets address the sociopolitical and economic realities, but they are envisioned and articulated in very different literary constructs. Amos's invectives are direct, detailed, and scathing. But reading Hosea is like looking into a kaleidoscope with the tumbling profusion of images that emerge and merge into new patterns and tropes. The traditional characterization of Amos as a prophet of justice as opposed to Hosea as a prophet of love not only oversimplifies matters but in fact overlooks an important aspect. Hosea is just as concerned with social injustice as Amos but

<sup>1</sup>Graham I. Davies, *Hosea*, ed. R. N. Whybray (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 13.

*While the eighth century B.C.E. was a time of great prosperity and luxury, the effects were felt by only a minority of the population. This is what gave rise to the harsh outcries of Amos and Hosea in favor of the poor.*

simply expresses it differently. Hosea's critique is aimed not so much at the syncretistic cultic abuses, as has often been taken for granted, but at the sociopolitical and economic realities of eighth-century Israel. In this connection, Hosea's use of the metaphor of Israel as an adulterous wife has received a fresher look.<sup>2</sup> More on this later.

While the superscription of the book places Amos's prophetic activity during the reigns of Jeroboam II (786–746 B.C.E.) in Israel and Uzziah (783–742) in Judah, Hosea's is presented as coinciding with the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham (743–735), Ahaz (735–715), and Hezekiah (715–687) in the south and Jeroboam II in the north. The superscription in Hosea betrays a Judean editorial bias in the prominence given to Judean kings (four listed to one Israelite king, Jeroboam II). Taken literally, this would make Hosea's period of activity a very long one, but that is not likely. Judging by the clues in the book, it is more probable that Hosea's activity spanned the waning years of Jeroboam through the period of political uncertainty that followed his death.

#### THE EIGHTH CENTURY: A TIME OF PROSPERITY

Two aspects stand out about eighth-century B.C.E. Israel (and Judah). First, Israel and Judah experienced unprecedented economic growth and political stability under Jeroboam II and Uzziah. Second, in light of the above, it is anomalous and quite striking that the prophetic materials that relate to this period do not give the impression that all was well. In fact, ironically, this is the period that gives rise to the greatest number and the most intense of the prophetic oracles of judgment.

That the first part of the eighth century was a period of prosperity and growth can be substantiated by looking at some specific indicators: colonization, regional specialization, demographics, and trade and commerce. Using information from archaeology, social sciences, and biblical texts other than the prophetic ones, I have presented elsewhere a working hypothesis concerning the eighth-century social reality.<sup>3</sup> Here I will merely summarize the salient points. Colonization refers to the expansion on the part of Israel and Judah towards the east, the west, and the south. Second Chronicles 26:6–8 witnesses to the colonizing activities of Uzziah. Not only was Uzziah (Jeroboam II as well) successful in forging a strong state locally, but he was powerful enough to extend his control beyond his borders. Territorial expansion and political subjugation are often motivated by and result in economic gains. Regional specialization refers to specialized economic activities such as viticulture, olive orcharding, mining and metallurgy, dyeing and weaving, and farming and herding. Changes in demographics often reflect the changes in the socioeconomic realities. One such avenue of information is the growth of cities.

<sup>2</sup>Marvin L. Chaney, "Agricultural Intensification as Promiscuity in the Book of Hosea" (paper presented at The Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Washington, D.C., November 20–23, 1993); Alice A. Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>D. N. Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003).

Trade and commerce flourished in the eighth century B.C.E. The available information indicates that interregional and international trade was initiated, maintained, and monopolized by the crown. It is precisely at those times when there was a strong centralized power that there was also thriving trade. The geopolitical advantage enjoyed by Israel and Judah in the eighth century enabled them to control trade and commerce through the control of trade routes. This had two very favorable outcomes for the wealthy. First, the entire trade enterprise was geared towards procuring items of interest and demand for the elites. This included military items such as horses and chariots, and luxury items such as fine linen, jewelry, perfume, and spices. Second, since the elites controlled trade, they were also the beneficiaries of such lucrative enterprises. The profitable nature of interregional and international trade prompted the production of commodities or articles that had good exchange value. Commodities such as wine and oil were worth more in terms of their exchange value per unit of volume or weight than grain. Hence wine and olive oil, the agricultural specialties of Palestine, were prominent items in export/import exchanges.

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*“the geopolitical advantage enjoyed by Israel and Judah in the eighth century enabled them to control trade and commerce”*

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In discussions concerning eighth-century Israel and Judah, one question is often neglected: Who were the beneficiaries of the growth and prosperity, or at whose expense were such prosperity and growth achieved? It would be erroneous to assume that the growth and prosperity benefited everyone in the society. Further, the anomaly one needs to explain is this: Why do the largest number and the most intense of prophetic oracles come from a period that enjoyed significant prosperity and growth? One explanation is that the growth and prosperity witnessed especially in the first part of the eighth century benefited only a small minority of the population—the members of the ruling class. Through an organized system of taxation, they were able to extract the economic surplus. The surplus went to support a life of leisure and luxury, which is marked by palatial private residences, conspicuous consumption, use of luxury items such as fine linen, expensive ornaments, and perfume, and nonproductive recreational activity. Considerable surplus was also invested in providing for military means in order to gain political control. Stronger political control results in greater socioeconomic benefit. This in turn enabled the elite to invest even more in the military. The cumulative effect of this vicious cycle is the impoverishment of the peasantry, who constituted the majority of the population.

#### THE EIGHTH CENTURY: A TIME OF INJUSTICE

The heart of the issue in the eighth-century socioeconomic reality was the concentration of vast amounts of land in the hands of a small minority. The process of land accumulation came at the expense of the common peasants. This phe-

nomenon is related to and is a result of various factors. In the following paragraphs each of these aspects will be briefly mentioned and illustrated through texts from Amos and Hosea. From a methodological perspective, it should be pointed out that the various aspects relating to the process of land consolidation are not derived from the prophetic texts but are gathered instead on the basis of studies of agrarian societies, both ancient and modern, and of archaeological and biblical texts other than the prophetic ones. Often biblical scholars fall into the trap of circular argument by using materials from the prophets to construct the social reality of ancient Israel/Judah and then using the same information to test that reality against the prophetic texts.

As I understand it, the eighth-century social reality of Israel and Judah included:

### *1. The growth of urban centers*

Within agrarian societies, the importance of the urban centers or cities stems from their political (administrative and military), economic, and religious functions. The social groups associated with these various functions had to be supported. Initially the arrangement might have been one of mutual benefit, with the primary producers providing goods and services in return for military protection. But as the balance of power tilted in favor of the ruling class, the mutual dependence soon degenerated into outright exploitation. The cities functioned effectively as administrative centers of the state in extracting the surplus from the rural areas.

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***“To the prophets, cities symbolized the malady that afflicted the society. They were painfully aware of the effects of the urban paraphernalia on the lives of the poor.”***

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To the prophets, however, cities symbolized the malady that afflicted the society. They were painfully aware of the effects of the urban accouterments on the lives of the poor. Amos calls Ashdod and Egypt to witness the violence and oppression in Samaria (Amos 3:9–11). The occurrence of “fortified palaces” four times in this section is noteworthy. Such structures were most likely the residential quarters of the civil and military officials. These palatial structures stood as symbols of elitist power and wealth. Hosea echoes this sentiment: “Israel has forgotten his Maker, and built palaces; and Judah has multiplied fortified cities” (Hos 8:14). In Hos 6:1–3, the mention of Kullani and Hamath, two of the important commercial centers in Syria, shows that Israel is just as guilty when it comes to the devastating influence of the urban centers; hence the judgment.

### *2. Militarization*

The dominance of the ruling class over the peasant group is possible because of the military power of the former. In ancient Israel, critical military items such as horses and chariots were imported in exchange for local specialty items such as wine and oil. Hosea pointedly says: “Because you have trusted in your power and in

the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed” (Hos 10:13b–14). Elsewhere Hosea alludes to King Hoshea’s shifting loyalties (2 Kings 17:3–4) when he says: “they make a treaty with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt” (Hos 12:1). The “treaty” in this context refers to the procurement of military items. The delivery of oil could also be interpreted as tribute in kind paid to the foreign nation to avoid drastic consequences. Either way, “carrying oil” had a devastating effect on the common population who bore the brunt of such expensive undertakings through a system of taxation.

### 3. Extraction of surplus

The extraction of agricultural surplus was accomplished through a careful system of taxation. Two things are critical to the success of such a taxation system. First, the highly organized nature of the operations of ruling aristocracy gives them an advantage even though they are a minority. Second, the ruling class can accomplish what it wants because it has the military power. Two passages from Amos speak to extraction of surplus. Amos’s accusation that “you trample upon the poor and take from him exactions of wheat” (Amos 5:11 RSV) brings to light the burden of taxation on the peasants.<sup>4</sup> Whether one reads the cryptic reference to “king’s mowings” (Amos 7:1) as shearing wool<sup>5</sup> or agricultural reaping,<sup>6</sup> it is clear that the crown has extracted the prime share of the surplus. Hosea refers to the practice of extracting surplus when he says: “You have loved a prostitute’s pay on all threshing floors” (Hos 9:1). In the context of harvest, it is best understood as the share of agricultural produce taken away as rent in kind.

### 4. Lifestyle of the upper class

The extracted agricultural surplus went to support a life of leisure and luxury for the elite that was expressed in several ways. First, Amos draws attention to their palatial mansions, including their “houses of ivory” and their penchant for having one residence for summer and another for winter (Amos 3:15). Second, their immoderate consumption is characterized by *marzeah*, a celebration held in honor of the dead (Amos 6:4–7, using the technical term in v. 7). Far from its original context, *marzeah* had evolved into an elaborate affair including party houses, feasts, and festivities.<sup>7</sup> For Amos, the trappings that went with the *marzeah* celebration epitomized the elite’s life of luxury.<sup>8</sup> And third, the kind of pastimes in which they engaged is demonstrated by the wanton behavior of elite Samaritan women “who

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the technical aspects of translation relative to this passage, see treatments by Harry Torczyner, “Presidential Address,” *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 16 (1936) 6–7; Maria DeJong Ellis, “Taxation in Ancient Mesopotamia: The History of the Term *Miksu*,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 26 (1974) 211–250; Shalom Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 226–227.

<sup>5</sup>John Hayes, *Amos: The Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) 202.

<sup>6</sup>J. Alberto Soggin, *The Prophet Amos: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1987) 113. Also Paul, *Amos*, 227.

<sup>7</sup>Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets*, 91–93.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 139–141.

extort the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, 'Bring something to drink!'" (Amos 4:1). With unqualified disdain Amos predicts a punishment for these "cows of Bashan" that includes being carried away with butcher's hooks.

Hosea, too, draws attention to the lifestyle of the ruling class when he says, "On the day of our king the officials became sick with the heat of wine" (Hos 7:5). The imagery of the oven and the process of baking (v. 4) suggests that the production and consumption of finer bread was part of this affluence.<sup>9</sup>

### 5. *Trade and commerce*

In agrarian monarchies, trade and commerce was initiated, maintained, and monopolized by the royal circle, who thus became its beneficiaries. Interregional or international trade was therefore designed to procure items of value and interest to this group. The systematic development and control of trade routes became vital for the movement of goods as well as generating revenues from trading caravans. According to 2 Kings 14:25, Jeroboam II and Uzziah seemed to have had control over the area from Hamath in the north to the Sea of Arabah in the south. This would have included the King's Highway, one of the major trade routes of this time, which ran along the length of the Transjordan territory.

### 6. *Market conditions*

This refers to the abuses and corrupt practices in the market situation. With the advent of a wider market orientation, drastic changes occurred in the area of production. The demands of the market promoted the cultivation of those crops that brought maximum economic advantage. More and more lands were converted to producing commercial crops, leaving the staples, which the peasant class needed for survival, in short supply. Consequently, peasants were forced to buy in the market the staples they had once produced themselves. The merchants took advantage of their unfamiliarity with the market conditions and shortchanged them through unscrupulous tampering and deceit in the transactions. Amos focuses on the corrupt practices of the merchants who only grudgingly observed the holidays because it meant loss of business for them (Amos 8:5). They not only sold the produce at a higher price but also shortchanged the peasants with tampered measurements (8:5), thus violating the injunction of Deut 25:13–16. The "selling the sweepings of the wheat" (Amos 8:6) alludes to the fraudulent practice of adulterating the grain with chaff to increase the weight. Hosea echoes the same practice: "A trader, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress" (Hos 12:7). He makes it clear that the merchants grew rich out of these corrupt practices, oblivious to the fact that this was at the expense of the common peasants.

### 7. *Indebtedness of the peasants*

Many factors drove the peasants into debt: (1) The exactions in agricultural produce were heavy, sometimes more than half of the total produce. (2) The com-

<sup>9</sup>Morris Silver, *Prophets and Markets: The Political Economy of the Ancient Near East* (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983) 95–96.

mon peasants bore the brunt of much of the taxation to support the programs of the state. The energies of the peasants were expended on fulfilling their agricultural and state obligations. (3) Prices tend to be the lowest at the time of the harvest. (4) Illegal business practices on the part of the landowners further cut into the returns. (5) Since peasants were dependent primarily upon rain for agriculture, if rains failed they were forced to borrow to feed the family. If the rains failed for subsequent seasons, then the peasant went into deeper debt. Often, the peasants were forced to offer either a piece of their own land, an article of value, or sometimes even a member of the family as collateral for a loan. Failure to repay mounting loans resulted in the foreclosure of land and/or sale into debt slavery. Accumulation of land through debt instruments was a means of creating large estates. The role of the debt instruments in foreclosure proceedings is alluded to in Amos 2:6b. The reference to “*the money/silver*” (the Hebrew text uses the definite article here) signals that a specific type of “money” is intended, namely, the interest on loans. The mention of selling the needy for “a pair of sandals” (Amos 2:6b) could be taken as a reference to a process whereby the “selling” was legalized (cf. Deut 25:9 and Ruth 4:7). Amos 2:8 enumerates two more practices that relate to the indebtedness of the peasant: the practice of creditors taking garments as collateral for loans and the landlords exacting payments in kind. Garments could be confiscated for failure to repay a debt as well. Exod 22:26 and Deut 24:12–13, however, stipulate the return of the garment to the debtor before sundown.

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#### *8. Role of the creditors*

The creditors and moneylenders played a critical role in the impoverishment of the peasantry. These businessmen were probably themselves landed elite or a separate class within that group who specialized in that operation. The passages from Amos mentioned under the previous point illustrate the role of the creditors.

#### *9. Role of judicial courts*

The courts had the function of establishing justice—who was in the right and what was right based on the principle of entitlement. But the courts had become the very instruments of subverting justice. Hence Amos singles out the judicial officials who “turn justice to wormwood” (Amos 5:7). In fact, corruption was so rampant that anyone who dared to act with integrity and dispense justice incurred the wrath and scorn of their colleagues (5:10).

#### HOSEA’S “WIFE OF PROMISCUITY”

Traditional interpretations have understood the metaphor of Gomer as Hosea’s “wife of harlotry” (Hos 1:2 RSV) to refer to the cultic abuses in Israel. But

this requires further examination. According to Keefe, this language, too, is a commentary on the sociopolitical realities of Hosea's time.<sup>10</sup> Some key aspects of the text lend support to this interpretation. First, popular views that posit the seductive allure of syncretistic fertility cults of Canaan lack textual or other evidence. Second, focusing only on Gomer places the metaphor in the context of marriage, whereas the text is pointing to a larger context. The various characters in the scenario represent specific groups. In other words, the prophet's critique is not aimed at Israel as a whole but rather at targeted groups within Israel. In the overall scheme, therefore, whom do the children represent? In this scenario they represent the lower masses who are victimized by the sociopolitical and economic policies and practices of the elite. The unusual names evoke connections in a subtle way. For example, the reference to Jezreel evokes the royal acquisition of land by Jezebel and Ahab at the expense of Naboth. It also calls to mind the chaos and political instability subsequent to the death of Jeroboam II, mirroring the situation after the death of Solomon. For the elite who had full control over the land tenure structures, concerns of legitimacy and inheritance were foremost. Female infidelity may jeopardize this but not actions of a harlot. Hence, the preferred translation is "wife of promiscuity" instead of "wife of harlotry." Hosea uses this feminine metaphor to portray the behavior of the ruling elite who are male. Despite outward appearances of prosperity and growth, Hosea's early preaching recognized the disastrous path of Israel's leadership. According to his word, the political chaos, instability, and economic crisis experienced by Israel subsequent to the death of Jeroboam II were direct results of the disastrous policies and practices of the ruling class who failed to know the Lord (7:7; 8:4).

The prophetic critique in Amos is direct, vivid, and hard-hitting. He does not mince words. While addressing the targeted groups about their complicity in matters of injustice and corruption, Amos often highlights the drastic consequences of their policies and practices for the poorer sections of the society. Amos is quick to point out that the elite failed to recognize the effect of their conduct toward "the ruin of Joseph" (Amos 6:6).

In contrast to Amos, Hosea, as we have seen, is subtle and multilayered in his critique. Nevertheless, both prophets tackle directly the abusive and destructive practices of eighth-century Israel. Now in the biblical canon, both continue to speak boldly against corrupt uses of power and for God's abiding concern for the oppressed. ⊕

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<sup>10</sup>See Keefe, *Woman's Body*.