



The Mourning Earth (Amos 1:2) and the God Who Is

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The metaphor of the mourning earth is one of many shared expressions in the prophetic books of Amos and Hosea.¹ It holds a key position in each book: in the opening verse of Amos (Amos 1:2), and at the head of the body of Hosea's prophetic speeches (Hos 4:3). Both Amos and Hosea warn that the end of the northern kingdom is near. They declare that those responsible for shaping the course and character of the nation have lost their connection with YHWH, a loss that is about to bring unremitting woe and lamentation to Israel. The mourning earth serves in both books to represent the coming catastrophe but also to open up its cosmic dimensions, revealing to the books' audiences what they may not recognize about the nature of their God. Each book articulates the horizon of mourning differently, however, and I will focus here on the expansion of the image of earth in mourning in the book of Amos.²

¹On the deliberate links between Amos and Hosea, see Jörg Jeremias, "The Interrelationship between Amos and Hosea," in *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D. W. Watts*, ed. James W. Watts and Paul R. House (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996) 171–186. See also Aaron Scharf, "The First Section of the Book of the Twelve Prophets: Hosea—Joel—Amos," *Interpretation* 61 (2007) 138–152.

²Hosea's emphasis is on the breakdown of intimacy between YHWH and Israel. Thus the languishing of the earth and its creatures in Hos 4:3 can be seen as a sign of the impact of estrangement from YHWH. The desolate earth displays graphically the damaged habitat of a once fruitful love, just as the ravaging of the land in Hos 2:3, 9–12 metaphorically conveys the harsh consequences of infidelity and separation (cf. Hos 9:16–17; 13:15).

The earth mourns, the morning darkens, the earth melts, the Lord roars: the injustices of Israel condemned by Amos occur within a cosmic arena. The people have seriously misjudged both God and the consequences of their actions. Yet Amos calls readers—both ancient and modern—to see, to turn, and to live.

Amos develops the cosmic dimension of the metaphor of earth mourning into a major theme. In the opening scene of Amos, this metaphor illustrates the cosmic reach of YHWH's voice (Amos 1:2). The initial impression created here is sustained by a series of short hymnic passages that praise the creative power of YHWH at key points throughout the book (Amos 4:13; 5:8–9; 9:5–6; cf. 8:8).³ The implications of these recurrent proclamations of the essential nature of YHWH for Amos's overall concept of judgment is the subject of the following reflection.⁴

THE MOURNING EARTH: AMOS 1:2 AND 9:5–6

And he said:

The Lord roars from Zion,
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;
The pastures of the shepherds mourn,
and the top of Carmel dries up. (Amos 1:2 RSV)

The Hebrew verb translated “mourn” here is אָבַל, which is rendered as “wither” in the NRSV. With human subjects, however, אָבַל means “mourn.”⁵ Its use with the “pastures of the shepherds” is metaphorical, and the aptness of this metaphor is brought out in the parallel phrase: “the top of Carmel dries up.” The mourning of the land, in other words, is expressed as drought: the earth shrinks, loses its vegetative cover, and turns dry and dusty. These phenomena parallel human mourning rituals of fasting, bowing toward the ground, stripping of clothing and cutting of hair, sprinkling the body with dust.

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The dynamic sketched in Amos 1:2 is telling for the book of Amos as a whole. The drought of the fertile land is shown as an immediate response to the Lord's voice, which breaks out from Zion like the roar of a lion seeking prey. Lying behind these images are traditions of theophany, or the manifestation of the presence of YHWH, whose voice thunders in the storm and induces the earth to tremble and quake.⁶ In Amos 1:2 the voice of YHWH withers the landscape. This premonition,

³On the connection between these passages and Amos 1:2, see Jörg Jeremias, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 13–14.

⁴In this discussion I will consider how the final composition of the book of Amos speaks to an audience. I assume that the book encompasses successive stages of composition and structuring.

⁵See Amos 8:8 and 9:5. See also the NRSV translation of אָבַל as “mourn” in Jer 12:4, 23:10, where this verb is again paralleled with the verb “dry up.”

⁶Cf., e.g., Job 37:1–4; Ps 18:13–15 (= 2 Sam 22:14–16); Ps 46:6; 68: 7–8, 33. For close parallels to Amos 1:2, see Joel 3:16; Jer 25:30.

not simply of a divine appearance but of a destructive force, sets the tone for what follows.⁷

The focus on the land rather than on its cities and human inhabitants introduces a cosmic dimension to this forewarning of divine judgment. The earth itself, represented by mountain and pastures, is bound up with what Israel has put at risk through its mistaken assumptions about God, which are exposed in the prophetic oracles that follow. A larger and more essential reality lies behind the apparent fruitfulness and prosperity of the northern kingdom, a reality that the voice of YHWH now brings forward.

The book of Amos begins with an alarming scene of natural devastation, and it draws to a close with similar images. Amos 9:1–6 conveys the culminating vision of Amos, in which the Lord appears in full, standing beside the altar and shaking the sanctuary (Amos 9:1).⁸ It concludes with a summation of the transcendent power of YHWH:

The Lord, GOD of hosts,
he who touches the earth and it melts,
and all who live in it mourn,
and all of it rises like the Nile,
and sinks again, like the Nile of Egypt;
who builds his upper chambers in the heavens,
and founds his vault upon the earth;
who calls for the waters of the sea,
and pours them out upon the surface of the earth—
the LORD is his name. (Amos 9:5–6)

In these verses both the earth and its people are stricken: the earth melts and undulates, and its inhabitants mourn. The mourning of the land in response to YHWH's roar in Amos 1:2 thus signals the comprehensive convulsion, grief, and inundation of the inhabited earth in response to the full appearance of YHWH.

AMOS'S PRAISE OF YHWH AS CREATOR

Between the beginning and the end—and in fact at the center—of the book of Amos are two short hymnic passages that praise YHWH's cosmic activities (Amos 4:13 and 5:8–9). Along with 9:5–6, these passages have been characterized as doxologies of YHWH as creator.⁹ They are associated with Amos 1:2 under the broad tradition of theophany. The announcement of the divine name in all three doxologies (e.g., “The LORD is his name” in Amos 9:6) is significant, since biblical accounts of theophanies often include pronouncements of

⁷On the implicit image of YHWH as a warrior intent on executing judgment, see Jeremias, *Book of Amos*, 13–14, and Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 38–42.

⁸The immediate reference here is probably to the altar of the sanctuary at Bethel. See Hans W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress, c 1977) 274.

⁹On the doxologies in Amos see, Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 216–217, and Jeremias, *Book of Amos*, 76–79.

the name of YHWH (Exod 3:14, 6:2, 20:1–2, 33:19, 34:5; see also Gen 26:24, 28:13).

Because of the interrelationships between these passages, the book of Amos can be seen as structured around glimpses of divine activity in creation.¹⁰ In an interpretative era when exegetes focused on distinguishing original prophetic speeches from redactional additions, the doxologies were often discussed, apart from their contexts, as later compositional flourishes. Since, however, these passages appear in significant positions in the book as a whole, it is important to relate them to their contexts in Amos and to reflect on how they expand the opening image of the book.

THE HYMNIC DOXOLOGY OF AMOS 4:13

If Amos 1:2 sounds an opening note, warning Israel of disaster on a cosmic scale, Amos 4:13 follows a backward look at the indifference of Israel to a series of divine communications (4:6–11). YHWH has brought famine, drought, blight and disease, and even destruction reminiscent of Sodom and Gomorrah to Israel. Yet the Israelites have not turned, or returned, to God. They have kept their distance. In Amos 4:12 the survivors of these disasters are summoned to prepare to “meet” their God.

The Hebrew verb translated here “prepare” (כִּוֵּן) is used elsewhere in the Old Testament both in contexts of sacral preparation and of battle.¹¹ In Exod 19:11–19 it occurs in conjunction with the verb “to meet” in the classic portrayal of theophany at Mt. Sinai, in which God’s appearance is both highly sacred and dangerously powerful, though ultimately beneficent (Exod 19:3–6). The repetition in Amos 4:12—“Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God”—heightens the dual sense of encounter and reckoning. It alerts the prophetic audience to expect something greater than simply the agent of misfortunes envisioned in Amos 4:6–11: God in the fullness of divine being.

Amos 4:13 then opens out into hymnic praise of this God. The phrase, “For lo,” intimates an actual meeting, yet YHWH is introduced first not by name, but by an illustration of who he is:

For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind,
 reveals his thoughts to mortals,
makes the morning darkness,
 and treads on the heights of the earth—
 the LORD, the God of hosts is his name!

Only in relation to the divine being is the divine name proclaimed. In turn, the divine name and title reflect the divine being.

¹⁰Cf. Jeremias, *Book of Amos*, 8.

¹¹Walter Brueggemann, “Amos IV 4–13 and Israel’s Covenant Worship,” *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965) 1–15.

The epithet “God of hosts” is a variant of the more common, “of hosts,” which identifies YHWH as creator of heavenly lights and forces and ruler over a company of celestial beings (Ps 148:1–6; Gen 2:1 [RSV]; Ps 89:5–12; 1 Kings 22:19) and as commander of heavenly and earthly armies (1 Sam 17:45; Josh 5:14–15). These divine roles converge. YHWH enlists the heavenly hosts in warfare (Josh 10:12–14; Judg 5:19–20), but they also serve as celestial beings that surround and serve him (Ps 103:19–22).¹²

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Since Amos 4:13 follows a sequence of accusations against Israel, the epithet “God of hosts” here carries associations of YHWH in a kingly role as executor of justice (and warrior). But images of YHWH’s creative acts and cosmic reach predominate in the verse itself. There are no explicit references to judgment upon Israel’s failures in this depiction of the God with whom Israel must reckon.¹³ Amos 4:6–11 indicts Israel for consistently failing to turn or return to God, and 4:13 suggests that this omission is related to a failure to recognize YHWH for who he is: the one who creates, transforms, and transcends the essential reality on which all other realities are founded.

The language of the last pair of divine attributes (Amos 4:13b) admits the nuance of judgment: Israel’s God is the one who darkens morning and treads upon the high places of the earth. Morning becomes dark naturally through the divinely ordered alternation of night and day. Yet the association of darkness with death is evoked in the context of the woes listed in Amos 4:6–11. The image of treading on the heights of the earth illustrates God’s cosmic dimensions but may also suggest YHWH’s dominance over the high places of the illegitimate cult.¹⁴

Overall, however, Amos 4:13 highlights God’s activities as creator. Since it forms a conclusion to the catalogue of Israel’s indifference to YHWH in Amos 4:6–11, it suggests that the failure of the Israelites to recognize their God as active creator is of primary importance. The claim that YHWH “reveals his thoughts to mortals” in Amos 4:13a offers specific grounds for a confrontation. YHWH does not keep to himself who he is. So why does Israel not attend and respond to its God?¹⁵ In Amos 4:6–11, YHWH’s self-communication is evident in nonverbal phenomena like the withholding of rain or the fall of great cities. These should convey

¹²Choon-Leong Seow, “Hosts, Lord of,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 3:304–307.

¹³Jeremias, *Book of Amos*, 76.

¹⁴Particularly—in Amos—Bethel. See Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 224. Cf. Mic 1:3.

¹⁵Cf. Amos 3:7.

to the Israelites that the parameters of their self-conceived world do not necessarily match those of the reality formed by the cosmic movements of God.

THE HYMNIC DOXOLOGY OF AMOS 5:8–9

Amos 5:8–9 is another hymnic fragment placed at the center of the book:

The one who made the Pleiades and Orion,
and turns deep darkness into the morning,
and darkens the day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea,
and pours them out on the surface of the earth,
the LORD is his name,
who makes destruction flash out against the strong,
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

At first glance this passage does not follow directly from what immediately precedes it, but a closer look at the larger context of Amos 5:1–17 reveals a carefully constructed composition within which 5:8–9 forms the “hymnic core.”¹⁶ A sequence of themes leads up to Amos 5:8–9 and is repeated in reverse order after it: (1) the warning of lamentation and death (Amos 5:1–13, 16–17); (2) the appeal to seek the Lord and live (Amos 5:4–6, 14–15); and (3) the accusation of the perversion of justice (Amos 5:7, 10–13). Together these themes create a context of judgment in which hymnic praise of God’s creative activity holds the center (Amos 5:8–9).

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The cosmic images of Amos 5:8–9, like those of Amos 1:2 and 4:13, lift one’s sight to a larger reality. The territory of the house of Israel (Amos 5:1, 4), the house of Joseph (Amos 5:6), and the false sanctuaries of Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba (Amos 5:5) gives way to the domain of the constellations, the rising and setting of the sun, and the measureless movements of sea and storm (5:8). The sudden contrast is perhaps intended to convey how removed this divine reality has become from the consciousness of the Israelites. There is no obvious transition between Amos 5:6–7, with its condemnation of those that “turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground,” and the beginning of the hymnic praise of YHWH in 5:8.

There are subtle interconnections, however. Amos urges Israel to “seek YHWH” in 5:6, and the nature of YHWH is revealed in 5:8–9.¹⁷ The same participle (from the verb “to turn over”—**הפך**) is used to represent the perversion of justice

¹⁶Jeremias, *Book of Amos*, 84.

¹⁷This use of participles is characteristic of all the hymnic fragments in Amos.

by the Israelites in Amos 5:7 and the turning of darkness to morning by YHWH in 5:8a. The abstract categories of justice and righteousness in Amos 5:7 resonate with the fundamental elements of heaven and earth named in 5:8, implying a relationship between human and cosmic order (cf. Ps 89:8–18). This relationship is borne out in the concluding verse of the hymn (Amos 5:9), which turns back towards the human sphere: the destruction of the strong and their fortresses.

The resumption of accusations against Israel in greater detail in Amos 5:10–13 (again in participial form in 5:12b) gives sharper definition to “the strong” whom the hymn declares YHWH can overpower. They are those who trample on the poor, harass the innocent, take bribes, and push those in need away from any redress.

In these ways Amos 5:8–9 is connected with the announcement of woe and lamentation for Israel that is developed in Amos 5:1–17 as a whole. Yet the language and tone of Amos 5:8–9 go far beyond a simple warning of divine judgment and its divine executor. What is attributed to YHWH first in Amos 5:8 is the making of constellations that structure the night and mark the flow of time (Gen 1:14–15). This is an act of primordial creation, and it is described in the Hebrew of Amos 5:8 in the past tense. Within this fundamental order, YHWH continually transforms darkness into morning (here begins the use of present participles) and, correspondingly, darkens day into night. These two activities counterbalance each other. Judgment is not predominant in the first part of Amos 5:8.

The divine summoning of the waters of the sea to pour out on the earth in the second part of Amos 5:8 has been interpreted as both threatening and beneficial. The first impression may be that of a devastating storm or flood, with associations of judgment that are developed in the final hymnic passage in Amos 9:5–6, where this motif recurs.¹⁸ The counterposing divine movements in the first part of Amos 5:8, however, allow a place in the second part of the verse for the image of rain-bearing winds from the sea that water the land.¹⁹ The implicit joining of destructive and generative activity again widens the scope of the verse beyond judgment.

The evocation of wide-ranging, even contrasting cosmic movements in Amos 5:8 leads up to the introduction of YHWH, whose name is revealed here in its simplest, most essential form: “YHWH is his name.”²⁰ The continual alteration of present realities within a fundamental primordial order shows who YHWH is, and this is the framework within which the destruction of the strong in Amos 5:9 is presented. Their fortresses cannot isolate them from the changing patterns of YHWH’s activity in the creation he has ordered.²¹

¹⁸Jeremias, *Book of Amos*, 91; James L. Crenshaw, *Hymnic Affirmation of Divine Justice* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975) 128.

¹⁹James L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 95, and Paul, *Amos*, 168–169 n. 99, favor this reading. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 241 n. 93, notes the ambiguity of the reference here.

²⁰The epithet “God of hosts” occurs in Amos 5:14, 15, and 16.

²¹Cf. Job 9:4–12.

AT THE CORE OF JUDGMENT

Standing at the center of the book of Amos, Amos 4:13 and 5:8–9 offer a glimpse of the cosmic arena in which YHWH forms and creates, transforms, treads, calls, and pours out continually. These hymnic pieces may seem to intrude like “meteor-like material witnesses of another world,”²² but in doing so they enlarge the frame of reference for Israel’s current state. They place the images of universal mourning that begin (Amos 1:2) and close (Amos 9:5–6) the book within a fuller vision of YHWH, God of hosts. In the realm of this God, what strikes human senses as a sudden rupturing of the order on which life depends is part of a larger reality in which light transmutes into dark, just as dark changes to light; in which mountains in their massive solidity and wind with its powerful fluctuations are created together; in which the constellations mark the heavens even as waters engulf the earth. It is within this ever-shifting spectrum of cosmic activity that destruction can erupt upon the strong and their strongholds.²³

“the accusations raised against the kingdom of Israel throughout the book of Amos give a sense of how the Israelites have misread their God”

Yet the destiny of Israel is not wholly beyond human comprehension, since YHWH reveals his thoughts continually (Amos 4:13). Those who fail to turn towards and attend to YHWH (4:6–11) must meet their God unprepared (4:12). Nor are Israel’s circumstances beyond human choice. Those who overturn justice and righteousness (Amos 5:7) are invited to live by acknowledging the God who seeks these qualities above all other signs of acknowledgment (Amos 5:14–15, 24; see also Ps 97). Hovering around that choice, however, is the prospect of human lamentation and wailing (Amos 5:1–2, 16–17).

The accusations raised against the kingdom of Israel throughout the book of Amos give a sense of how the Israelites have misread their God. By abusing the helpless, the nation has “profaned” God’s “holy name” (Amos 2:7). They have flouted the divine presence by reveling in profits taken at the expense of the poor at religious sites of their own choosing (Amos 2:8). They have suppressed the prophets and nazirites raised up by YHWH as witnesses to his presence (Amos 2:11–12). Their expressions of allegiance to YHWH are wholly inappropriate (Amos 5:21), since their rituals are disengaged from the practice of justice (Amos 5:24). These religious observances have at the same time been perfunctory and begrudging (Amos 8:5). It would seem that the Israelites have minimized YHWH, refusing to recognize the divine reality that encompasses the world they have constructed.

²²Erhard S. Gerstenberger, “Psalms in the Book of the Twelve: How Misplaced are They?” in *Thematic Threads in the Book of the Twelve* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003) 82.

²³Cf. Jeremias, *Book of Amos*, 77.

The metaphor of the mourning earth that opens the book presages the human lamentation that is pending due to this misreading. It is also a sign of the reality of the God who gives voice from the temple in Jerusalem. The withered, mourning earth is a visual figure of the larger movements of God in and through the world, movements that are depicted more fully in the hymnic passages that follow.

It must be stressed, however, that this metaphor, like much prophetic language, is a *figure* of the movement of God. It cannot be applied directly to natural disasters like drought and famine or to political violence and upheaval and used to decode these phenomena as divine judgments. By imaging such catastrophes the metaphor of the mourning earth, rather, reminds the audience of Amos that they cannot hope to secure an existence untouched by God. They will inevitably encounter YHWH, because, as Amos 1:2 illustrates, God's voice reaches throughout the land and, as Amos 4:13; 5:8–9; and 9:5–6 proclaim, God's handprint and footprint are everywhere.

In Amos 5:4 and 5:6 the prophetic voice urges its audience—past and present—to seek God proactively and “live.” The parallel exhortation in Amos 5:14–15a clarifies how this can happen:

Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.
Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate.

The phrase “just as you have said” is a deft probe, reminding the audience how they have assumed that YHWH is their advocate and how, perhaps, they have deceived themselves into believing that they desire his presence. That they have seriously mistaken God is clear in Amos's exposure of their distortion of justice (Amos 5:7, 10–13). At the core of the practice of justice, however, as the pivotal position of the hymn in Amos 5:8–9 testifies, is recognition of the pervasive reality of YHWH, the God who is (Exod 3:14). ⊕

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