

THE THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL ETHIC OF AMOS

The work and message of the prophet Amos¹ were based upon and conditioned by his personality and beliefs. His particular vocation as a prophet made him set himself against the civil and religious leaders of his contemporary society and the social conditions and religious rites they maintained and practised, and the comparison resulted in judgments which formed the major part of his message of moral condemnation and theological development. Both the method and the message were to be of importance for subsequent theological development in later prophets. Prior to his public preaching little is known of Amos. No longer can he be considered as merely a simple shepherd wrenched from his flock by God to deliver a message to the people of the northern kingdom. Yet opinions as to his position in the southern kingdom have varied from describing him as a person of high rank and the one responsible for the greater part of the temple herd, to the suggestion that he was one of the sheep breeders of Tekoa. The use of cultic tradition and form in his oracles has been taken to suggest that he had close associations with the cult, perhaps through holding some cultic office, though it seems obvious that he was not one of the prophets directly linked with it :

'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son ; but I am
a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees' (7:14)

Though little of his personal life is known, his theology and ethical judgments highlight and give depth to his personality and he stands out as one of the great moral leaders of the Chosen People.

His message was given at a time of prosperity. It announced impending doom and judgment, for with the prosperity had come its attached vices of extortion, hypocrisy, corruption and social injustice. Frequently the prophets complained about the times of prosperity (Is. 1:17-23 ; 3:14 ; Mich. 2:1-2. 8-11. 3:6 ; Soph. 1:9). In Osee 12:9 Ephraim says, "Yes I have become rich, I have amassed a fortune," and according to Isaiah 'The land is full of silver and gold and treasures past counting (Is. 2:7). A major cause for complaint was the control of the land by the wealthy in such a way that it led to the impoverishment of the poor. The officials of the monarchy drew their profits from their posts and the kings' favours. The wealth of the

¹ I am indebted to the following : J. D. Watts, *Vision and Prophecy in Amos* ; A. S. Kapelrud, *Central Ideas in Amos* ; R. S. Cripps, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos* ; W. Brueggeman, 'Amos iv 4-13 Israel's Covenant Worship', *Vetus Testamentum* 1965, pp. 1ff ; W. S. McCullough, 'Some Suggestions on Amos', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 1953, pp. 247ff.

rich was badly distributed and obtained through injustice (cf. Mich. 2:2 ; Os. 12:8).

The basic faults in society which aroused Amos were the luxurious life of the richer classes, the injustice of the courts, oppression of the poor and weak, immorality, and hypocrisy in worship. First there was the luxury and indulgence in extravagant building, in food and drink and in idleness, all of which were helping to sap the national character. The extravagance of the buildings was referred to by Amos when he speaks of the summer and winter houses (3:15) some of them constructed from hewn stone, which was unusual (5:11 cf. Mich. 6:15 ; Soph. 1:13). The fittings of the houses of the rich were also considered worthy of mention. There were costly furnishings, beds inlaid with ivory and provided with damask cushions (3:12-15 ; 6:4). The occupants of these homes would appear to have had as their motto Isaiah's saying : " Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die ! " They excelled in drinking wine, often from sacral vessels (2:8, 9, 12 ; 6:6), and their womenfolk, the ' cows of Bashan ' (4:1) drank as much as their husbands (4:1 ; 6:6). Their banqueting tables were provided with the choicest foods ; lambs, calves, fatted beasts (5:22 ; 6:4). The prophet sums up the luxury of the wealthy :

' Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory
and stretch themselves upon their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock
and calves from the midst of the stall :
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp
and like David invent for themselves instruments of music ;
who drink wine in bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils ' (6:4-6).

The prophets often complain about the venality of the judges (Is. 1:23 ; Mich. 3:1-3 ; 9-11 ; 7:1-3) and Amos is no exception for he found injustice in every aspect of Israelite life. The judges act corruptly in the oppression of the poor for the sake of money : even for a pair of shoes. The judges receive money for the betraying of the innocent and the cheating of the needy out of their land : ' they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes ' (2:6). Their transgressions are many and the true administrator of justice ' at the gate ' is hated. Those who seek justice are trampled underfoot through the very institutions which are intended to secure justice (5:7 ; 12 cf. Lam. 3:19). The message of the Lord was addressed to the corrupt administrators :

' But you have turned justice into poison
and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood ' (6, 12)

The injustice in Israelite society struck most at the poor and the weak. Creditors showed no pity to their dependants, and worked together with the courts to oppress the poor (2:6-8; 8:6). The prophets took up the cause of the weak and poor (Is. 3:14-15; 10:2; 11:4; Am. 4:1; 5:12) and Deuteronomic laws expanded the legislation found in Exodus (cf. Ex. 22:24-26; 23:6 and Deut. 15:7-11; 24:12-13; 24:14-15). There was a long history of conflict between the organised rich and the defenceless poor. The prophets were not however revolutionaries trying to overturn the established order but moralists, full of sympathy for the poor, who defended the poor with the fervour of preachers. The prophets attack the abuses and the lawmakers of Deuteronomy legislate for the poor and the weak: 'For the poor will never cease out of the land: therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land (Deut. 15:11).

Amos had considerable acquaintance with the cultic rites of his day—sanctuaries, festivals, sacred music and the offerings. What struck him most about the worship of Israel was the moral deficiencies and shallowness of the worshippers. Their attitude was summed up in the derisive words:

'Come to Bethel, and transgress
to Gilgal and multiply transgression'

They were zealous in acts of outward religion. There were many sacrifices (4:4), peace-offerings (5:22), meal offerings (5:22), thank-offerings (4:5), freewill offerings and tithes (4:4-5). But these were mere ritualistic observances lacking in any internal holiness. This religious activity had little effect in the day to day life of these people. Ritualism compared ill with injustice. The religious interests of Israel were summed up by Amos:

'bring your sacrifices every morning,
your tithes every three days
offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened
and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them:
for so you love to do, O people of Israel!' (4:4-5).

Against these travesties of God's will for society and people Amos sets his own personal belief and is forced to pronounce Israel's guilt. The prophet's idea of God has features which do not enter into the usual Yahwistic scheme, but nevertheless fit into the basic structure of Yahwistic faith. He had no doubt that Yahweh was Lord and Master above all gods, the Creator and sustainer of nature:

'He who forms the mountains, and creates the wind
and declares to man what is his thought
who makes the morning darkness
and treads on the heights of the earth—
the Lord, the god of hosts is his name' (4:13)

He is great, and possesses power all over and even beneath the earth, and fixes the stars in the firmament: 'who made the Pleiades and Orion . . . darkens the day into night' (5:8). As Yahweh God of hosts he controls heaven and earth, nature and nations, and can punish all be they on the heights of Carmel or in the depths of Sheol (9:2-6). Israel's God has been depicted before as the God of nature (Gen. 19:24; Ex. 12:29; Jg. 5:5), but in Amos's deism there is a more universalistic trait. Never is his god merely the God of Israel. In fact He is never given that title. The interests of Yahweh spread beyond the confines of Israel and Judah. He is behind the movements of all nations (9:7) and has had a part in all man's history and destiny (2:13; 4:6-7; 7:4; 8:9; 9:2). He can punish all the nations such as Damascus, Gaza, Edom, Tyre and Israel's neighbours (Chaps. 1 and 2).

This glimmer of universalism did not lead to any denial of the special relationship existing between Yahweh and Israel for Amos's mission is after all 'Go prophesy to *my* people Israel.' Yet Amos's theology of this relationship of Israel with Yahweh is closely related to judgment upon the ills of his contemporary society. His basic themes of divine justice and judgment, conversion and covenant are all aspects of his treatment.

Nowhere does Amos make explicit reference to the covenant, but all his warnings and judgements depend upon his belief in the relationship existing between Israel and its God. Yahweh their God has had a part in the history of all nations, and all are responsible to Him for sins against their fellow men, but to Israel He has become known in a special way. This has conferred special privileges upon the chosen people, but also makes special demands upon Israel—it is no onesided bargain. Because of the covenant Israel must mirror in its leaders and its life the justice, truth and mercy of God. God has manifested his justice to other nations already (1-2) and the message of Amos is that by punishing Israel for its sins God's justice will be once more manifested. God has created the moral order, and has power to act everywhere and punish transgressions such as oppression (1:3-4), slavery (1:6), the breaking of covenants (1:9), lack of mercy (1:11) immorality (1:13) and irreligion (2:1). These standards are not just for one nation, but are ethical norms for all mankind. Within creation there was to be right order, and this would be especially demanded of the 'Virgin Israel', God's people.

The requirements of God's justice were that within the covenantal framework there should be right behaviour and this involved more than externalism in religion. It demanded a right way of living together with one's neighbours. The election of Israel meant that the nation had God with it, but the nation (or its leaders) had taken God's favour in the deliverance of the exodus as an excuse for nationalism, and onesided gains. They accepted the privileges but not the obligations of the covenant of love, and lived with a sense of false security and self-righteousness. The words of the prophet told the people what were the requirements of justice and life in fulfilment of the covenant. 'Seek the Lord and live' (5:6). Only with the restoration of good living will God be truly present :

' Seek good and not evil
that you may live
and so the Lord the God of hosts will be with you
as you have said
hate evil and love good
and establish justice in the gate . . .
but let justice roll down like waters
and righteousness like an everflowing stream '
(5:14-15, 24)

Amos like the other prophets looks back to the Exodus (5:25) and sees in the period in the desert the ideal period for relations between God and His people (cf. Os. 2:16-17 ; Jer. 2 & 1-3). With the nomadic life there was no extravagance in worship which was now so conspicuous in Israelite life : the cult might be poor but it was sincere. Jeremiah was to take up Amos's call :

' For in the day that I brought them out of Egypt
I did not speak to your fathers or command them
concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices '
(Jer. 7:22 cf. Am. 5:25).

The election of Israel which is due exclusively to Yahweh's free act should not be overestimated by the Israelites. The warnings of Amos are precisely the same as those found in the Deuteronomic reform : 'Do not say in your heart "It is because of my righteousness that my Lord has brought me in to possess this land" . . . Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land' (Deut. 9:4-6). The Israelites are saying 'Evil shall not overtake or meet us (9:10) yet the Lord warns them 'Are you not like the Ethiopians to me O Israel' (9:7 cf. 2:9-11 ; 3:2). The obligations of the covenant could not be discharged by cultic activity alone (5:21-24) and because of the hypocrisy, injustice, luxury and deceit Yahweh was no longer in fact present in Israel's worship (4:4 ; 5:2).

The whole future of this elect nation would depend upon its future relationship with God, and God's desire was not at first the death of the sinful nation but that it might be converted to Yahweh and the keeping of the covenant. Sincere repentance was necessary. (5:4-6, 14ff)

One of the central topics of prophecy was conversion. The sinful people must turn away from their sin of idolatry, their materialistic greed for power and their mocking of the covenant through their extravagant but empty ritual. They should return to the early fervour of Exodus days and return to faithfulness to Yahweh who is always true to his promises. Consequently, although Amos's message does announce Israel's doom and heralds the punishment of Israel, he does strive to restore the sinful nation to God by awakening repentance and seeking covenant renewal. He attempts this in three ways: by reiterating the divine lesson of history, seeking covenant renewal and then pleading for Israel, in the account of the visions.

Yahweh has during the course of the nation's history tried to reprove it for its faults by natural hazards and national defeats. As a father chastises his son in the hope of restoring all to order God has acted against Israel (Deut. 8:5 'Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you.'). There has been famine (4:6), drought (4:7-8), pestilence and plague of locusts (4:9) and conquest (4:10f) increasing in severity but all these attempts to secure a return to faithfulness had failed in the past.

'Yet you did not return to me says the Lord.' All has been in vain. This was the message too of Osee: 'for all this they do not return to the Lord their God nor seek him' (Os. 7:10). 'The people did not turn to him who smote them, nor seek the Lord of hosts' (Is. 9:13). All the prophets tried to teach the lesson of history but to little avail (Is. 9:12; 42:25; Jer. 2:30; 5:3; Soph. 3:2-7 cf. Rv. 9:20-21; 16:9-11).

It has been noted that Amos makes no direct reference to the covenant, but recent work on Amos 4:4-13 suggests that the whole passage is a call to repentance through a form of covenant renewal. The form critics have shown how the prophets used older cultic traditions. Vv. 4-13 are to be best understood by putting them in the setting of a cultic renewal of the covenant. In such a rite v. 12 is a call for preparation for covenant renewal (cf. Ex. 19:11; Jer. 61:12):

'Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel,
because I will do this to you
prepare to meet your God, O Israel'

Israel only goes through the motions of covenant memorial rites for they have so little effect on their everyday life. The covenant is

broken (vv. 4-5) and consequently there is judgment upon the nation (vv. 6-12), but there is hope for the people in a renewal or return to the covenant obligations, and all should be restored to their true relationship with the Lord of the covenant (v. 13). No longer would the time, place and actions of covenant worship be abused.

Whether or not Amos sought to bring Israel to repentance by referring to the lesson of history or calling for covenant renewal the account of the visions shows his attempt to obtain repentance, but the frustration of his failure leaves him with almost no hope. The first vision of the plague of locusts (7:1-3) is a message of warning about the intended judgment upon Israel. Yet the prophet considers it as part of his vocation to make intercession for Israel, and he is successful in that 'the Lord repented concerning this. "It shall not be," said the Lord.' The judgment and punishment to be meted out according to the second vision of fire (vv. 4-6) is essentially the same as in the first vision, but is more far reaching. Amos by his intercession won God to forgiveness and hoped to have some effect on the people. But with the third vision there is no intercession by the prophet—all his attempts had failed. It had been possible in the past within the framework of the covenant for the people to intercede to their God, but the corruption and immorality showed how empty their lives were, and how for the people (though never for Yahweh) the covenant had ceased to have any reality. Yahweh no longer gave any possibility for intercession, repentance and forgiveness.

Once his intercession had failed Amos turned to judgment upon the sins of his contemporaries. Refusal to accept that there were covenantal obligations brought with it judgment, chastisement and destruction. There is a judgment against false worship: Their temple songs will be turned into wailings and lamentations and their feasts into mourning (8:3-10) for Yahweh hates and despises the feasts and solemn assemblies (5:21f). The altars of Bethel and the horns of the altars will be cut down (3:14). The life of luxury will be changed into deprivation and exile (5:4; 4:3f; 6:4f; 8:13). The prosperity of the wealthy will collapse with their houses; they shall not enjoy the wine of their fine vineyards, and in the destruction of the cities and land they are told:

' Your wife shall be a harlot in the city
and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword
and your land shall be parcelled out by line;
you yourself shall die in an unclean land,
and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land'

But the greatest calamity of all would not be the hunger, plague, death and destruction but the virtual extinction of the covenant which depen-

ded on the presence of Yahweh in Israel. The ultimate punishment appears to be the absence of Yahweh for 'the days are coming when I will send a famine of hearing the words of God . . . they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord but they shall not find it.' (8:11-12) The 'day of Yahweh' would be a day of visitation by Him, not for glory but punishment and destruction. Instead of light there would be darkness, instead of deliverance fiery judgment (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2; 5:6, 18-20).

Although the message of Amos is one of moral judgment there are passages which give hope for the future. It is possible that 'the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph (5:15) and the hope lies in the Davidic line. Even after Yahweh's visitation there is the prospect of a limited activity in the community for there will be the 'stout of heart' and those of Samaria who have been rescued, ten in every hundred (2:16; 3:12; 5:3; 8:11-13). Amos who was convinced of Israel's election saw that Yahweh would continue His covenant in some form by restoring the Davidic house :

" In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins
and rebuild it as in the days of old
that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name "
says the Lord who does this' (9:11-15).

These concluding verses of the book (9:11-15) are in such contrast with the darkness and death of God's punishment that some authors have denied that they are Amos's work.

Amos's description of the ills of society and the neglect of the covenant finds its counterpart in the later prophets, but the assurance he gave that the covenant and God's promise were to persevere was to be a foundation upon which all the prophets built, especially Isaiah and the author of second-Isaiah (Is. 40-55). Because of his task of announcing judgment he had earlier eliminated a direct reference to his belief in the election of the Davidic house. 'Only as he drew his ministry to a close, as he framed his message of judgment within the greater plan of God, did he draw on this element of his heritage for hope that Yahweh would yet fulfil the promise of election' (Watts).

B. ALGER