



'Let justice flow...'

A Lent study guide of Amos by
Richard Grocott

This Bible Study will challenge comfortable faith but will also feed and nourish those who seek to better understand their world and their place within God's creation.

Scripture quotations and readings taken from the Holy Bible, The New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE) except where stated otherwise.



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With thanks.

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R. Grocott

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Foreword

*Do you know what I want? I want justice - oceans of it
I want fairness - rivers of it.
That's what I want. That's all I want.
(Amos 5:24, The Message)*

In 2016 I had the privilege to be the Vice-President of the Methodist Conference. I ended my address to the Methodist Conference with those powerful words from the prophet Amos, describing God's endless, irresistible longing for justice.

We need God's rivers of justice now. We need them where people feel overwhelmed by poverty or live in fear of war. Where the climate crisis is destroying livelihoods and lives and biodiversity is being lost. Where people are experiencing discrimination or oppression. Where people are fleeing conflict, persecution and poverty and risking their lives to find sanctuary. We need fairness, justice and love.

So what does God's justice look like for the world now, and what does it mean for us, as Methodists, to be a justice-seeking people? The Methodist Conference last year adopted the 'A Justice-seeking Church' report as a framework to support Methodists in their Christian discipleship as justice-seekers. As part of this, the report offered six Principles for Justice which describe the underpinnings of our beliefs about a God of justice. The themes of these Principles for Justice can be found woven throughout the Bible, as indeed they are through the book of Amos.

This London District Lent Bible study of the prophet Amos is an opportunity to explore what it means to be a prophetic people, seeking justice in today's church and world. As the 'A Justice-seeking Church' report reminds us:

Christian discipleship includes the call to be and to act as a prophetic community; people who are both willing to recognise and engage with the reality of the 'world as it is', and who yet look with hope and anticipation to the 'world as it should be', and in all their actions seek to bring about that transformation.¹

I hope that this study of the prophet Amos, alongside the themes of the 'A Justice-seeking Church' report, will help us all to look deeply into what the prophet is helping reveal to us of God's nature and God's justice - and to explore what challenges this gives to us as God's people today in London and beyond.

Rachel Lampard, Director of Social Action and Social Justice, The Methodist Church

¹ All references to and citations are from 'A Justice-Seeking Church: A guide to the 2023 Methodist Conference report on the Walking with Micah project', available at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/30703/justice-seeking-church-guide-to-report-1023.pdf> (accessed 15 January 2024).

Introduction

'Let justice flow' is a six-session Bible study based on the ministry of the Old Testament prophet Amos. The study addresses issues of social justice raised by Amos in the light of the 2023 Methodist Conference report 'A Justice-seeking Church: Walking with Micah'.

Amos lived some 800 years before the birth of Jesus, during an era of great economic wealth and political stability. However, it was also an era of great income inequality. While the rich lived sumptuous lives of affluence and splendour, the majority of the population lived in abject poverty. It was a society that claimed to be deeply religious, but it failed to uphold decent values of justice. Amos receives a calling from God to challenge the social and economic injustices that he sees all around him.

Amos uses lots of colourful images - a lion roaring from Zion, a plumb line, a bowl of fruit - some beautiful poetic language and a host of rhetorical devices to enliven his urgent message predicting impending doom for those who fail to change their ways.

This study could be used by groups or individuals at any time of the year. However, it would be particularly appropriate for a Lent study group. The study raises the kind of deep and searching questions of faith that befit a meaningful Lent study. What kind of God would allow such pain and suffering to occur in his world? Can God's people expect protection from natural or human-made disasters?

As the study also engages with issues raised by the 'A Justice-seeking Church' report, we ask what Christians today can do to help bring about a more just and caring world. This study will challenge comfortable faith but will also feed and nourish those who seek to better understand their world and their place within God's creation.

'A Justice-seeking Church'

The Methodist Conference of 2023 adopted the report 'A Justice-seeking Church: Walking with Micah'. It also commended it to the wider Methodist Church throughout Great Britain for prayerful study and action. It is a response to our calling as Christians to explore what it means to act justly, love kindness and walk humbly with God (see Micah 6:8), which is seen as integral to a Methodist way of life. For details of this report, see the Appendix.

As the report emphasises, Methodists (now and in the past) have always challenged injustice, worked for change and supported people experiencing injustices. As a Church, we face the challenges of declining membership and limited energy, but we also continue

to have a commitment to being an inclusive, growing, evangelistic and justice-seeking church. As we face economic, ecological, political and social changes in Britain and the world, the time is right for a renewed focus on justice and a fresh approach for our Church.

The report draws on Methodist history, theology, current concerns and practice, and recommends a framework of:

- Principles of justice which underpin our understanding of God's justice and what it means to seek justice.
- Priorities for justice to focus Methodist efforts and resources on key issues.
- Practices for justice which help us to be more effective and rooted in God in our justice seeking.

For the purposes of this Bible study, we are going to concentrate on the six Principles for Justice, which underpin our understanding of God's justice and what it means to seek justice:

- God entrusts those in power with a special responsibility for upholding justice. Those seeking justice will encourage and challenge those with power to fulfil their vocation.
- God calls all people and nations actively to work for peace and justice, liberation and transformation. It is never just someone else's responsibility. We all have a part to play.
- God desires the flourishing of creation and human community within it. The search for justice does not diminish or limit the flourishing of others but seeks to enable it.
- God consistently shows a bias to people experiencing poverty and those who are excluded. The search for justice must attend to those who live in poverty, and those who are marginalised in other ways, as a priority.
- God made humans in the image of God, each worthy of equal value and dignity. The search for justice entails treating others with respect, and may involve reclaiming lost worth.
- God calls us to live in hope and in ways that reflect God's character and the pattern of God's kingdom. Thus, seeking justice involves honesty and truth, and may demand protest and resistance, restitution, forgiveness, reconciliation and, ultimately, transformation.

In each study we will be introduced to one of these Principles in ways that link with the study of Amos. The intention is to stimulate conversation about ways of taking forward this agenda in the life of our churches.

Suggestions for a group Bible study

1. Group Bible studies, during Lent or at any other time of the year, are a wonderful opportunity for Christians to grow and share fellowship. It is through the sharing of personal insights and experiences that we are open to the presence of God's Holy Spirit and learn from each other.
2. It is important for the group to work together; we need to create the right atmosphere in our study group so that this becomes a safe place where we can feel at ease to share our innermost thoughts and feelings.
3. It is important that we have a shared agreement of working together before we begin. First and foremost, confidentiality. Unless consent is given, what is said in the meeting remains in the meeting. We do not repeat comments made during the discussions outside, out of respect for one another.
4. Groups function better when we do not allow one or more persons to dominate or overpower the discussions. Inevitably there will be subjects that we feel passionately about, but we must be sensitive to the presence of others who may also wish to contribute. Listen attentively to others in your group and respect their contributions. Remember that there are no definitively right or wrong answers to questions.
5. The group leader may not necessarily have all the answers to the questions posed but plays an important role in keeping the study going and bringing the study to an end.

Study One:

Amos the prophet

*'The LORD roars from Zion
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds wither,
and the top of Carmel dries up.'*
Amos 1:2

ato da mangiare, ho
ato da bere."
ve me food, I was
me drink."
timothy Schmalz



Confession: God of Mercy

All over our world, we see nations and people torn apart by hate and war.
Old wounds refuse to heal, grudges continue from generation to generation.
God have mercy:

Christ have mercy.

We long for peace between nations.
Watching the unfolding horrors on social and television media,
we swipe to the next story because the suffering is too much to bear.
God have mercy:

Christ have mercy.

We play our part in the conflicts of our time, swapping a story at a friend's expense,
envying another's success.
God have mercy:

Christ have mercy.

We find it hard to live up to your teaching.
Forgiveness is a challenge for those
more worthy than we believe ourselves to be.
God have mercy:

Christ have mercy.

We struggle to find peace in our hearts, filling the emptiness and fear
with those things that harm us and hurt others.
God have mercy:

Christ have mercy.

We long to meet the Prince of Peace.
Help us not to be satisfied with an absence of war but to seek the peace that is offered by
your Spirit.
God have mercy:

Christ have mercy.

Michaela Youngson
From *The Weaver, the Word and Wisdom: Worshipping the Triune God* (Inspire, 2007).
Adapted with permission.

Study One

Amos the prophet

Imagine what it must have been like to live 800 years before Jesus. The territory was very different from Israel/Palestine today. God's people lived in two kingdoms, Israel to the north and Judah to the south. It was a good time to live in these lands if you were from a wealthy family. There was peace and prosperity. Food, wine, good housing and fine clothes were all available. You had been brought up to believe that you deserved all these things because you were part of God's chosen people; your wealth and fine living showed what a righteous person you were.

In the reigns of King Jeroboam in the north and King Uzziah of Judah in the south you also felt safe and protected. It had been a long time since there had been a war and you had no reason to believe that things would change. Yes, you had noticed that there were some very impoverished people in your land, but wasn't that the way of the world? Weren't there always going to be poorer people; hadn't God ordained things that way? You have a clear conscience, you are a pious Jew, you worship regularly at the Temple, you even sacrifice animals when needed, the priests told you how close you are to God.



But who is this seedy-looking character who keeps standing up and preaching in the marketplace? People have told you that his name is Amos, and he's a shepherd. A dirty shepherd! Why should anyone take what he says seriously? He says that he's a prophet and he has an urgent message that he wants everyone to hear. He certainly speaks with great passion, and lots of people do come out to hear him. But his message is making you feel very uncomfortable. He's saying that all this wealth and affluence you have enjoyed for so many years is a sham and God isn't at all happy with the way his people are behaving. What should you do?



Read: Amos 1:1-2

Amos's book is the third in a collection in the Old Testament known as the Minor Prophets. This term doesn't mean that their books are not important; it simply means that when compared with prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, their works are quite short.

As the verses we have just read suggest, Amos was by vocation a sheep herder and dresser of sycamore trees. His home town was Tekoa, in the highlands of Judah, about five miles south of Bethlehem. Amos's calling was to challenge the way the rich and wealthy were living. This made him very unpopular. In the next few sessions, we will be hearing more about this message, how Amos shared it and how it was received.



Reflection: Think of a person like Amos you have encountered who challenged what you think and believe? How did it feel?

A prophet in Old Testament times was someone called by God to preach a message to the people, but also to represent the people before God, to intercede before God when times were hard. Sometimes the prophet was called to challenge the status quo, and this meant challenging the rulers of the nation, their kings and queens to behave in ways that were worthy of their faith. This would often mean preaching a very unpopular message that the king, rulers, priests and wealthy merchants didn't want to hear. Sometimes the lives of the prophets may even have been placed in danger. Often their messages included predictions about the future, a future in which unless the people changed their ways, God would punish them. Sometimes, when people don't want to hear a difficult message, they turn to others with a more comforting message. This is what happened to Amos in 7:10-17.



Read: Amos 7:10-17

In these verses, Amos the upstart outsider challenges the established religious leadership of his time, represented by a professional prophet named Amaziah. Amaziah is a priest in charge of the official sanctuary and all the ceremonies performed there. He claims he has a genuine calling from God which has been properly certified. He does this job for a living and probably lives quite comfortably. Amos, on the other hand, comes from another country, and his profession has been raising sheep. He's not a priest and he doesn't have all the right qualifications. Nevertheless, he is convinced that his calling to preach a completely different message is genuine and comes from God.

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Amos's words are harsh and difficult for the people to hear. Amaziah tries to ridicule him in verse 11: 'For thus Amos has said, "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile".' In other words, who would really believe this nonsense? He tells Amos to clear off and go back home: 'Flee away to the land of Judah ... but never again prophesy again at Bethel' (Bethel was the main shrine in Israel). Amos decides to stand up to this bully, and in verses 16 and 17 warns him what will happen to him and his people if they don't listen to his message: 'You yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'



Now let's turn to our first Principle for Justice:



God entrusts those in power with a special responsibility for upholding justice. Those seeking justice will encourage and challenge those with power to fulfil their vocation.

The summary on page 33 of the report says that in the Bible, there are expectations of what it is to be a good ruler and to have legitimate power over others. Jesus shows a very different approach to the use of power: trust in God shows how, through love, power can be liberating. Power distorts perspectives, and therefore the powerful require a humility of heart as well as mind to be challenged by God. Power must not be abdicated through a reluctance to accept responsibility. The pursuit of justice, like love, is the task of everyone, irrespective of status.



Questions

1. Thinking of the way in which Amos challenges Amaziah, how do we discern when people are speaking in the name of God?
2. How can we better encourage others to use their power to call for justice in the world?
3. Can you think of good examples or bad examples of leaders who seek to uphold or flout justice in the world? Over the next week, be attentive to issues of justice in our world. Be attentive to leaders who seek to uphold justice and those who flout justice in the world.

Study Two

Amos warns the nations of the world

*Thus says the LORD:
for three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they sell the righteous for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals
Amos 2:6*

FIRE

TURN



Prayer of Confession

Loving God, we come to you in this season of Lent, conscious of our own weaknesses and our own inability to live lives that reflect your glory and your holiness. Your prophets of old call us to recognise and challenge injustice in the world around us and to behave in ways that show that we follow a God who is caring and compassionate. Instead, we have been shallow, selfish and self centred. We have thought of satisfying our own needs and desires before the needs of others.

The prophet Amos has reminded us that you expect better from us and that there will be consequences for those who fail to take your word seriously.

Have mercy on us as we reflect for a moment on our shortcomings.

(A moment of silence.)

Here is the good news - ours is a God who is slow to punish and quick to forgive. We believe that, as a sign of this, you sent your Son into our world to be our Lord and Saviour. In Jesus we find a God who forgives all who truly confess their sins. A God of love and grace who wants all his people to enjoy a fresh start and live life in all its fullness.

Amen, thanks be to God.

Now may we be sent out in your service to live and work to your praise and glory, Amen.

Study Two

Amos warns the nations of the world

Every time we listen to the news on radio or TV, or when we pick up a newspaper, it would appear that there are stories of people who do not experience justice in their lives. Some might suggest that we tire of these.



Reflection: How do we strike a balance between the stories of pain and horror affecting people's lives and stories of good news?

Chapter 1 of Amos reads a bit like a long news story in which the Lord, speaking through the prophet, recounts a list of events in which the nations of the world have behaved badly. These are often described as the 'Oracles against the nations' and occupy a large section of this book.



Read: Amos 1:3–2:16

In these verses, Amos begins by lambasting the traditional enemies of Israel for their wayward behaviour. Later, his judgement turns to God's own people. Amos says that they will be subject to the same standards as other nations are.

To begin with, Amos speaks of God's judgement on seven of Israel's neighbours who have long been regarded as enemies. In each prophecy we see a very similar pattern. Each begins with the so-called messenger formula, 'Thus says the LORD', followed by a number sentence, 'For three transgressions ... and for four ...'. This was a rhetorical device often used in Wisdom literature (e.g. Proverbs) to emphasise importance. Amos then names the transgressions, delivers the Lord's judgement and ends with a second 'Thus says the LORD' for effect!

Let's have a quick look at these. To begin with, in verses 3-5, the focus is on Damascus, or Aram as the country is known in Old Testament texts. Aram is an old enemy, but no longer considered to be a threat. Nevertheless, events of past history are recalled and the threat

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that they will be exiled to the city of Kir, from where they originally came.

In verses 6–8, next to draw fire is the Philistine city of Gaza, one of five Philistine cities along the south-west coast of the region. The Philistines had a long history of hostile relationships with Israel (remember the story of Samson and his battles with the Philistines in Judges 13 – 16). Although there is no conflict with Israel or Judah at this time, Amos predicts that Ashdod will be wiped out and all Philistines left in Ekron will perish.

Verses 9–10 focuses on Tyre, the chief north-western city of the Phoenicians which had become a wealthy city as a famous trading and commercial centre. They are accused of reneging on a brotherly alliance and sending others into exile, so fire will be sent on the walls of Tyre which will consume even its great palaces.



Edom (verses 11–12), located to the south-east of the Dead Sea, although controlled by Judah in this period and not considered a threat, nevertheless fire will be sent down on Teman and the palaces of Bozrah because of a historic crime of rape committed in war.

Ammon is next (verses 13–15), east of the Jordan, long since controlled by King David and no longer considered a threat to Israel. However, painful past histories are recalled in which the Ammonites are accused of a particularly vicious war crime of ripping open pregnant women while in battle. Fire will be sent down to consume their palaces, and their kings will be sent into exile.

Moab (2:1–3) was an area East of the Dead Sea which had previously rebelled against Israel, but by Amos's time, King Jeroboam had won back most of this territory. Nevertheless, their historic crime of burning the bones of an Edomite king, thus desecrating a respected grave, means that they will perish amid war cries and the sound of trumpets. A decisive military defeat in which all their officers would perish.

Up until now, Amos's prophecy has focused God's ire against the kind of 'bad guys' you might expect when any prophet worth his salt gets into his stride. Now, to the astonishment of his largely Jewish audience, he turns to the very people who saw themselves as the 'good guys': God's own people, Judah and Israel.

To begin with, Judah, the Southern Kingdom, a people who were in a covenant relationship with their God and who might have expected to be exempt from this wrath, but now even they are targeted. They have spurned the law of the Lord and been led

astray by false gods. They should have known better than this.

In chapter 2:6-12, we reach the real climax of Amos's work, the people of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, themselves. Amos has two particular points he wants to make in these verses. First of all, the Lord will grant God's people no reprieve at all for the many ways in which they have oppressed the poor and powerful (verses 6-8). The indictment lists a number of ways in which the rich and powerful have corrupted justice at the expense of the poor and powerless. They have shown a lack of concern for the poor and vulnerable and those who do not have the power to stand up for their rights. This includes selling human beings into slavery because they could not pay their debts. He also denounces sexual promiscuity and temple prostitution, which was practised by heathen religions.

Second, Israel should have known better. God has acted on its behalf so many times in the past. The very same people whom the Lord called out of slavery in Egypt to settle in their promised land of milk and honey have become so unworthy of their calling that their God is threatening to smite them. Soon they will be hit by a tremendous force, like being hit and run over by a fast-moving wagon. There will be no escape from this judgement to come. Despite their fine archers, horsemen and the bravest of warriors, all will flee in the face of the judgement to come.

So what is the gist of these diatribes?

First of all, Amos is illustrating that the God of Israel is the God of all nations, even those who do not recognise him. What is more, he expects the same decent standards of ethical behaviour in Israel as elsewhere. Everyone, whether they are Jewish or not, should know that it is wrong to murder pregnant women and to sell other human beings into slavery. So Judah and Israel, who have had a special relationship with God, should not become complacent, arrogant or self-righteous about their faith. They, more than anyone else, should know right from wrong.



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Second, what Amos is drawing attention to in these early chapters is a concern that will feature throughout this book. The God of Israel is a God who has a special concern for the poor and powerless. He has a special concern for the less-fortunate members of society and is concerned to ensure that they are treated justly. If there are no human beings who will stand up for the weak, Amos makes it clear that God has not forgotten them.

At the end of the day, the rich and powerful who are inflicting such suffering on the poor, impoverished people of their land will have to answer to God for what they have done. So the selfishness of sin does have its consequences. The punishment will fit the crime and God will surely execute justice.

Now let's turn our next Principle:



God calls all people and nations actively to work for peace and justice, liberation and transformation. It's never just someone else's responsibility. We all have a part to play.

On page 34, the report makes clear that one of God's defining characteristics is justice. All of us can be transformed as we seek to share in God's image and likeness. The diversity of our faith communities is a strength. Therefore, faith communities can achieve more when they work together for justice and resolve conflict.

Questions

1. As you read from the book of Amos, how do you feel about the concept of judgement? Alongside this, how do you experience the love of God today?
2. Is it right that God should judge people of faith with the same severity as those who do not recognise him?
3. From your experience, who comes to mind that might need their rights defending in our contemporary world?
4. What does it mean to you to share in God's image and likeness?
5. How does this image and likeness influence the way we approach issues of justice?
6. What practical steps can we take towards creating peace and justice in our world?

Study Three

Tough love in the book of Amos

*'Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'*
Amos 5:23-24



Prayers for Justice

Holy God, we live a world of such pain and suffering, a world that so desperately needs to discover your saving grace. Breathe new life into us, your people, we pray. May our faith in your loving ways inspire us to serve you in newness of life and to worship you in fervent praise.

Make us effective channels of your love and forgiveness, that our lives may touch the lives of others with the renewing power of your love.

A prayer from All We Can²

Loving God of all the world,
We hold before you the nations.
To the God who reigns over governments,
Bring justice where injustice rules.
To the God who carries a weary world without growing weak,
Give strength to the struggling and hope to the hopeless.
To the creative God who dreamt up our world,
Grant vision and insight to those with a heart to change things for the better.
To the compassionate God,
Heal what is hurting and restore what has been broken.
With grateful hearts we thank our loving God,
whose compassion never ceases,
whose love for us never runs dry,
whose fight against injustice never relents. Amen.

²'A prayer for the nations', All We Can, www.allwecan.org.uk/justice_prayer/a-prayer-for-the-nations (accessed 23 January 2024).

Study Two

Tough love in the book of Amos

In everything that flows, we see through the lens of the writer in a particular time. What marked out the people of Israel was their belief not in many gods, as was common in many Middle Eastern religions of that era, but their belief in one God, YHWH, Yahweh, the Lord. This is the only God whom Amos recognises. This God is an all-powerful God who created the world, as we read in Amos 4:13:

For 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.

As the passages we will read illustrate, the God of Amos is no tribal God whose power, influence and concern are limited to one tribe or one nation. The Lord is the Almighty God of the whole world. The flip side of this is that just as he is the Almighty Creator, so he is also the destroyer. When he looks in anger at the way people have abused his creation, he seeks justice through punishment. At times, he uses natural forces to punish and even destroy. This could be seen as tough love, rather like the way a parent disciplines a child for their own good.



In chapter 4, Amos talks of God's judgement on the cows of Bashan. Bashan was a rich pastureland in the Transjordan region. Here, the wives of wealthy landowners lived opulent lifestyles and encourage their husbands to earn more by oppressing the helpless and grinding down the poor. Amos is appalled by this indifference to the plight of the poor. (Note: the term 'cow' sounds a very harsh if not insulting way to describe a woman in our culture.

Remember, however, that in the Ancient Middle East, cows were revered, almost sacred animals.)

Amos goes on to speak of ways in which the Lord uses natural forces to inflict punishment on the selfish wealthy elites. Verse 9 reads, 'I struck you with blight and mildew, I laid waste your gardens and your vineyards; the locust devoured your fig trees and your olive trees; yet you did not return to me.' So the Lord used pestilence, drought and locusts, but still the arrogant wealthy elites would not change their ways.

At other times, the Lord uses other nations and their armies to inflict his punishment; for example, in chapter 3:11, Israel is told that 'An adversary shall surround the land and strip you of your defense, and your strongholds shall be plundered.'

The problem with this punishment is that it inflicts suffering not just on the perpetrators of injustice but on the victims as well. You would have thought that an all-loving, all-powerful God would have found a way of punishing injustice that would change the behaviour of the evildoers and give freedom to their victims, but this doesn't seem to be what happens.



Read: Amos 4:6-7

In these verses, Amos speaks of God's punishment on the whole of Israel:

I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities
and lack of bread in all your places;
yet you did not return to me ...
And I also withheld the rain from you
when there were still three months to the harvest.

You can just imagine the immense suffering this crop failure would have brought to the whole nation, rich and poor alike; a famine that would have hit the weak and the most vulnerable hardest.



Reflection: In the light of your faith journey, how do you make sense of natural disasters like earthquakes, fires, famine or pestilence?

It might appear that once God pronounces judgement in the way just described, there is no reprieve, no way back. The exceptions come in chapter 7.



Read: Amos 7:1-6

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In these verses, Amos appeals against judgement foretelling further doom on the people of Israel. A swarm of locusts was to be sent after the king's crop. Many of the farmers planted fields that came to crop two or three times a year. The proceeds from the first crop were always given as tribute to the king. It was the subsequent crops that allowed these poor subsistence farmers to feed their families and make a living. To send down pestilence on these later harvests does seem to be particularly harsh, hitting the weakest and most vulnerable farming families.

Amos seems to understand this and so he appeals to God to reconsider this judgement: 'I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!' The Lord then relents and says that this will not happen. This happens again when the Lord shows Amos a vision of a great fire devouring the land of Israel. Once again, Amos appeals to the Lord and once again the Lord relents, saying that this will not happen.



Another way of understanding these rather harsh judgements is to see them as pointing towards a final day of reckoning for Israel and her enemies. Chapter 5:18-20 describes this best:

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why do you want the day of the LORD?
It is darkness, not light,
as if someone fled from a lion
and was met by a bear ...
gloom with no brightness in it.

This verse is an example of a biblical genre known as eschatology. Eschatology is seen elsewhere in the Bible in the books of Daniel and Revelation. On the day of the Lord, it is believed, God will judge his world with extraordinary severity. For those who have sinned, like the greedy, rich leaders whom Amos speaks against, it will be a day of cataclysmic disaster; for those who have followed God's ways it will be a day of freedom and redemption.

A final and related issue we need to explore in this study concerns the authenticity of

religion in Israel. After predicting the day of the Lord in chapter 5, Amos goes on to criticise the pious but hypocritical manner in which the wealthy elites worship the Lord.



Read: Amos 5:21-27

The wealthy elites in Israel certainly know how to appear as pious, godly believers. They love to make pilgrimages to famous shrines where they enjoy sumptuous feasts. Their long, sacred ceremonies which feature offerings of grain or well-fed farm animals are a central feature of Temple worship. They believe they are pleasing God in this way, but instead Amos tells them that the Lord despises all of this, even the sound of their worship; their songs sung to the strumming of lutes appals him.

This self-seeking, self-righteous worship isn't what God wants at all. Instead, he desires that his people exercise justice and righteousness. Verse 24 is both the title of this study and a favourite verse of the famous American Baptist Preacher Martin Luther King: 'But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' This is a beautiful image of God's justice as a powerful movement of progress in his world.

Questions

1. Why do you think Amos needs to appeal towards a loving God the way he does in chapter 7?
2. Does the promise of a final day of God's judgement give you encouragement in difficult times? Or do you find this to be a frightening image?
3. Why do you think Amos appeals to God to reconsider his judgements?
4. How can authentic worship encourage justice to 'flow like a river'?

Now let's think about the next Principle:



God desires the flourishing of creation and human community within it. The search for justice does not diminish or limit the flourishing of others but seeks to enable it.

Page 31 of 'A Justice-seeking Church' reminds us that creation is intrinsically good and, as Genesis 2:18 suggests, people are made for each other. Flourishing within that

world is also about care for the environment. The wasting or exploitation of God's gifts is not just a sin against God but also represents an injustice against others.

In order to thrive, human beings and all living creatures need to respect the balance between creation and environment. We do not have the freedom to do whatever we like. Justice, flourishing and diversity are all linked and may involve us placing certain constraints on activities that might restrict the flourishing of others in the future as well as the present.



Reflection for the next study: Can you think of examples of wasteful behaviour that fails to respect God's creation?

Study Four

Wealth and justice among God's people. What went wrong in Israel?

*'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.'*
Amos 5:14



Lord, I am part of God's creation.
Make us one in you, Christ Jesus!

Lord, help me embrace difference.
Unite us in our diversity, Lord.

In the things I don't comprehend, Lord,
Make us gain your way of seeing, Lord.

When my unconscious bias shields me,
Extend our knowledge of each other, Lord.

If I should be stubborn in protecting my heritage,
Speak your truth into our common heritage, Lord.

If I am oblivious to the suffering around me,
Suffer your grace to jolt us into reality, Lord.

If modern-day slavery unfolds under my nose, Lord,
Increase the stench of oppression, such that it causes us to come up for air;
To smell injustice,
To hear cries of injustice,
To act to curb the stifling clutches of injustice.

Lord, I am blessed,
Because together we are,
For always, held in your grace;

To serve for a present age,
Free of injustice, bigotry and segregation,
A world characterised by
Your love, Lord Jesus,
Your embrace for all people.

Your acceptance of difference,
Difference that lives harmoniously,
Holding in love, contradictory convictions.

In the mighty name of our just God,
In the healing name of our Restorer God,
Powerful in grace, powerfully working in our weakness, through the saving grace offered
us in Christ Jesus, now and for always. Amen!

Revd Dr Jongikaya Zihle (September 2023)

Study Four

Wealth and faith among God's people. What went wrong in Israel?

If any nation in the world should have known how to look after the poor, the weak, the elderly and the foreigner, it was Israel. The people of Israel had been enslaved in Egypt after their ancestors had migrated there because of famine in Canaan. Then they had wandered for years in the wilderness before settling in their promised land of milk and honey where they eventually became comfortable again.

When they were set free from Egypt, they were told to remember their humble origins and to look after the dispossessed in their midst. The first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah, are full of laws and instructions that encourage the people to defend the poor. For example, in Deuteronomy 24:19-22 the people are told to under-harvest their crops and leave what remains for the poor. According to Leviticus 25:35-38, if a fellow Israelite is reduced to poverty, he must be given help and offered an interest-free loan.

However, during the time of Amos, the wealthy seem to have forgotten about their obligation to look after the poor. Their behaviour reminds us more of the Egyptians as they enslave those who have fallen into debt.



Read: Amos 5:7-15

These words are almost certainly addressed to the powerful elites of Judah and Israel. In particular, they are directed at those tasked with upholding justice in the nation. This is the first time that the words 'justice' and 'righteousness' are used by Amos. Both words are wrapped up with an understanding of God's nature as one who seeks a just legal process which defends the rights of all. Upholding the law would also mean passing appropriate judgement on those who fail to look after the poor. The leaders of the land, in particular the king and his representatives, are supposed to be appointed by God to defend this law and to embody justice and righteousness.

In these verses, we see that, in the time of Amos, justice has been poisoned and turned

on its head. Judgements made in courts of law are made not in the interests of the weak and vulnerable, but for the rich and powerful. Nobody in power seems to have respect for righteousness. All those with vested interests – legal, commercial and administrative leaders – manipulate the legal system to their advantage. Anyone who brings a genuine case to court, challenging the power of the wealthy, will be defeated. The rich are thus able to levy unreasonable taxes on the poor and even collect tributes on the grain they produce. Many of the poor were once farmers themselves. Now they have lost their land to the rich and are forced to pay rent to use the land they work. They have been reduced to little more than subsistence living.

In the meantime, the rich get richer, and use their ill-gotten gains to build expensive homes and plant pleasant vineyards. Amos warns them that they will never live in their new homes or drink the wine from their vineyards. He warns that all of this will soon be taken away from them. The Lord knows all about their crimes and their monstrous sins and soon he will act! Amos holds all people to a high moral standard, but particularly the wealthy.

Less fortunate members of society do not have the money, power or influence to defend themselves and ensure that they are treated justly.

Amos concludes this section with an appeal to his people to turn away from their wickedness before it is too late – hate evil and love good; establish justice in the courts and maybe the Lord will show favour to the righteous survivors of the wrath that is to come. If there are no human beings who will stand up for the weak, Amos makes it clear that God has not forgotten them.

Let us consider another of the Principles:



God consistently shows a bias to people experiencing poverty and those who are excluded. The search for justice must attend to those who live in poverty, and those who are marginalised in other ways, as a priority.

This Principle reminds us of a truth that has been encountered a number of times in our study of Amos. God requires us to give greater attention to those in poverty as more often their voices go unheard.

The instruction we regularly hear throughout the Old Testament is to care for widows, migrants and orphans and to relieve poverty. In the New Testament, John the Baptist advocates radical sharing with the poor (Luke 3:10-14), Paul encourages his congregations to give generously to the poor (Acts 11:27-30), and James criticises those who treat rich visitors more favourably than poor visitors (James 2:1-7).

God calls on us to act against dehumanising treatment of refugees and migrants or trafficked individuals.



Questions

1. Why do you think that, in the time of Amos, God's people had abandoned their obligation to look after the poor in their world?
2. Why do you think this is happening in our world today?
3. Do you think it is wrong for people of faith to live in wealth and luxury?
4. What do you think are the responsibilities that the rich and powerful today have towards those less fortunate than themselves?

There is further reading on inequality in Israel and Judah during the ministry of Amos in the Appendix.

Study Five

**Visions of judgement and
justice**

*'This is what the LORD GOD showed me: a basket of
summer fruit.'*

Amos 8:1



Plumb line prayer

Then God said, 'See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people.'

(Amos 7:8)

God of justice, mercy and truth,
we gather in your presence,
aware of it in all creation -
where the warmth of the sun, the strength of the wind,
the energy of the waves, the stability of the earth
all remind us of your constant love
and your power to change and challenge our lives.

God of justice, mercy and truth,
we gather in your presence,
aware that in our world
there is one law for the rich and one for the poor,
that the scales are weighted against many
of our sisters and brothers,
and against new nations struggling to become,
and to find a balance.

God of justice, mercy and truth,
we gather in your presence,
aware of our own lives -
individually and in community -
where they measure up,
where they fall short,
where they are out of kilter -
as your plumb line shows us what is true.

Help us to be true to ourselves,
true to our history,
true to our own story,
true to you. Amen

Jan Sutch Pickard



Study Five

Visions of judgement and justice

In this study, we are going to be looking at a series of visions Amos had in which God spoke to him about the message he was to share with the people of Israel.

Amos was clearly a very sincere man of God with a vivid sense of the physical reality of God in his world. Amos felt passionately about the messages the Lord had given him and he sought a variety of creative ways of relating these messages. Believed to be one of the first 'writing prophets', Amos drew upon a wide variety of poetry and prose in his literature. He also used metaphors, similes and even satire to engage his readers.

Amos is best known for his five visions in chapters 7:1-3 (locusts), 7:4-5 (fire), 7:7-9 (the plumb line), 8:1-3 (the basket of summer fruit) and 9:1-4 (earthquake and destruction).

The first two of these visions were looked at in Study 3 when we considered the ways in which Amos appealed to God not to send swarms of locusts or an all-consuming fire to devour the land in which his people lived. Amos was able to convince the Lord that these punishments for sin were excessive, and so the Lord relented. We then talked about the role of intercessory prayer in our own devotional lives.

Today, we are going to concentrate on the other three visions:

1. The plumb line (Amos 7:7-9)



If you have ever watched a plumber or a carpenter at work, you may have seen them using an instrument we call a 'spirit level' to make sure that objects are positioned straight and not out of line. In ancient times, they didn't have spirit levels; instead they used a tool called a plumb line. This was a very simple device - a metal weight tied to a piece of string. Builders would hold this line against something they were building, such as a wall, to make sure that it was straight.

In Amos 7:7-9, the Lord speaks to Amos in a vision. He shows him a wall and he holds a plumb line against the wall to illustrate how badly it has been built. In fact, it has been so badly built, the only solution is to knock the wall down and build it again. We are led to conclude that this wall is Israel. It is a country that believes it is extremely strong and has great faith in the strength of its army and its king. This vision disabuses Israel of that fallacy. She has been tested by God and found to be 'out of plumb'. The judgement is particularly harsh against the king, Jeroboam, the royal house and the religious institutions they support, their sanctuaries and shrines. All of this is a sham and will soon be laid to waste. Israel is just too small to stop the oncoming armies.

Amos doesn't dare to contest this third judgement; he knows that the Lord means business this time.

2. The basket of summer fruit (Amos 8:1-3)



One of my favourite Christian festivals is Harvest. It is one of the few times of the year when we decorate our churches with colour and beauty. Those heart-warming displays of fruit and vegetables that adorn our church sanctuaries are a highlight of the year. In many churches, Harvest festival services often begin with children bringing forward their offerings - often baskets full of freshly collected fruits from gardens and orchards.

In this fourth vision, Amos is shown a similar looking basket of summer fruit. At first glance, unlike the previous visions, there is nothing ominous about this one. There are no locusts, fires or wonky walls in this vision. In fact, a basket of ready-to-eat figs or pomegranates just looks tasty and appetising. However, what we lose in translation from the original Hebrew is a deadly play on words. The Hebrew word for 'fruit' (*qayis*) sounds just like the word for 'end' (*qes*). This meaning would have been patently clear to the Hebrew readers of this passage - Israel's time is up. 'The end has come upon my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.' This judgement is for the whole nation, not just the king and his house, not just the judges and the priests, but the whole nation is indicted.

Amos goes on to describe in quite gory detail the punishment that is to come. Songs of praise will give way to songs of lamentation. Dead bodies will pile up everywhere; there will be too many to give them all a proper burial. In the end, there is only silence, as the remaining few are left speechless in the aftermath of the judgement of God and in the presence of death. All of this from a humble basket of fruit!

Some scholars argue that this judgement is a defining moment in Amos's ministry. In earlier pronouncements of judgement, there is always the glimmer of hope of pardon. Here it is obvious that, owing to their continued failure to heed various warnings, the people of Israel have gone beyond redemption.

3. Earthquake and destruction (Amos 9:1-4)

Continuing with the theme of the previous vision of judgement, this fifth and final vision reminds the people of Israel of the overwhelming nature of God and the total destruction that is to come.

Where this vision differs from the other four we have studied is that it does not involve the Lord showing Amos something, but simply standing by an altar and describing a vision to him. This is another catastrophic picture of death and destruction. It begins with an earthquake so violent that when it hits the cities it shakes the buildings to their foundations. God instructs the heavenly hosts to strike the columns of the Temple with great force. People are caught under the rubble of falling buildings, and those who are left, those who flee from disaster, are put to the sword.

However, there is no fleeing from this disaster. From the heights of the highest mountains like Mount Carmel to the depths of the earth (*Sheol*), there is literally nowhere to go to escape God's wrath. Wherever Israel goes, God will have his eyes upon them. Those who are left are hoarded into captivity by their enemies where they too are put to death. The people have chosen selfishness and greed over good, and so this vision ends with the promise that the Lord will set his eye on them for evil and not for good.

Let us compare these visions with the next Principle:



God made humans in the image of God, each worthy of equal value and dignity. The search for justice entails treating others with respect, and may involve reclaiming lost worth.

From the very beginning of Scripture, we are told that human beings are made in the image of God. So we are challenged to treat all human beings with dignity and respect. When we fail to recognise this image in others, we distort our relationships.

In Jesus, we see the truest image of God. In the passion narratives, we see Jesus treated as of no worth, executed in pain on the cross. Yet through the cross, we see God's ultimate defeat of evil. Through loving our neighbour as ourselves, the image of God can be seen more clearly in us, and our worth can be restored.



Questions

1. We have explored in this study some of the most difficult passages of Amos. How do they leave you feeling?

2. Are you tempted to avoid, reject or rationalise difficult passages of Scripture like these?
3. When you read the plumb line vision, what concerns you about our world?
4. How do you respect the value and dignity of those who are different from you?
5. How do you deal with those who fail to show such respect?

Study Six

Hope for a better world

*‘On that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its branches
and raise up its ruins
and rebuild it as in the days of old’
Amos 9:11*



Shouted, whispered and unspoken Prayer of intercession

God of wisdom, as your prophets of old saw unlimited possibilities and called people to faithful living, grant us the vision needed to change your world.

Where the voices of greed drown out the voices of the needy, where children die through malnutrition,

where countries are devastated by AIDS,

grant us the courage to make a difference, and:

Send your Spirit to bring new life.

Where the shouts of despair drown out the whispers of the hopeful, where peace appears to be an unobtainable dream.

where well-being is measured in how much we own, grant us the courage to make a difference, and:

Send your Spirit to bring new life.

Where the laughter of the arrogant drowns out the whispers of the broken-hearted, where depressed people find only stigma and rejection,

Where refugees are unwelcome and uncared for, grant us the courage to make a difference, and:

Send your Spirit to bring new life.

Where the alleluias of the self-righteous drown out the prayers of the faithful, where churches are dying through lack of vision,

where people of faith distrust each other,

grant us the courage to make a difference, and:

Send your Spirit to bring new life.

Hear all our prayers, shouted. whispered and unspoken. Amen.

Study Six

Hope for a better world

In this concluding study, we are going to consider the hopeful message with which Amos ends his book.



Reflection: Is it possible to believe in God without hope for the future?

Much of the book of Amos has offered us a rather harsh image of God's judgement on the people of his time. The final verses of chapter 9, which conclude the book of Amos, offer a much more hopeful outlook on the future.



Read: Amos 9:11-15

These verses are quite different from the tone and language of anything we have read before in the book of Amos. They could be considered a fitting conclusion to Amos's prophecy, a promise that days of doom will be replaced by hope and renewal. They look forward with hope and confidence to an as yet undisclosed time in the future, when God's judgement will come to an end. In this time, those who are left will be saved, they will rebuild their country and live not just in relative prosperity, but in a country where justice and peace prevail.

Let's look at these verses in a little more detail and consider first how they fit in with the rest of the book, and second, what they have to teach us today.

Verse 11 begins this final section with the news that David's fallen house will be restored. King David was, of course, considered to be the greatest King of Israel. Under his rule, the country was seen to be at its strongest and most wealthy. Every king that followed was measured by the ability, or more likely inability, to live up to the standards of King David.

LET JUSTICE FLOW

As a Methodist minister, now in his sixth appointment, I know that most churches or circuits have memories of their own Davidic era. They look back on the successful ministry of a colleague with such affection that it is very difficult for anyone who follows to measure up to the standards that they set!

Amos tells his readers that this new Davidic era will soon be upon them. Some scholars have read these verses and believe that they were written sometime later, possibly some two hundred years later during the period of the Babylonian exile, or even the return from exile (see further reading in the Appendix). Other scholars, particularly Christian commentators, believe that Amos is here predicting the coming of the Messiah and therefore pointing forward to the birth of Jesus.

Most importantly, we are told that the restoration will involve rebuilding the country, and in particular rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and its Temple. Indeed, in this bright and glorious future, all of the places that have fallen into disrepair will be renovated and made new. This vision of restoration is also a vision of a restored relationship between God and the remnant of his people who have survived the destruction of the past.

Verse 12 speaks of Edom being restored to Israel. This suggests not only the return of all the land that Israel controlled in the Davidic era, but also the restoration of the land of all the twelve tribes of Israel.

This hopeful vision, though, goes even further. Mention of 'all the nations who are called by my name' points forward to a time when God's grace will be shared even beyond the people of Israel. In Acts 15:16, James the brother of Jesus quotes this verse as proof that the gospel message is intended to be shared with the Gentile world. James goes on to say, 'Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God' (Acts 15:19). The implication of Amos's hopeful vision is that a time will come when the whole world will enjoy the grace of God.



Verses 13 and 14 put even more flesh on the bones of what God's people can look forward to: 'The time is surely coming ... when the one who plows shall catch up with the one who reaps and the treader of grapes with the one who sows the seed.' This is an image of agricultural abundance. Normally, there would be a gap between one harvest and the arrival of the ploughman to prepare the land for the next crop. In this vision, the whole agricultural cycle is accelerated. There will hardly be any rest between the various

harvests of wheat, barley, vines and other essential crops. Such will be the abundance of God's provision.

Unlike before, they can be confident that the crops that they plant, the seeds that they sow, will be allowed to grow and reach a rich maturity. All of this will mean that the people of Israel will enjoy a huge increase in their food supply. Not only that, but the quality of fine wines that are promised would whet the appetite of even the most choosy sommelier.

These verses also herald the return of a more just and peaceful order in Israel in which debt slavery will be a thing of the past. In this new order, all God's people will live in peace and prosperity, and not just the wealthy elites. Unlike earlier passages in the book of Amos, there is no demand for repentance from sin. Judgement and punishment are now in the past. The remnant of God's people will flourish. These would be wonderful, encouraging words for people who have experienced hunger, drought and the ruination of their crops (Amos 4:6-9). This plentiful, rich harvest would contrast with the scarcity that they experienced in earlier times.

The final verse, 15, compares the future of Israel to a vine, an image regularly used throughout the Old and New Testaments. The promise of these verses is that, at some time in the future, God's people will be allowed to root themselves in their own soil of Israel, and never again will they be uprooted. This vine will be firmly rooted and so will be richly fruitful.

Judgement is never God's last word. Beyond the harsh but necessary message of Amos is always the promise that God will restore his broken relationship with his people.

A similar challenge comes from the final Principle:



God calls us to live in hope and in ways that reflect God's character and the pattern of God's kingdom. Thus, seeking justice involves honesty and truth, and may demand protest and resistance, restitution, forgiveness, reconciliation and, ultimately, transformation.

This Principle reminds us, 'The pursuit of justice begins with God; justice is both God's work and God's very nature, and we are invited to participate in it.' We are called not just to deeds, but also to a way of life - we must not simply refrain from unjust acts but also be proactive in our justice seeking. Seeking justice is not about one-off acts of goodness, but our whole attitude as we seek to become more Christlike.

The pursuit of justice is something that should be so deeply embedded in who we are as Christians, so as to drive all that we say and do. Justice is not an added extra but the very essence of what it is to be a wholesome Christian believer.



Questions

1. What do you think would be more important to Amos's readers - the promise of food and restoration or the promise of a more just world?
2. Are there any such hopeful signs in our society today?
3. Can you share or give examples of the way in which the Church proactively works for justice in our society?
4. Is there anything from this course that has encouraged you in your faith journey?

Appendix

For details of 'A Justice-seeking Church; Walking with Micah', the following resources are available on the Methodist Connexional website:³

- A three-minute guide
- Conference report
- Guide to conference report

A more complete guide to the report can be found at: www.methodist.org.uk/media/30267/justice-seeking-church-guide-to-report-0823.pdf

A prophet as a 'critical friend'

I worked for a number of years as a school governor at a church school in South Kent. Our role was said to be that of a 'critical friend' – that is, someone who befriends and works alongside the head teacher and his or her staff but who also raises issues and concerns. Only by exercising our critical function did we really have value. The same is true of prophets in the Old Testament. They themselves are worshippers of God, they obey the same laws and worship like the rest of their society. However, they also point out misgivings they may have with the way the country is being run. In particular, they want to make sure that the king looks after everyone in his kingdom and not just the rich and the wealthy. The best prophets are not afraid of being critical friends because they know that they are only acting out of concern for their people.

Inequality in Israel and Judah during the ministry of Amos

Israel and Judah appear to be deeply divided along class lines in the book of Amos. They are countries of great inequality of income distribution. To put it simply, the rich have become very rich and the poor have become very poor. Most of the rich seem to be city dwellers, particularly concentrated around Samaria, the capital, where they have built expensive homes.

Amos 3:15 describes this well:

I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house,
and the houses of ivory shall perish,
and the great houses shall come to an end.

Amos 6:4–6 also describe how the rich loll on beds inlaid with ivory, feasting, drinking and generally enjoying a lavish lifestyle! While this wealthy, urban elite only make up around 5 per cent of the population, it has been estimated that they control some 50 per cent of the nation's wealth.

At the apex of this society is the king and the royal family. There was an expectation in the

³ www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/social-justice/a-justice-seeking-church/read-the-justice-seeking-church-report (accessed 15 January 2024).

ancient Middle East that the king would defend the poor from exploitation. This expectation can be found in many biblical texts, such as Psalm 72:2: 'May [the king] judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice.' In each province, royal officials were appointed to act as governors, military commanders and judges. Many officials would then have been appointed to serve the royal officials. It is not clear quite how and when the ruling elite had become so dislocated from the wider society.

The majority of the population lived in rural areas and relied on agriculture for their existence. Many had been small-scale farmers who had, until recent years, just about made enough to get by and feed their families. The recent hikes in taxes and grain tributes had hit them harshly and forced many into debt. Some had decided to sell their land and so had become tenant farmers, and they were increasingly vulnerable to rent hikes. When they fell further into debt, they were forced to sell themselves or members of their families into slavery. Population increases and inheritance laws, which meant that land was divided into smaller and smaller farming plots, added further to rural poverty.

An example of the kind of exploitation experienced by the poor can be found in Amos 8:4-6, where the prophet speaks in almost satirical terms about the way the rich use underhand techniques to cheat the poor. They so resent the restrictions of the Sabbath and other religious festivals when they are unable to continue their underhand tactics:

When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain,
and the Sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah smaller and the shekel heavier
and practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.

Who wrote Amos 9:11-15?

These verses of Amos chapter 9 present the future of the remnants after the judgement that has been predicted elsewhere in the book. There is no demand for repentance in these verses; rather, a hopeful picture of restoration, peace and justice.

This section of the book would have been a great encouragement to the people of Israel who lived in the period of the Babylonian exile or the post-exilic period. The words would have encouraged the believers to persevere when life was harsh, and they and many around them were suffering oppression.

Consequently, some scholars have argued that these words could not be part of the prophet Amos's original work. For example, Julius Wellhausen argues that it is impossible to reconcile these hopeful words with the harshness of the rest of the book. Wellhausen says that these verses are more about 'roses and lavender, rather than blood and iron'.⁴

A bible commentator named George Adam Smith wrote a book called *Amos, Hosea and Micah*. Smith agrees with Wellhausen and describes these verses as 'a pleasant piece of

music, as if the birds had come out after the thunderstorm, and the wet hills were glistening in the sun'.⁵

However, Daniel Carroll says:

A close literary reading undermines these views. To start with, these verses offer a general sketch of restoration beyond judgement, not a full fledged vision of all such a restoration might entail. These verses do also have ethical substance. The promise of crops and harvest herald the end of debt slavery. Hope is political, economic and religious. A strong ethical fiber is woven into this sketch of the future.⁶

On balance, I concur with Daniel Carroll. These verses may have been reread by Babylonian exiles as words of hope and encouragement. However, there is nothing in them that contradicts the ethical message of previous chapters. The use of visionary imagery employed in these verses is also typical of earlier chapters of Amos's work.

⁵ George Adam Smith, *Amos, Hosea and Micah* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906)

⁶ M. Daniel Carroll R., *The Book of Amos (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 2020), p. 155.

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