

The Book of Amos

By WB Jonathan Paz

The Book of Amos holds a distinguished place in Freemasonry. An excerpt is used during the ceremony of circumambulation during the Fellow Craft degree: "Thus he shewed (showed) me: and, behold, the LORD stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand. And the LORD said unto me, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A plumbline. Then said the LORD, Behold, I will set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel: I will not again pass by them anymore" (Amos 7:7-8 KJV). In holding such a prominent place in the lives of all Masons, it would do well to take an opportunity to contemplate on this prophet of God and learn more about this book.

To help us understand where the Book of Amos resides in its traditional place, it may be helpful to understand the structure of the Hebrew Bible itself. This collection, also called the Tanakh, is divided into three sections, subdivided as follows:

1. Torah, or teachings
 - a. Genesis
 - b. Exodus
 - c. Leviticus
 - d. Numbers
 - e. Deuteronomy
2. Nevi'im, or prophets
 - a. Former Prophets
 - i. Joshua
 - ii. Judges
 - iii. Samuel
 - iv. Kings
 - b. Latter Prophets (ordered by length)
 - i. Isaiah
 - ii. Jeremiah
 - iii. Ezekiel
 - iv. Twelve Minor Prophets (a single book, ordered by length)
 1. Hosea
 2. Joel
 3. Amos
 4. Obadiah
 5. Jonah
 6. Micah
 7. Nahum
 8. Habakkuk
 9. Zephaniah
 10. Haggai
 11. Zechariah
 12. Malachi
3. Ketuvim, or writings

- a. Poetic
 - i. Psalms
 - ii. Proverbs
 - iii. Job
- b. Five *Megillot* (scrolls)
 - i. Song of Songs
 - ii. Ruth
 - iii. Lamentations
 - iv. Ecclesiastes
 - v. Esther
- c. Historical
 - i. Daniel
 - ii. Ezra – Nehemiah
 - iii. Chronicles

The Old Testament of the Christian Bible, contains all the same books as the Hebrew bible, but ordered in a different way. This collection is divided into four sections, subdivided as follows:

1. Pentateuch – the Five Books of Moses
 - a. Genesis
 - b. Exodus
 - c. Leviticus
 - d. Numbers
 - e. Deuteronomy
2. Historical
 - a. Joshua
 - b. Judges
 - c. Ruth
 - d. 1 and 2 Samuel
 - e. 1 and 2 Kings
 - f. 1 and 2 Chronicles
 - g. Ezra
 - h. Nehemiah
 - i. Esther
3. Wisdom/Poetry
 - a. Job
 - b. Psalms
 - c. Proverbs
 - d. Ecclesiastes
 - e. Song of Songs
4. Prophetic
 - a. Isaiah
 - b. Jeremiah
 - c. Lamentations
 - d. Ezekiel

- e. Daniel
- f. Hosea
- g. Joel
- h. Amos
- i. Obadiah
- j. Jonah
- k. Micah
- l. Nahum
- m. Habakkuk
- n. Zephaniah
- o. Haggai
- p. Zechariah
- q. Malachi

The Book of Amos begins with a brief introduction to the titular character. Amos was a shepherd and sycamore fig farmer from the town of Tekoa in the Kingdom of Judea. He was called by God to prophesy against the Kingdom of Israel and its ungodly ways.

The book describes his mission starting “in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah, and Jeroboam son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.” (Amos 1:1 HCSB) King Uzziah, also known as Azariah, reigned over Judah between 767-740 BC. King Jeroboam reigned over Israel between 782-753 BC. This would place the mission of Amos between 767-753 BC. Given the fact that this happened some 2,700 years ago, being able to pinpoint the period down to an uncertainty of fourteen years seems pretty good. However, the earthquake that was mentioned is historically verifiable. With this information, we can say with certainty that his mission would have occurred between 765-760 BC: a period of just five years! It’s very difficult to be able to be so specific with an event that far into ancient history.

This book was written during a time when Israel and Judah were at relative peace and harmony with each other. Jeroboam II had a relatively long reign, and largely restored the borders against gains made by its hostile neighbors.

The book begins by pronouncing judgements upon the nations in the region (lines are counted from HCSB):

1. Damascus – “they threshed Gilead with iron sledges” (10 lines)
2. Gaza – “they exiled a whole community, handing them over to Edom” (11 lines)
3. Tyre (7 lines)
 - a. “they handed over a whole community of exiles to Edom”
 - b. “[they] broke a treaty of brotherhood”
4. Edom (8 lines)
 - a. “he pursued his brother with the sword”
 - b. “he stifled his compassion”
 - c. “his anger tore at them continually”
 - d. “he harbored his rage incessantly”
5. The Ammonites – “they ripped open the pregnant women of gilead in order to enlarge their territory” (12 lines)
6. Moab – “he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom” (11 lines)

7. Judah – “they have rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his statutes” (8 lines)
8. Israel (40 lines)
 - a. “they sell a righteous person for silver and a needy person for a pair of sandals”
 - b. “they trample the heads of the poor on the dust of the ground and block the path of the needy”
 - c. “a man and his father have sexual relations with the same girl, profaning [God’s] holy name”
 - d. “they stretch out beside every altar on garments taken as collateral”
 - e. “they drink in the house of their God wine obtained through fines”
 - f. “[they] made the Nazirites (sanctified people) drink wine”
 - g. “[they] commanded the prophets: Do not prophesy”

As you can see, while the crimes committed by the other nations are significant and numerous, the crimes of Israel are even greater. Furthermore, if you were to read these passages (Amos 1:3-2:16), the punishments for the other seven nations are much more succinct compared to the judgement in store for Israel. It’s a demonstration of the peril in which that nation finds itself: the more dire the warnings, the more desperate God is to rebuke the behavior and bring the strays back into His fold.

The book continues with a discussion on why God is planning to punish Israel. God tells His people, “I have known only you out of all the earth.” This affirms the status of the offspring of Jacob being God’s chosen people. However, the verse continues: “therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities.” (3:2 HCSB) Though they are God’s chosen people, they are not immune from His wrath and judgement. It then further expounds on the crimes committed by the people of Israel, including social and spiritual corruption, which continued even through several disasters brought upon them by God to turn them from their path.

To drive the point home at this point, Amos decides to include an ancient hymn, one that would have been very familiar to the people of his day, and an expression of the awesome and terrible power of God: “He who forms the mountains, who creates the wind, and who reveals His thoughts to mankind, who turns the dawn to darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the LORD God Almighty is his name.” (4:13 NIV)

After all this doom, however, God still calls to his people to repent: “For the LORD says to the house of Israel: Seek Me and live!” (5:4) Here again, Amos invokes the ancient hymn: “He who made the Pleiades and Orion, who turns midnight into dawn and darkens day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out over the face of the land—the LORD is his name. With a blinding flash he destroys the stronghold and brings the fortified city to ruin.” (5:8-9 NIV)

Later in chapter 5, a familiar concept is raised, but to ancient Israel it is a new concept: the Day of the LORD. It is supposed that the Day of the LORD might have been some kind of well-loved festival, perhaps heralding a new year. However, Amos is among the first prophets to refer to this Day as a day of terror: “Woe to you who long for the Day of the LORD! What will the Day of the LORD be for you? It will be darkness and not light. It will be like a man who flees from a lion only to have a bear confront him. He goes home and rest his hand against the wall only to have a snake bite him.” (5:18-19 HCSB)

After proclaiming God’s disgust with the heartless offerings given up by the hypocritical Israelites and mocking the opulence the rich among them with which they surround themselves, Amos proclaims a

series of five visions. The first three include locusts eating away the harvest, fire consuming the land, and a plumbline. This third vision being so important to us, I will present here two additional versions of the text for comparison and additional contemplation:

He showed me this: The Lord was standing there by a vertical wall with a plumb line in his hand. The LORD asked me, "What do you see, Amos?" I replied, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "I am setting a plumb line among My people Israel; I will no longer spare them." (7:7-8 HCSB)

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing by a wall that had been build true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD asked me, "What do you see, Amos?" "A plumb line," I replied. Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer." (7:7-8 NIV)

The prophetic narrative at this point is interrupted by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel and advisor to the king of Israel. He mocks Amos by calling him a seer, someone who might be sent looking for lost trinkets, and demands he return to Judah, chiding Amos that he is prophesying against King Jeroboam in his own sanctuary and temple. Amos rebukes Amaziah, proclaiming that he is not a professional prophet who would falsely proclaim the blessings of God and ignoring the misdeeds of its rulers, but that he, a lowly shepherd and farmer, was directly called by God and compelled to prophesy against Israel and its king.

Amos then continues describing his remaining two visions: a basket of summer fruit, mocking the wealth of Israel while so many starve; and the LORD standing beside the Altar, commanding that it be destroyed. Here again, Amos invokes the ancient hymn: "Because of this, won't the land quake and all who dwell in it mourn? All of it will rise like the Nile; it will surge and subside like the Nile in Egypt." (8:8 HCSB) "The Lord, the LORD Almighty—He touches the earth and it melts, and all who love in it mourn; the whole land rises like the Nile, then sinks like the river of Egypt; he builds his lofty palace in the heavens and sets its foundation on the earth; he calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out over the face of the land—the LORD is his name." (9:5-6 NIV)

Amos then concludes his writing with an interesting oracle: "In that day I will restore the fallen booth of David: I will repair its gaps, restore its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old." (9:11 HCSB) The Kingdom of Israel broke away from the Kingdom of Judah in rebellion against King Rehoboam, who was the grandson of David. The kingdom of Judah would continue for another 180 years after Amos's time. So, if the line of David is to be rebuilt, it would have had to be destroyed first. So, here, rather than prophesying against Israel, he is prophesying against his homeland Judah! And not only that, he is proclaiming its restoration at the hands of the kings of Persia after the Babylonian exile.

This article can only provide a summary of a fascinating prophetic book. But, it being tied to Freemasonry in such a colorful way, I would encourage you to read the book yourself and do your own research on its content. Below is a link to an article written by M.W. Tom Hauder discussing in greater detail the relationship between the Book of Amos and Freemasonry.

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